

**ETHNIC MOVEMENTS, WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: A STUDY OF
WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN ASSAM**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Date: 7th Dec. 2017

DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled “**Ethnic Movements, Women’s Participation and Political Representation: A Study of Women’s Organisations in Assam**” submitted by me in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree in this university or any other university.

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For my 'Mother'

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List of Abbreviations

AASU: All Assam Students Union

AAGSP: All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad

AATWWF: All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation

ABSU: All Bodo Students Union

ABWWF: All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation

AGP: Assam Gana Parishad

AFSPA: Armed Forces Special Powers Act

AJMP: Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad

AMS: Assam Mahila Samiti

APMS: Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti

ASS: Assam Sahitya Sabha

BAC: Bodoland Autonomous Council

BLT: Bodoland Liberation Tigers

BPF: Bodoland People's Front

BPPF: Bodoland People's Progressive Front

BTAD: Bodoland Territorial Area Districts

BTC: Bodoland Territorial Council

BSA: Bodo Sahitya Sabha

NMA: Naga Mother's Association

PTCA: Plain Tribes Council of Assam

ULFA: United Liberation Front of Assam

WLM: Women's Liberation Movement

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Introduction

A modern democratic nation-state is entrusted with one of the prime tasks of ensuring equality amongst its members. The creation of conditions of such equality amongst the members of the political community is not only the task the nation-state strives to achieve, but also a challenge confronting the same. The mechanism through which such equality, to a larger extent, has been attempted to ensure is the provision of equal rights established through the principle of democratic citizenship. Therefore, understanding of citizenship within the space of the nation- state is critically important as it is considered as a condition for creating equality in an otherwise divided and hierarchical society. Establishing the basic equality amongst the people under unequal conditions also means extending and increasing citizenship rights to those who remained hitherto excluded from its ambit. Citizenship has been defined as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (Marshall, 1950: 28-29). Drawing from the definition citizenship seems to be based on equality of rights and duties. But these rights and duties are not universal in nature and depend on the context of its application. However, when equality of citizenship rights is discussed one needs to be careful of the fact that it operates within the societies marked by hierarchies of caste, class, race, sex, religion etc. At the same time what constitutes citizenship in terms of its constituent elements is also subject of contradiction.

The major contradiction lies in determining what will be the basic unit for conferring citizenship rights, whether individual or community. When individuals are taken as the basic unit for conferring rights, the achievement of formal equality amongst citizens becomes relatively easier, because under such provision each individual is conferred equal rights irrespective of the hierarchies of his/ her social position. Liberal democracies with their commitment to the basic principle of individualism have endorsed individuals as the basic unit for conferring universal citizenship rights. But it leaves

certain other issues unattended such as how does one visualize individuals without locating them in the context of their existence (society/community). Hence it becomes essential to pay attention to the communities wherein the individuals are located in, and also to the demands of group rights based on such identities of individuals. Another important contradiction that comes up in this context is the non-positioning of communities on equal terms within a societal context and thus members belonging to least advantaged communities may not be in a position to enjoy individual rights because of their location within such communities. At the same time, conferring rights on the basis of community may also lead to the restriction on individual rights. The overall contradiction between liberal and multicultural positions on citizenship rights has centered on the uncomfortable relation between individual and group rights. In certain cases, such as the Indian context, an attempt has been made to strike a balance between individual and group rights. But such contradictions have been far from being resolved in the Indian context too, where inequalities both at individual and collective levels are more than a reality and there have been constant demands of expansion of the horizon of citizenship rights, especially of group rights.

The Indian context is the expression of a situation where individuals and groups have been subjected to different forms of inequalities due to the various contexts of their existence. Citizenship rights based on equality amongst citizens have not proved to be enough to contain the existing inequalities of the society to a larger extent. Group based inequalities have culminated in the rise of various identity movements, by those who feel discriminated and subjugated due to their group identity. Context of such movements comes from certain inadequacies in the provisions of citizenship rights, where some sections of citizens are not in a position to feel the belongingness to the basic notion of equal membership of the political community. Thus the issue of group rights has prominently encircled not only within the liberal democracies of west, but also in India. Demand for group specific rights, including political autonomy and has taken a strong hold in certain regions in India, amongst which Northeastern region is a very prominent one. The assertion of ethnic based identity and demand of group rights in order to protect and get recognition of such identities in public sphere, have taken the form of identity

movements in several states of the region, of which Assam can be considered as the most fertile ground of such assertions. Ethnicity has evolved as a major tool of group mobilization and demands have ranged from linguistic, cultural rights, political autonomy and at times to the extent of secessionism. The understanding of ethnicity and ethnic based identity movements as a basis for demanding group specific rights, in certain context, have become essentially important because of its crucial relation with the idea of a democratic nation-state and citizenship rights.

The position that can be deduced from the approach of the liberal democracies towards citizenship rights by making individual as the basic unit does not solve the problem of group inequality. At the same time the formal equality guaranteed by universal citizenship rights amongst individual citizens has also not been able to generate equality amongst them at individual level. For example in the relation between men and women as equal citizens women are subjected to various forms of inequalities despite having formal guarantee of equality. The dominant conception of citizenship has not been considered enough to entail substantive equality for women, and therefore has been subject of criticism by the feminists of all strands. The criticisms are primarily based on two counts. “Firstly citizenship is gender blind and secondly most historical conceptualization of citizenship has thrived on the divisions between members and non-members” (Roy in Bhargava and Acharya, 2008: 140). The first contention accuses citizenship of not taking cognizance of the fact that modern societies are rooted in patriarchy whereas the second talks about citizenship being largely identified with male and public activities. In both cases women as individual citizen do not enjoy equality at par with men. The question of women’s equality takes a crucial turn when there is demand for group rights to meet with the inadequacies of universal citizenship rights which fails to a larger extent to address the question of group inequality. The larger question one is confronted with at this juncture is when women are located within multiple group identities, when citizenship rights based on individual rights have remained gendered, will group specific rights deal with the question of gender inequality or push women to further vulnerability? The vulnerability of women becomes twofold if they are located within minority and marginalized groups, firstly because of the existing gender relations

based on patriarchy that operates within and outside group identity and secondly due to the position of their groups within the larger societal hierarchy. Therefore, whenever group rights are demanded, it is crucially important to understand whether such rights create further conditions of freedom for women or put more restrictions on them. The critique of group specific rights from the feminist point of view is based on the issue of restrictions on individual rights, specifically women's rights when group rights are considered, because communities and groups operate as structures of domination in case of women. In this regard example may be cited from the situation when ethnic based group rights are demanded and women become bound by such rights, by dint of their location within such group identity. Therefore, the interaction between individual (women's) and group rights needs to be investigated to understand the discourse on group rights and women's stake on those group specific rights.

The historical understanding of the discourse on rights reflects the non-inclusion of women within its ambit. The universal notion of citizenship did not come women's way without them struggling for it. Feminist movements in various parts of the world struggled to win those rights for women, which were later established through universal citizenship rights. However, dominant notion of citizenship has also not remained aloof from the patriarchal structure of the society and the public/private divide. The struggle for equality within families and communities has remained major challenge for the feminists. In such a situation, when group specific cultural, linguistic and political rights are demanded, there is need of contextualizing them in the context of women's rights. Although in the context of India, women have got associated with various people's movements and have raised women's issues within them, the approach to the question of gender equality within such spaces is a matter of debate. This is particularly true of the places where women's movements have been constantly associated with other movements, such as ethnic based identity movements, without creating space for their autonomous existence, where other forms of identities predominates over gender equality.

This research is an attempt to understand women's question within the understanding of identity movements, specifically ethnic based identity movements which aim at demanding group rights. Largely it is an attempt to understand the gender perspective of ethnic movements which is otherwise a neglected area of enquiry. Within the broader understanding of women and community, it tries to situate women in relation to the construction of group identity and their stake in the goals and interest pursued through the mobilization of such identities. Emphasis on group identities, specifically ethnic identity has been drawn largely in the context of the crucial debate of individual vs. group rights. The women's question within identity movements has been approached through the understanding women's participation within the mobilization of group identities and demand of group rights. It also tries to enquire whether such participation brings any alteration or redefinition of existing gender relations. Women's participation is further understood through the activism of women's organisations formed within the space of the movements. The impact of women's participation on the existing gender relations has been enquired through the question of women's representation in the bodies of decision making which is related to the demand of political rights by the ethnic groups and creation of new political structures aftermath of the movements. The context and the case studies of the proposed research work have been ethnic based identity movements in the Northeastern region of India, with special emphasis on the state of Assam. In totality this work has been an attempt to understand women within identity movements, by focusing on issues of women's participation and representation, through the activities and approach of the women's organisations formed within the space of these movements.

Statement of Problem

The Northeastern region of India is a region of immense complexity and diversity. The region has confronted with numerous conflict situations in the post independence era and continues to undergo multiple problems at various levels. The existence of immense diversity makes the understanding of socio-economic, cultural and political dynamics of the region extremely difficult. The complex history, demographic composition, cultural and linguistic diversity, existence of both traditional and modern

institutions of governance plays important role in shaping the understanding about the societies here. Though there have been many potential areas to be explored, research in this area is a very challenging task. This region has been a fertile ground of various movements, and especially the state of Assam has a very vibrant history of a range of people's movement starting with the nationalist movement, peasant movement, ethnic based identity movements (many a time seeking separate statehood) etc. From the 1980s onwards there has been tremendous rise of ethnic based identity movements in the state of Assam, though they are rooted in long historical origin. The rise of these movements has critical impact on the political dynamics of the region. At the same time it has brought many other issues to the forefront, such as ethnicity as the major tool of pursuance of group interest which paves the way for demands of group rights including self-determination, preservation and recognition of cultural distinctiveness etc.

These movements have been the result of a long historical process and expression of the discrimination, domination meted to certain communities who are also in a minority and marginalized position. It is not possible to understand these movements by reducing it to a particular cause. The communities, who became ethnically conscious, responded in forms of movements to their deprivation in various forms, including non-recognition of language and culture, economic backwardness and non-accessibility to political apparatuses. Therefore those communities have developed their own mechanism of demanding their rights and fell back to their ethnic origin to pursue their interests including political one. There is development of the understanding that if they have access to political power they can promote and protect their interest both in cultural and economic spheres. Therefore, demand of political autonomy in the form of new political structure, separate state within Indian union, and of sovereignty has been part and parcel of these movements. However, much of the studies in these movements have been concentrated around the issues of ethnicity and nationalism without locating gender within such phenomenon. The construction and deconstruction of identity of women within the arena of ethnic identity and movements for its protection has been conveniently neglected.

Women constitute a very important part of these movements occurred at various historical moments in the state of Assam. Starting with the nationalist movement women have not only participated but also made extreme sacrifices for the cause of the nation and communities they belong to. In fact, there is a very vibrant history of formation of various women's collectivities in North-East India and especially in Assam, though not much attention has been paid to reinvent such history. Nevertheless, women had and still form various organisations for collective actions. However, formation of women's organisations needs to be largely understood not exclusively as part of autonomous women's movement, but as a response to the problems and conflict situations confronted by these societies. Women have responded to such situation in various ways, mainly through formation of organisations, primarily for peace making.

This research while attempting to understand women's stake within the identity of their community, tries to understand identity movements in the context of Assam, by locating women within the same. The moot point of reference has been taken as the women's organisations formed within identity movements. An attempt has been made to trace the history of women's organisations in relation to the nationalist aspiration and identity consciousness of various communities they are located in. This work has primarily focused on formation and activities of women's organisation within ethnic based identity movements in Assam. Three case studies have been taken and looked into in order to trace the historical links of women's organisations to the movements. The starting point of enquiry has been the nationalist movement followed by Assam Movement and Bodo Movement. Three women's organisations namely Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS), Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP) and All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) have been identified in relation to these movements.

The gender perspective of these movements, though very crucial, has not been given much emphasis as a crucial area of study, especially the role of women's organisations within them. The study of these women's organisations becomes essentially important not only to understand women's relation to their communities, but also to analyze how far women were able to seal a good deal or pushed to more vulnerability by

the demands and attainments of group rights as a result of these movements. When political autonomy is guaranteed which has been the case of the Bodo identity movement, and when a new government was formed in the context of the Assam movement, it is also important to enquire how the issue of political representation for women is articulated within those structures of autonomy, especially by the women's organisations. The major contradiction lies in the fact that when identities are invoked for pursuance of group interest, women are bounded by the identity of their communities in a much rigid way, where boundaries of various groups are maintained by inflicting identity markers on women, but those interests pursued by communities seldom coexist with the idea of gender equality. At the same time women's organisations also operate within considerable restrictions, to articulate women's issues, especially for political representation. The participation of women in these movements is regarded essentially important for their success, without engaging with the linkage of the issues of participation with political representation for women. Therefore, this research attempts at establishing such a link by looking at these issues through the women's organisations located within identity movement.

Area of study: Rationale behind selection of the study area

Ethnic upsurge of different ethnic communities and their expression in form of movements is a reality in the context of Assam. History is witness to rise of such movements at various junctures, by ethnic groups who otherwise feel deprived and neglected in different spheres. However, gender relations within these movements have gone unnoticed and unattended, so is the study on women's organisations operating in the same space. On the one hand women's mobilization within these movements creates a conducive condition for an emerging public space for women, but on the other that particular space has been restricted to the extent of not allowing women to be part of the decision making process in a substantial way. One can witness a slow withdrawal of women from the public space once the goals of the movement are achieved to certain extent. Although the public space gained by women is deeply rooted in their group

identity, the formation of women's organisations within the movements makes a ground for articulating women's question within the space of construction of such identities.

The area of research has been specifically taken up in order to highlight the contradiction between group identity and women's question in Assam. The context presents a situation where group identity and politics based on it predominates and women are given a particular space in such construction of identity and politics. When group based identity, specifically ethnic identity becomes a tool to pursue various interests, including political, women are taken as an important constituency not only to maintain such identities but also to create boundaries of such identities. In Assam when women became part of various identity movements, it also created a space for women's organisations. However, one fails to visualize significant change in the existing gender relations and women's position in the larger societal hierarchy due to their mass participation in movements or formation of women's organisations. This is reflected specifically through the question of women's representation in the governments or new political structures created after such movements. The cases of formation of new government in 1985 after Assam Movement and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) after Bodoland Movement substantiate such argument. However, the rationale behind selecting the study area does not only rely on lack of adequate representation of women, but also the gender perspective of identity politics. The study area has also been selected for the lack of the serious effort to put women at the centre of the analysis of ethnic identity movements to understand their relations both to the ethnic movements and the issue of political representation.

The participation of women of Assam in the nationalist movement though opened up a space for their public visibility and was articulated by various means including the formation of different women's collectives, it could not generate any substantial redefinition of gender roles in the larger society. In fact, the energy of the first All-Assam women's organisation was directed towards the nationalist goals. The issues of women became much juxtaposed between the two trajectories of Assamese nationalism and colonialism. Along with the participation in the nationalist movement, there was also

serious concern of loss of identity and being outnumbered by the foreigners. Therefore, one needs to carefully locate women of Assam within these two trajectories. The concern of identity and protection of indigenous community has been part of the consciousness of people from Assam while being part of the nationalist movement. However, though women were located within both the categories, the space for their mobility was confined to existing social norms where women were not expected to defy their domestic responsibilities. Therefore, when political freedom came about, it did not come up with much promise for women. After the phase of nationalist movement women in Assam withdrew from the public sphere to a larger extent despite their activism and extreme sacrifices within the same. In fact, women's organisations too could not pursue the case for women specifically in the field of political representation.

An unprecedented mobilization of common people, after nationalist movement, has been witnessed during Assam movement in the 80s. The concern for identity of the native people rooted in the pre-independence period had another intense expression during the Assam Movement. Needless to mention, women again constituted a major part in that movement. The space of the movement gave rise to various women's organisations such as Mula Gabharu Santha, Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad and whole range of such other organisations. However, despite their tremendous contribution women started withdrawing from the public sphere after the movement and women's organisations started losing ground and struggled to survive. The political power ensured by the movement was shared amongst the male leadership and women organisations too could not engage themselves with the question of political representation in a substantial manner.

The ethnic assertion of smaller ethnic groups followed by the Assam movement also opened up a new era of women's involvement in the identity movements. One of the most powerful assertions of the Bodo community brings back the same pattern of women's mass participation for the cause of the community and formation of women's organisations such as All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) which was later named as All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF). However, this

organisation, though comparatively radical in its dealings, its engagement with women's question as a political one has been heavily constrained by concern of the group identity. Having presented such a picture of identity concern and politics of it, the gap area has been identified as the study of the women's organisations within the same space. Out of numerous other organisation present outside the ambit of identity politics, the organisations related within them has been taken for analysis, because of such crucial factor being neglected within the study of ethnic identity and politics of it. The very crucial issues of the nature of women's movement, the location of women within ethnic identity concern of the group expressed in the ethnic movements, the formation of women's organisations to articulate women's issues primarily issue of women's representation, constitutes the ground for selecting the research area. The understanding of identity movements through the women's organisations aims at providing alternative understanding of such phenomenon, which has remained a crucial gap in the particular context of its study.

Objectives

- The study attempts to locate women within ethnic based identity movements by understanding their participation and whether such participation leads to the radicalization or alteration of their position in other spheres, primarily the political.
- Emphasizing on women's participation, the study attempts to analyze women's organisations formed within the space of such movements and their role in raising women's question with specific reference to women's political representation and access to institutions of decision making.
- While trying to understand the relation between women and the communities/groups they are embedded in, the study endeavors to understand the contradiction between women's access to limited public space in terms of mobility in socio-economic sphere, with claims of gender equality.

- By emphasizing the centrality of women's role in reproduction of the identity of the community this study attempts to understand the conflict between group rights and individual rights, within the space of identity movements mediated by women's organisations.
- This study also attempts to analyze the power (patriarchal) relations involved in the composition of communities, Identity movements and functioning of the institutions of the State.

Hypotheses

- Women's active participation in the identity (ethnic) movements and activism towards collective aspiration of the communities they are located in, does not substantially impact on existing gender relations or lead to their representation in different structures of decision making.
- Socio-economic mobility and accessibility to limited public space does not necessarily lead to enhancement of women's position in decision making both in private sphere and public institutions.
- Women's organisations formed within the space of identity movements do not pose a serious challenge to patriarchal constitution of identity movements and the power structures of the state.

Methodology

As laid down in the objectives this research basically aims at understanding women's question within identity movements, specifically the ethnic movements, through the women's organisations formed within the movements and relate it with the question of women's representation. Three organisations have been identified for the study in three different historical contexts, wherein a major portion of focus of the study has been concentrated in the third organisation. This research that largely followed a qualitative method also has taken the help of quantitative analysis in order to substantive

the arguments. The research depends on both primary and secondary sources for collection of data and information.

The findings of the research have been based on 75 interviews, which include 45 from the leadership of three organisations and 25 from common members and beneficiaries, using a *Structured Interview Schedule* comprising both open and close ended questions. Both *Purposive and snowball sample techniques* have been used for data collection. The participants in these interviews largely comprise of the women leaders and activists who were closely related to the identity movements and women's organisations formed within them. The participants of the interviews have been located within three women's organisations namely Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity (APMS), Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP) and All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF). Apart from that academicians and activists engaging themselves with women's movement and organisations and relatives of women leaders have also been interviewed. All three cases have been put in their particular historical contexts, namely the Nationalist Movement, Assam Movement and the Bodo Movement. The respondents of the study have been divided into 15 each from the leadership of three organisations, within the age group of 40-80. The huge variation in age group is reflective of the fact that the youngest of these organisations that is ABWWF was established 24 years back, whereas the others are much older than that. Therefore, the respondents include those who now are the office bearers of these organisations and those who are associated with the organisations and the movements from over a period of time, in fact, from the time of their inception, specifically in case of the second and third organisation. The formation of the first organisation was during the nationalist movement and is an all Assam based organisation, where leadership has been more or less confined to Assamese speaking middle class, caste Hindu women. The leadership of the second organisation is also more or less similar, though there has been active participation of both tribal and non-tribal women during Assam movement. The third organisation has been a tribal based organisation wherein it is also led by middle class tribal women. This was formed for a larger representation of tribal women of Assam and later became confined to Bodo women only. Therefore, an attempt has been made to do undertake *comparative analysis*

of the organisations in terms of the approaches they adopt to address women's issues and the identity concern they address. The *Universe of the Study* includes three women's organisations and interviews were conducted in five districts of Assam, namely Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh and Kamrup depending on the location of the headquarters of the organisations and the residents of the leaders. The participants were approached for conduct of interview via different ways, through phone calls, through people working in these areas and through academicians engaged in these areas. Voice Recorder has been used whenever permitted.

This work has been methodologically divided into two parts. The first part of analysis has depended on historical accounts of the women's organisations for which much has been relied upon the *Secondary Literature Review*. However, collection of literature on women's organisation have been a difficult task as most of the secondary literature has been concentrated on accounts of the movements, without any mention about women's activism and organisations. Therefore secondary literature on women's organisations have been collected from documents and personal accounts from women leaders and their relatives, women's magazines and other such documents available from that period, especially from 80s both in Assamese and Bodo languages, which have been translated and analyzed. Apart from those, the novels, newspaper interviews, articles by women writers were also used for the purpose. The method of *content analysis* has been used to analyze the secondary literature. The second part of the research has been based on interviews of the participants, on the basis of which the quantitative analysis of the research has been primarily based on. The Interview method has been largely *Focused Group Interview* where women leaders of the organisations have been primarily targeted. Two kinds of analyses have been drawn from the data collected from the participants. Firstly, there have been tabulation of data in order to quantify the responses and secondly it has been based on the personal experiences, narratives of the participants. Therefore, the method of *Narrative Analysis* has been followed in order to substantiate the quantified data.

As a feminist researcher my approach was to understand the gender question within the category of group identity. My location within an identity which was shaped by the linguistic nationalism propagated by Assamese middle class culminated within the historic Assam movement and understanding the identity concern of the women located within a group identity as opposed to my location, gives the opportunity in *exercising reflexivity* in the research process. The standpoint of women belonging to an alternate identity helped the researcher to understand the alternative perspective while conducting the research and analyzing the data. While conducting the interviews the respondents were specifically asked questions in order to relate gender issues within the construction of group identity and that also helped me to understand the limitations of looking at such issues through gendered lens.

Ethical concerns in the research have been addressed through seeking informed consent of the participants, by informing the respondents for the particular purpose for which the interview has been conducted. The use of voice recorder has been prohibited, whenever permission was not granted. Participants those who wanted to maintain anonymity and asked for non-disclosure has been maintained by assigning pseudonyms.

The *limitations of the research* include, among other things, dependence on interpreter because of lack of knowledge of Bodo Language on part of the researcher and less inclusion of the women who are beneficiaries of the welfare activities of the organisations.

Chapterisation

- The Introductory chapter of the work attempts at broadly laying down the scheme of the study. It has included the statement of problem, the study area and the rationale behind the selection of the study area. While explaining the rationale behind the selection of this particular area of study, it also mentions the gap area which this research aims to bridge. The introduction also includes the objectives and hypotheses of the work, which were addressed and tested in the subsequent chapters. The research methodology that has been followed for the analysis of the

cases studies is also outlined in a detailed manner. The scheme of chapterisation, which gives an idea of the main issues and arguments they address to, has also been laid down in the introductory chapter.

- The first chapter “**Exploring the Theoretical Framework**” presents an account of the larger theoretical framework the study has tried to follow in order to analyze the particular case studies of the proposed work. Instead of a particular theory, rationale behind adopting a larger theoretical framework is the multiple issues this study has tried to analyze. The theoretical framework includes the debate between individual vs group rights and theories of ethnicity. Ethnicity has been regarded as a marker of group identity and means to pursue group interest. It attempts to understand the demands of group rights based on ethnicity and its interaction with gender in a given context. The theoretical framework of the study also tries to address the issue of representation or women’s representation per se. As ethnic based group rights are inclusive of political autonomy and representative rights, the theoretical concerns related with the issue of representation would be explored.
- The second chapter “**Myth and Reality of Gender Equality in the Societies of North-East of India**” is an attempt to uncover the myth and reality of gender equality in societies of Northeastern region of India and understand the deep rooted patriarchal structures of the same. This chapter tries to focus on the contradictory positions that emerge from the practices of the multiple societies in order to determine the status of in this region. This chapter focuses on the relation between women and community and women’s role in the defense of the community in terms of their association with various movements for collective rights. The focus of the chapter also concentrates in understanding the category of women in Northeastern region of India with special reference to women in Assam. The different socio-economic and political developments in these societies and the interaction with the state system at various historical moments presents a picture where women of these societies cannot be seen as having same

kind of experiences. Therefore, this chapter attempts to understand women by locating them in the membership of the communities they belong to and how their belongingness to a particular society and community with specific socio-cultural practices determine their status. Overall this chapter is an attempt to understand women in relation to the communities and their role in pursuing collective rights of the community through various movements.

- The third chapter “**Movements, Organisations and Locations of Women: The case of Assam**” presents a detailed account of the case studies undertaken in the research work. In this chapter an attempt has been made to locate women in various movements in that occurred at various historical junctures in Assam. These movements are primarily related to the nationalist aspirations of a community or group, where their identities are embedded. This chapter has taken three historical moments or movements namely the Nationalist Movement, The Assam Movement and the Bodo Movement and tried to locate the role of women within them. For engaging into the role of women this chapter attempts to analyze the women’s organisations formed within these movements which constitute the case study analysis. This chapter endeavors to introduce the three women’s organisations namely Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation in their historical and present contexts. Through the activities of the organisations an attempt has been made to understand the creation of public sphere for women and its impact on existing gender relations. This chapter also attempts to undertake a comparative analysis of the activities of the women’s organisations.
- The fourth chapter “**Understanding Participation and Political Representation: the Women’s Question in Assam**” is an endeavor to explore and critically engage with the issues of participation and women’s representation in the context of movements for identity preservation and through the women’s organisations formed within the same context. One of the prime demands of identity movements has been right to self determination or political autonomy.

This chapter seeks to focus on the issue women's representation in the context of different political arrangements that are made in order to meet with the demands of group rights through identity movements. In the context of the study, in Assam new governments and political structures have come up after the identity assertion of various communities. Therefore, this chapter attempts to understand whether participation of women in the various identity movements ensures them any political equality, in terms of their representation in the political structures. An attempt has been made to explore the issues of political representation through the approach of the women's organisations. This chapter also tries to focus on a comparative analysis of the organisations on the issue of political representation.

- The fifth and the final chapter “**Contradiction between Group Identity and Women's Question in Assam**” presents the contradictory position of ethnic identity and women's question in the context of Assam especially in regards to the question of women's representations in the bodies of decision making. This chapter attempts at understanding the major sites of contradiction between ethnic identity and women's question. While dealing with the question of contradiction this chapter tries to focus and on the issues of participation and representation in relation to ethnic based identity movements in Assam. Apart from that this chapter also attempts at presenting the major findings of the study and the suggestions. This chapter seeks to present the limitations of the study and the scope for further research in the study area.
- **Conclusion** or the concluding chapter of the study concerns itself with presenting a summary of the issues and arguments floated throughout all the major chapters of the study. It basically aims at presenting a coherent position of the work by linking the major arguments of the work in a systematic way.

CHAPTER I

Exploring the Theoretical Framework

1.1 Introduction

Liberal democracies are often confronted with contradiction between Individual and group rights. Demands for group specific rights has not been encouraged within liberal democracies, primarily because of its commitment towards liberal principle of individualism and at the same time group rights consists within itself an inherent tendency to restrict individual rights as it tends to prefer groups or community over individuals within certain contexts. There exist various sites of contestations between individual and group rights, of which women's rights has been one of the major area of such contestations. Often group rights have not been seen as essentially conducive for the enjoyment of individual rights. At the same time, one cannot lose sight of the fact that absence of group rights may also lead to the discrimination of certain groups (minorities both religious/ethnic and so on) in an otherwise hierarchal society. In such a backdrop, it is likely that groups placed in a higher position in the societal hierarchy with cultural and linguistic advantages and also some access to political power discriminates those groups who do not enjoy the same.

Under such pretext, the discriminated groups develop the need for protecting group specific characteristics, especially cultural practices and also try to reach to political power and thus culminating in strong demands of group specific rights. However, concession of group rights also brings along certain set of crucial questions to the forefront especially in regard to compatibility with citizenship rights based on individual equality. Therefore the 'internal restrictions'¹ brought about by group or community based rights needs to be examined in the context of its restrictive tendency towards individual rights, especially women's rights. At the same time, it also urges to explore whether group rights can be enabling factor for women. Therefore to balance the two sets of rights is a serious challenge for any liberal democratic polity.

Most liberal democracies, while conferring rights on its citizens considers individuals, not the groups as a basic unit. This would mean that there is an acceptance of basic equality amongst individuals and inequality amongst groups, specifically towards that of the minorities, is ignored under the principle of ‘benign neglect’ⁱⁱ. However, the acceptance of individual equality has not been able to put a veil on the group based inequalities and hence the liberal democracies are not immune from demands of group based rights. On the other hand democracies such as India has recognized group based rights and granted the same to the minorities as enshrined in the Constitutionⁱⁱⁱ. But the contradictory positions in the Constitution between Individual and group rights have remained a very sensitive and debatable issue in Indian democracy, especially rights based on religion. Much of the debate has been concentrated around personal law vs individual rights, especially women’s rights. The rationality of group rights is reflected within the understanding of inseparable relation between individual and group identity. When an individual’s group’s identity, be it ethnic, religious or any other, becomes a cause of their disadvantage in the social, economic and political sphere in the larger society, it impinges on the enjoyment of individual rights of the same and hence, arises need for recognizing group identity and securing rights based on such identities. But, such recognition of identity and concession of group rights have to be pitted against certain pertinent issues such as gender equality. For example if religious or ethnic based group rights are conceded, there is need to visualize them in the context of existing gender relations. The group based rights may generate benefits to the specific right demanding groups, but it may not address the question of inequality embedded in the patriarchal practices within families and communities.

1.2 Individual vs. Group Rights Debate

Within the liberal democracies, the contradictions between individual and group rights has been brought up more sharply when multiculturalism as a movement came up in the west in the 1970s in favor of demand of group specific rights. However the counter to the multicultural position has been given by feminist writings criticizing group based rights to be restrictive towards women. While investigation of the conflict between

multicultural and feminist perspectives is essentially important, it is also crucial to understand why group rights are important and have become dominant factor in the political discourse. “Modern societies are increasingly confronted with minority groups demanding recognition of their identities, and accommodation of their cultural differences” (Kymlicka, 1995:10). Group rights are essential, as they not only recognize the identity of the particular group, but also give them the access to resources of the society, which they are otherwise denied from. At the same time recognition of group identities are important in the sense that they are crucial constituents of individual’s identity, their life chances and choices. It is not possible to understand individuals without locating them in the context of their existence as they cannot be seen as stripped off their ascribed identities, which they acquire by dint of their birth in a particular group or culture. The advantage or disadvantage and recognition and non-recognition associated with such identities will have definite impact on its members. Liberal contention of ‘abstract individualism’^{iv} comes under serious test in such circumstances. This has happened because individual enjoyment of rights gets affected by their belonging to a particular group identity. Merely terming women as abstract entities will not strip them off the context of their existence or the patriarchies they live under.

As one begins by arguing that identities are important and so are their recognition, there is need of understanding what goes in formation of such identities. Rajeev Bhargava points out that “one’s identity, the understanding one has of oneself, is crucially dependent on the content of one’s beliefs and desires” (Bhargava, 2010: 105). But, all beliefs and desires do not contribute towards constructing an identity, it is only those beliefs and desires which are worth of making construction of such an identity of an individual. It is fundamental to understand that these desires and beliefs are derived from the framework of one’s culture. This framework varies from community to community and thus determines what is good and valuable, ought to do or not do, what one should endorse or oppose for their members. It creates the ground for the individual from which they can take a stand about the world. Therefore cultural identity constitutes a vital role in individual life and as well as in the life of a community. The crucial element of

preservation of cultural distinctiveness constitutes a major element in the demands for group rights.

The crucial role of ascribed identities in individual's life creates conditions which leads to certain constraints for the enjoyment of rights based on formal equality and are conferred without considering various social divisions. History has been witness to various struggles and movements to fight against inequalities stemming from group based identity despite the presence of citizenship rights based on equality amongst individual citizens. Divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion etc put individuals in different group hierarchies and in turn shape their identity and life chances. Belongingness to such identity flows from sense of shared history, culture, and way of life which is supposed to be different and distinct from other groups. Thus difference has been part of every democracy and demand for recognition of such difference through the provision of special rights has taken deep root within such democracies. Hence the multicultural position has supported group based rights to the minorities in the context of the western liberal democracies. In this regard Will Kymlicka has advocated strongly in favor of 'group-differentiated rights' (Kymlicka 1989, 1995:27-33).

While on the one hand, there is an attempt to display the inadequacies of citizenship rights based on the premise of individual equality and importance of group rights in order to meet with the aspirations of the disadvantageous groups. On the other hand, arguments have been put forwarded to highlight the conflict of such group specific rights with individual rights and women's rights in particular. However, while talking about divisions on the basis of categories of caste, ethnicity, religion and so on, one has to understand their intersection with the category of gender. Women are located in multiple identities and their patriarchal compositions. Hence, it is a highly contested proposition to accept that women's rights will be enhanced through recognition of group rights. For instance if ethnicity becomes the basis for group rights, it is important to understand the interaction of ethnicity with gender and understand whether such rights have contributed towards re-definition of gender relations within the ethnic group. Therefore the rationale behind group rights has to be tested against the question of gender

equality. In a society already based on gender inequality, group (minority) rights may create more inequalities than eliminating them by impinging on the individual rights and by putting considerable restriction on the freedom of its own members, especially women. In such a context the multicultural perspective on group rights has been contested by the feminist perspective pointing out to the serious contestation of group rights and gender equality. Susan Moller Okin referred to the growing contradiction between feminism and multiculturalism. She expressed her concern as to what should be done when the “claims of minority cultures or religion clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states” (Okin,1999:9).

The limitation on multicultural perspective on group rights has been brought about by Okin in two significant ways. “Firstly the defenders of group rights tend to treat cultural groups as monoliths, to pay more attention to differences between and among groups than to differences within them. Specifically, they accord little or no recognition to the fact that minority cultural groups, like the societies in which they exist (though to a greater or lesser extent), are themselves *gendered*, with substantial differences in power and advantage between men and women. Secondly, advocates of group rights pay little or no attention to the private sphere” (Okin 1999: 12). These two lines of argument give a significant understanding of the contestations of group rights and the issue of gender equality. By citing example of various societies Okin tried to show how most cultures aim at controlling women, as central focus of most cultures are personal, sexual and reproductive life, which are devised to control women’s life. The multiple instances from various societies display the patriarchal nature of different cultural practices and therefore concession of group rights to illiberal groups actually may lead to loss of freedom of women which otherwise is guaranteed by the liberal democracies through common citizenship rights.

In the backdrop of such contradictions between individual and group rights in the west, Indian democracy cannot claim to have a comfortable existence of them. This is despite Indian Constitution enumerating provision of group rights. “The Indian Constitution was to put together a notion of citizenship informed by the group differences

and assigning a differential system of rights and obligations to citizens recognized on that basis” (Rodrigues in Bhargava, 2008:181). In the context of India, the adoption of the Constitution and the guarantee of individual rights as well as group rights for certain groups seem to have created a balance between individual and group rights. The Constitution of India “On the one hand tried to ensure that no community is out rightly excluded or systematically disadvantaged in the public arena, on the other hand, it provided autonomy to each religious community to pursue its own way of life”(Mahajan, 1998:4). But over the last few decades the tremendous rise of demand of group specific rights has questioned the constitutional equilibrium. Demand of group specific rights, especially culture specific rights have been expressed in various forms. It ranges from cultural revivalism to demand of statehood to secessionism, and in the context of Northeastern region of India it has been bannered under ‘identity movements’^v, ‘identity politics’^{vi} which has become very pervasive in the recent past. This work, while trying to understand the issue of gender within the broader debate of individual rights and growing demands of group rights has not tried to follow a particular theory by considering the fact that it would not capture the complexities one confronts to understand such issue within the context of the study. There is an attempt to develop a larger theoretical framework which will address a variety of issues involved in the work. Firstly, there is an attempted to focus on the individual and group rights debate in the context of the notion of equal citizenship. Secondly, ethnicity or ethnic identity has been identified as the primary basis for demand of group rights and the relation between ethnicity and gender has been explored. Thirdly, within ethnic based group rights question of women’s representation has been addressed.

1.3 Exploring the interaction of Ethnicity and Gender

The growing consciousness amongst various groups of their group identities within liberal democracies, have not only given serious fuel to growth of Individual vs group rights debate, but also created the ground for seriously engaging into theoretical understanding of such group specific demands for rights and their bases. One such category for demand of group specific right has been ethnicity. The ethnic consciousness

of groups around the world of their ethnic identity and subsequent demands of rights suggest that ethnic identity may become a ground for creating inequality. The ethnic phenomenon is not only complex to understand but also is its theorization, because of multiple interpretations at disposal for categories such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic groups’ etc. There is a lack of unanimity among scholars regarding meaning of such terms and in many instance there is interchangeable use of such categories with other similar categories. However understanding of categories such as ‘ethnic identity’ has become essentially important not only because it works as a marker of distinctness and difference of one group with the other, but also because it has been used to pursue group interests aimed at demanding various rights including political autonomy and self determination. The theoretical exploration of the concept of ethnicity has been essentially related to the context of the study which has witnessed a constant rise in demands of group rights on the basis of ethnic identity and representative rights has also remained a major factor in the discourse of group rights. Therefore there has been an attempt to develop a larger understanding of concepts of ethnicity and representation and how these two concepts interact with category of gender.

While exploring the theoretical framework in relation to categories such as ‘ethnic group’ one faces with the limitation stemming from the contextual usage of such categories. For example under the context of the present study the category of ‘ethnic group’ has been used inter changeably with nation, tribe or community, minority and so on. Due to the blurring of boundaries of such categories within a particular context the rigid theorization becomes increasingly difficult. However there is variety of positions at place which aims at theorizing categories of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ etc. Writings on ethnicity has stressed on the recent origin of the term and its usefulness for pursuing various interests. “Ethnicity as the character or quality of an ethnic group seems to be a new term. Ethnicity as a group identity has become essentially important because of there has been a pronounced tendency amongst people and groups around the world, under different circumstances to insist the group distinctiveness and identity of and on new rights that derive from this group character” (Glazer & Moynihan, 1976:1). What

follow from such understanding is, the idea of distinctiveness remains central to the definition of an ethnic group, in order to claim rights on the basis of ethnic identity.

Further, there is an explanation of the idea of distinctiveness in the form of cultural uniqueness and shared history which goes into the making of an ethnic community that stands as markedly different from other such communities through display of their distinctiveness. At the same time the idea of ethnic community has also been used to trace the origin of the Nation. While defining an ethnic community Anthony Smith opines, “it is the sense of history and perception of cultural uniqueness and individuality which differentiates population from each other and which endows a given population with a definite identity both in their own eyes and in those of others” (Smith, 1989:22). Thus the attributes of an ethnic group which has been primarily emphasized are belonging to a common history and possession of cultural uniqueness that brings distinctiveness to a particular group. However there cannot be denial of the possibilities that if a particular group wants to use ethnic resources to pursue other interests may also find themselves in a position to create a mythical history so as to gain solidarity within the group.

Therefore out of many fold understandings one of the working definitions pointed out ethnic group as, “either a large or small group of people, in either backward or advanced societies, who are united by a common inherited culture (including language, music, food, dress and customs and practices), racial similarity, common religion and belief in common history and ancestry and who exhibit a strong psychological sentiments of belonging to the group” (Phadnis & Ganguly 1989: 18-19). Apart from shared history and culture there are inclusion of other attributes such as racial similarity, common religion and psychological sentiment of belongingness. In the midst of such belongingness to the group identity and the urge to preserve such distinctiveness encounters with a complex situation when such groups find themselves both in a minority and marginalized position in a particular societal hierarchy. The minority status of an ethnic group is also clubbed with the constant fear of forceful assimilation to the majority culture, not to mention that they are economically and politically at the receiving end as

well. “In the overall social context the practice was to use the term ethnic group to refer to minority and marginal groups expected to assimilate, to disappear, to continue as survivals, exotic and troublesome to major elements of a society” (Glazer & Moynihan, 1976:5). The study under consideration presents a picture of a multiethnic context, where a certain ethnic minority maintains a position of distinctiveness from majority and resists any attempt of assimilation. Such resistances have taken the forms of various ethnic movements with demand of group specific rights. This trend is not only specific to one particular ethnic group, but has been the feature of other ethnic minorities as well. While utilizing the ethnic resources for pursuance of group rights an ethnic minority is not only at a position of hostility with the majority only but also with other similar groups.

An ethnic group has also been defined as “any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the element of complete division of labor and for reproduction, forms an ethnic category. The objective cultural markers may be a language or dialect, distinctive dress or diet or customs, religion or race” (Brass, 1991:19). The centrality of cultural criteria has been pointed out to define an ethnic group, and objective cultural markers play a vital role in promoting the group interest. However usage of those cultural markers may vary depending on the context of its operation. This indicates that the ethnic group may use one of such marker or combination of some in order not only to exhibit their distinctiveness but also to promote their interests.

From numerous understandings of an ethnic group, it has been evidently clear that there is a sense of belongingness of members towards a shared identity of the group. The feeling of belongingness and at the same time consciousness about it may largely be termed as ethnic identity or ethnicity, though it has much broader meaning. Ethnicity is the consciousness about the ethnic identity, which is not only a tool to bring about cohesion within the group but also to demand certain group specific rights and recognition within the larger society. The various markers of ethnic identity have been invoked and used for group solidarity and promotion of interests. Therefore ethnicity, within certain context, has become the ground for demanding special rights including

right to self determination, economic development, recognition and protection of cultural distinctiveness. “Ethnic identity or ethnicity in addition to subjective self consciousness also involves a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to others. The cultural markers may be language, distinctive customs, religion etc. and any cultural markers may become a divisive cause of creating differentiation between two groups of people in a community” (Brass,1991:19). Ethnic identity symbolizes not only belongingness, but also calls for maintenance of cultural boundary. Ethnicity is an effective tool of mobilization of people to achieve political aspirations. Therefore ethnicity can be seen from the perspective of instrumentality which makes a way for the fulfillment of various aspirations of an ethnic group, provided that group maintains certain kind of internal cohesion and keep its boundaries more or less intact so that there difference from other groups is markedly visible. Such kind of argument also necessitates the need for engaging the idea of ethnic boundary and identifying the agents for maintaining such boundaries.

The understanding of ethnic boundary is essential considering the arguments on uniqueness of the group identity as perceived by its own members and others as well. These boundaries maintained specially through cultural markers not only ensure subjective belongingness but also maintain the space for interest pursuance. However there has also been a debate regarding the fluidity of such boundaries. Fradrick Barth opines that, “ethnic boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. So cultural differences can persist despite inter ethnic contact” (Barth, 1967:9-10). This position reflects the possibility of ethnic contact with other groups, where people may flow over boundaries, but ethnic boundaries remain more or less intact. On the other hand there are views which point out to the fluidity of ethnic boundaries. “Group identities are often fluid. Most of the groups change their boundaries slowly and imperceptibly, but some change quickly. Group boundaries may become either wider or narrower. Some group identities may be lost by assimilation, the process of erasing the boundary between one ethnic group and another” (Horowitz in Glazer & Moynihan,1976: 111-16). In both cases it can be argued that ethnic boundaries may get fluid to be amalgamated or incorporated in some other group and some groups may continue to keep their traditional

ethnic boundaries intact. However the contextual understanding of the study demands for engaging with the ethnic groups who maintains its cultural boundaries intact.

Understanding ethnicity in the context of the study, which is development of ethnic/identity movements in the Northeastern region of India and particularly in the state of Assam, is caught up in the complexities of its own. Ethnicity here has taken diverse forms, including insurgency movements for secession, as nationality conflicts, movements for autonomy within Indian union, as agitations against the immigrants and foreigners, as intra-tribal feuds, as demands for protection and promotion of language culture and as movements for restoration of ancient religions or faiths. The existence of fluidity and ambivalence of the existing situation, understanding of diverse and contradictory manifestations of ethnicity is challenging task. The complex phenomenon of identity formation identifies as:

Identity formation is a complex process. While primordial elements such as race, language and religion provide institutional frame, the cultural perception of the community towards other groups leads to crystallization of identity. In a multiethnic society, the reaction to the challenges arising out of the attempts by the dominant groups towards assimilation, growing economic competition among different ethnic groups and political and development processes enforced by the state reinforce identity formation. Moreover the whole process gets a fillip when emergent middle classes politicize issues of language, culture and even religion to their advantage. Thus identity formation is not the outcome of a single identifiable factor. Multiple factors come together to give rise to identity consciousness. That being the case, identity formation is a historical process the character of which is determined by time and space. (Karna in Aggarwal, 1999: 29-33).

Writing in the context of Northeast region Girin Phukan opines “it appears that the more society is modernized, the more ethnic demands are manifested and similarly, the more is economic development the more is ethnic conflict. Various cultural markers are used for ethnic mobilization. Tribal loyalties, religion, language, social discrimination on the basis of caste, sharing political power and economic opportunities have been utilized for ethnic mobilization. It is a kind of mobilization and manipulation of group identity which leads to ethnicity”(Phukan, 2002: 2-3).

In the exploration of the theoretical framework of ethnicity and ethnic group further complexity has been contributed by its relation with idea of nationalism. The aspirations of an ethnic group have been termed as the nationalist aspirations and their shared history and belongingness as nationalism, which also indicates the interchangeable usage of ethnic group as Nation. As the understanding of nationalism is centrally located in the idea of belongingness towards the political entity of nation-State, it is beyond doubt that there will be absence of unanimity to term an ethnic group as a nation. This leads one to enquire whether an ethnic community qualifies to be called a nation or not. The understanding of such positions also depends on how one perceives a nation. If nation is equated with state, the idea of territorial nationalism becomes primary focus. However, if there is acceptance of the existence of various nations within a state, the role of cultural nationalism seeking a territorial space occupies a major area of study. An ethnic, group demanding promotion of certain interest may not qualify to be called a nation. However, some ethnic groups go beyond the idea of interest politics and demand for political autonomy, territory and sovereignty as well. This distinction has been explained by Paul Brass in a detailed manner as:

some ethnic groups go further and demand that corporate rights be conceded to the group as a whole, that they be given not just individual educational opportunities on the same basis as others, but that they be given control over the public system of education in their areas of concentration so that they can teach the history, language and culture of their group to their own children. They demand a major say for the group in the political system as a whole or control over a piece of territory within the country or they demand a country of their own with full sovereignty. In the latter case that ethnic group aspires for national status and recognition. A nation therefore may be seen as a particular type of ethnic community or rather as an ethnic community politicized, with recognized group rights in the political system (Brass, 1991: 20).

Strong political organisation has been regarded as immensely important in order to successful mobilization of ethnic nationalism. The aspiration on an ethnic group in order to attain nationhood depends on various contributing factors. The aspiration of an ethnic group may not always be creation of political unit based on their nationalist aspiration. However, if they aspire for political goals there is need of becoming politicized and put their stake in the competition for power and influence in the arena of the State.

The study of ethnicity or ethnic identity has become increasingly important because of the politics and political demands associated with it and also for the rise of conflict on ethnic lines. These conflicts are not exclusively conditioned by the prestige of one's religion and language, for which recognition is demanded at public institution. Ethnicity as a tool to pursue various other interests not only involves collective pursuits, but also comes down to the level of individual interest. The identity mobilization and rise of consciousness amongst the members of the groups is articulated through some kind of an elite/middle class composition of such communities. Therefore it clears the grounds to argue that ethnic identity, once mobilized, also generates interests (both economic and political) not only at collective level, but also at individual level as well. Therefore ethnic groups have become focus of mobilization for pursuit of both individual and group interests. Therefore when ethnic groups, inhibits the traits of interests groups, there is possibility of the increase of the competition and conflict amongst them. There have also been shifts in the how the interest is defined by various markers of identity and members of the group as :

Certainly the prestige of one's religion and language is involved in conflicts where one advocates the right of public use of religion and language and where one advocates the right to economic or political advantages of the individual adherents of a religion or users of a language. But never the less it is clear the weight of these kinds of conflicts has shifted: from an emphasis on culture, language, religion, as such, it shifts to an emphasis on the interests broadly defined of the members of the group (Glazer & Moynihan, 1976:7).

A pertinent question remains, how should we try to understand women's location in the discourse on group rights and ethnicity? The point of reference shall remain to understand the co-existence and conflict of group interest and women's interest. While articulation of ethnic identity is undertaken in the form of collective group action women are also essentially brought into the fold of such identity and its preservation. However within the claims of nationalist aspirations of such smaller ethnic groups, women are assigned a particular role. The nationalist agenda has been masculine one, where women are called to participate in the specific role, as articulated, predominantly by male leadership. In the whole process women's identity has been created and recreated in a

particular way so as to fit into the nationalist aspiration of the group. Therefore the understanding of the concepts of 'gender' and 'nation' has become relevant in order to understand the location of women within the nationalist aspiration of a particular group. These nationalist aspirations may range from struggle for political independence of a whole nation to the aspiration of political autonomy/self determination of a smaller group. In the process of conceptualization of the idea of nation, women are also conceptualized in a particular way, which reveals the relation of women within their particular group identity. What has the category of gender to do with the idea of nation? The acceptance of gender as a category of analysis of nation and nationalism has encountered much skepticism, except for the feminist scholarship in the third world, who engages with such understanding in a more organized ways as compared to the western counterparts.

Such kind of analysis is conditioned by the fact that women's engagement in the nationalist struggle against imperialism has led to a very different trajectory of feminism in the third world countries. For example the anti colonial movement in India brought about a new kind of dynamic to the relation between women and nation. The dynamics of the relation in the context of India has been expressed in a popular nationalist slogan 'India cannot be free unless its women are free and women cannot be free until India is free' (Sinha in McCan and Kyung, 2012: 212). Therefore the third world women scholarship is in a forefront in understanding the phenomenon of nationalism. However the feminist scholarship has now become more active to recognize the ways by which nation shapes gender relations and instead gets shaped by the same.

The definitional ambiguity regarding what constitutes a nation has been mentioned in the earlier as well while trying to understand an ethnic group. Such definitional ambiguity regarding the term 'nation' has been encountered by the scholarship on nation and nationalism. In certain understandings origin of nation has been attached to primordial affinities, whereas in some other to capitalism and ethnicity. One of the broadest understandings of nation has been given by Benedict Anderson (1983:5) who characterizes nation as 'limited imagined communities'. There is however no one

universal and inevitable form of the nation. Nations are generally constructed around myth of their own uniqueness. A close understanding of the invented character of the nation reveals its reliance on discourse of gender. If nations are invented and not natural, the personification in the representation of the nation, through gendered language and imagery requires serious explanation. The crucial role women are playing in the reproduction of national collectivities and boundaries is far from being acknowledged. “Women are not only biological, but cultural reproducer of the nation. In fact in the cultural analysis of the nation women are represented as the cultural bearer of the community. “Because women are often constructed as the symbolic ‘bodyguards’ of a culture, those who carry the group’s ‘honor’ are responsible for the intergenerational reproduction of its culture, they cannot be marginalized easily from cultural analyses of the nation” (Yuval Davis, 1992:22-23).

When women are represented as the cultural symbol of the nation it not only establishes them as markers of community boundaries but also ensures community control over women’s sexuality. The gender- blind theorization of nationalism has been refuted by feminist scholars. This kind of theorization associates nation and nationalism typically with the domain of ‘public’ with the exclusion of women, who were largely confined to the private. “As nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse” (Yuval-Davis, 1997:3). Emphasis on gender neutrality negates the contribution of women in constructing and maintaining the national communities and identities. Thus in a way the picture of non-participation of women in the matters of public domain becomes apparent. Carole Pateman (1988:1) too pointed out the how formation of a nation on the basis of social contract is preceded by a sexual contract, so that women could be excluded from enjoying any power in the new civil/political society.

Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989:7) has demonstrated a variety of ways in which women contribute to the national process:

- As biological reproducers of the members of ethnic collectivities

- As producers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups
- As participant in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture
- As signifiers of ethnic/ national difference
- As focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of ethnic/national categories and
- As participants in national, economic, political, and military struggle.

The active mobilization and participation of women in various nationalist movements around the world has redefined the contribution of women in the nationalist discourse. This redefinition of women's contribution to the discourse has been reflected in the varied activities of women in several revolutions and nationalist movements. But this cannot claim to have altered the gendered construction of the discourse of nation. The gendered construction of the nation is also reflective of how men are constructed within the same project. "The contours of patriotic masculinity are produced against or through the self conscious rejection of the feminine or the feminized. The production of nationalist masculinity in national discourse is also enacted via the control/protection of women. The rhetoric of the protection of women as well as the protection of the nation itself often represented as women and thus was an important component in the production of masculinity" (Sinha in McCan and Kyung, 2012: 223-24).

The understanding of the role assigned to women by nationalist project or the discourse on nationalism, becomes crucially important in order to locate women's claim within such constructions. If the nationalist movements in third world are looked at, it becomes evident how women are called to perform certain nationalist tasks which not only include biological, but cultural reproduction of the national collectivity. While understanding the context of women within the ethnic group, similar analogy of nationalist projection of women is reflected. The ethnic movements, having stressed on the nationalist discourse, assigns women similar role. However there is also need of

investigating how women have visualized themselves within such construction? As women are drawn to the public sphere, despite their roles are heavily biased towards private sphere, the kind of agency they are able to create for themselves needs a careful understanding. For example, the concept of motherhood, which is so central to the understanding of nationalist discourse, needs to be put under the test of providing an enabling role to women, not necessarily confined to the idea of cultural representation of women and mothers of future generation of the nation. “The image of ‘motherhood’ both in the cultural representation of the nation as ‘mother’ and in women’s roles as ‘mothers of the nation’ has been among the most powerful and exalted images of the feminine. On the other hand women have also successfully mobilized the construction of ‘motherhood’ to stake their claims in nationalist politics. Indeed women are constructed by (and themselves construct the meaning of) motherhood in nationalist discourse” (Sinha in McCan and Kyung, 2012:224).

The understanding of women within the nationalist project, identity of the group, nationalist/ ethnic movements clearly throws out two vital points, apart from many others. Firstly there is a specific role women are assigned to within these phenomenons and secondly these are based on patriarchal composition. These movements rise up from a societal base which is deeply rooted in patriarchal practices. Therefore, the movements such as ethnic movements in the particular context of the study, though demands expansion of democratic rights, cannot escape from the criticism of being patriarchal in itself. Therefore this study attempts at addressing such contradictions. However within such contradiction the role of women to create a space for themselves remains the major reference point of the work. This has been necessitated by the fact that ethnic movements not only have socio-cultural goals attached to it, but major political goals. It is true in the context of this study. Therefore the stake and location of women in such political goals, or politics of ethnic identity necessitates a deeper understanding. In the pursuance of the political goals, these movements concentrate in collective effort to achieve the same, but oblivious to the existence of inequalities within the group. The gender perspective of ethnic movements which this study has undertaken has largely remained at the margin. While ethnic groups aim at political goals, (basically self determination rights in the form

of autonomy, separate political structure) the issue of women's political representation becomes essentially important to investigate.

There are varied ways of construction of womanhood during the process of identity formation of a particular ethnic group. In the process it creates the conditions for internal restriction on women members. The control of women in ethnic based identity politics is reflected through mobilization of women for mass action, imposition of dress codes, and dictation of sexual codes like discouragement of inter-caste marriage etc. the specific role assigned to women in the ethnic project has been elaborated by Yuval Davis as:

Gender divisions often play central organizing role in specific construction of ethnicity, marking ethnic boundaries and reproducing ethnic difference. The 'Proper' behavior of woman is often used to signify the difference between those who belong to the collectivity and those who do not. Women are also seen as the 'cultural carrier' of the collectivity and transmit it to the future generation, and being properly controlled in terms of marriage and divorce ensures that children born out of women are not only biologically but also symbolically within the boundaries of the collectivity (Yuval Davis in Moghadan, 1994: 413).

In the midst of understanding the idea of group rights, ethnic based identity movements and nationalist discourse, one cannot lose sight of women's rights and their stake into political goals of groups they are located in. Therefore, in understanding the pursuit of group identity and rights an engagement with the issue of women's political representation is essentially important.

1.4 Understanding Representation

In the midst of the multiple meanings associated with the concept of representation, the present study has confined its understanding to political representation within a representative democracy. It does so by locating representation in relation to the representative bodies meaning Parliament, assemblies and similar ones. Therefore it engages itself with the non-representation or under representation of certain categories of people within such structures. The concept of representation has been a widely used and much debated one. However, a close relationship has been established between

democracy in its modern form and representation and eventually idea of representation has become synonymous with having a representative government, though the meaning of representation has much wider meaning.

The intimate relation between democracy, representation and electoral politics has developed over a period of time through various historical moments. Therefore there cannot be a claim that democracy has always been representative. As political representation in a democracy unfolds in the present context it leads us to understand not only the composition of representative bodies such as Parliament, but also whether representatives are able to reflect the interest of the represented or not. Even before the advent of the modern ideas of democracy, representative assemblies such as Parliament have a different history. Edmund Burke remarked “the representatives are not supposed to get mandate or instruction from the constituents as to how to act within the Parliament. The parliament should act in one interest, as a whole, not guided by local prejudices and purpose” (Burke cited in Arblester, 1987:80). Therefore it is essential to enquire, if representatives do not represent or speaks for people whom they represent, and act independently how do one go about understanding representation of various constituencies or interests? “Burke did not think that representing had much to do with consulting the represented or doing what they wanted, that is because he was talking about representation of unattached interest” (Pitkin,1967:210). However, if representatives act in a general manner and with unattached interest, it will be difficult to deal with social divisions and inequalities which need emphasis on particular interests. At the same time, within such an arrangement the power of the people seems to be restricted only to a particular level, to the extent of electing representatives. In presence of different social divisions, opinions in the society it is unlikely that Burkean way of understanding representation will make a real sense of representation. A true representative is a delegate, carrying a mandate and working under instructions. So it is essential that representative speak for particular interests in order to make representation substantial. “If it is accepted that the representative or indirect democracy is at best an inadequate substitute for personal participation, and that everything possible should be done to ensure that the views and wishes of the people are represented as accurately as possible

within such a system, it must surely follow that the representation should be in proportion to the weight of opinion in the society” (Arblester, 1987: 83).

While understanding the concept of political representation through the idea of presence in the representative bodies, attention must be attached to the category of people who are not represented or under-represented, primarily women and which has been ignored for a substantial period of time. The meaning of representation for women is not only confined to their ‘presence’ in such bodies, but also reflection of their interest through representatives. The understanding of the causes of under-representation of women needs to be put in the context of the relation between democracy and feminism. “The two traditions have much in common for both deal in notions of equality and both oppose arbitrary power” (Phillips, 1991:1). However, the bonding between feminism and democracy cannot claim to have progressed simultaneously, as democracy itself in the initial stage of development did not endorse the concept of equality which was all inclusive. At the same time, organized movement for women’s rights is a later development in the context of exclusion of women from enjoyment of democratic rights. But, in its modern connotation democracy and feminism developed in a manner that stands to endorse principle of equality. Nevertheless, this does not create the ground to argue that such equality has been achieved substantially, especially in regard to women’s representation.

The historical development and debates regarding democracy progressed without women being taken as its constitutive part. Women were also overlooked in the call for freedom, equality etc leading their absence both in political theory and political affairs. However the modern connotation of democracy as a rule based on people’s consent and expansion of rights on principles of equality and non- discrimination develops a close bonding with feminism when women’s equal stake in the democratic institutions are established and thus issue of representation becomes essentially important. Representation becomes vital to the larger understanding of democracy as having equality as an intrinsic value. “Democracy is never a system of organizing the elections of government. It also brings with it a strong conviction about the citizens being of

intrinsically equal worth” (Phillips, 1999:2). Women have remained under represented in politics, though they have enjoyed formal equality with men. The formal equality ensured to women within democracies, needs to be seen in the context of the composition of various democratic institutions or elected representative bodies.

Different theoretical considerations are related with the issue of women’s representation with the limitations of putting them within one framework. In the view of the availability of a wide range of perspective the issue has been approached in a varied manner. One of the major issues related to women’s representation is the complexity of considering women as a “group” or “constituency” which can be substantially represented in the representative bodies. The other issue being even if the number of women are increased in these bodies whether they will be in a position to actually act for women or just remain at the level of only “presence”^{vii}, due to compulsion of their parties/ groups and other such constraints. The larger question remains, can women act for women? Therefore while understanding the issue of women’s representation the structural constraints impinging on the accountability and independence of women’s representatives needs serious considerations. Despite serious complexities and limitation attached to the issue, representation of women is essentially important in order to make sense of democracy in the modern context. While considering different positions on women’s representations there came up three important positions advocating their representation. The first position brings the idea of justice to propose that it will be unjust no to provide representation to women, whereas the second provides the idea that women will bring about different sets of values, experience and expertise to politics if they are given representation. However, the third position is more radical one which signifies the conflict between men and women and believes that women cannot be represented by men.

Hannah Pitkin identifies four types of political representations “authorized, where a representative is legally empowered to act for another, descriptive, where the representative stands for a group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics, such as race, gender, ethnicity or residence, symbolic, where a leader stands for national ideas, and

substantive, where the representative seeks to advance a group's policy preferences and interests" (Pitkin 1967:11-13). But none of the variety can claim to provide representation in a complete sense or is free from criticism. Though all forms of representation has its own way of explanation of the concept of representation, for the purpose of the study two forms of representations descriptive and substantive has been taken into consideration.

Descriptive representation talks about representatives standing for a group in the representative assemblies, which can also be called the reflection of the various social divisions within the larger society. This kind of representation refers to the fact that different groups cannot be represented by representatives not belonging to those groups. It in a way indicates that representation is in a way mirror to those whom they represent. However whether they act for the represented is a different dimension. If descriptive representation has to applied in case of women, it will mean that women as a "group" has to be represented. But this has been a problematic contention. "There is no geographical concentrations that could form the basis for a 'women's constituency' and as long as voting is tied to localities, no women candidate can seriously present herself as representing women alone" (Phillips, 1991:67). While Iris Marion Young talked about "group representation"(Young,1989:258), especially of the oppressed groups, the difficulty of establishing women as such group still remains intact because of the heterogeneity that the category of 'women' represents. The second form of representation, which is substantive, means acting on behalf of a group. By doing so it aims to pursue the interest of the group and also include it in the policy preference. However when women representatives are present in the assemblies, they may not be able to advance the interest of women. It is also because the issue of women's interest is a very heterogeneous one and there is no clarity whether women can be regarded as an interest group. The debates within feminism regarding representation also talks about whether women can be regarded as an interest group. Women representatives many a times remain wary of speaking or acting for women. "Getting more women elected may be a necessary but is certainly not a sufficient condition" (Phillips, 1991: 70). The Indian debate on representation has been primarily concentrated on the debate of rights vs

representation that came up during the debates of the Constituent Assembly. But the fear of majority domination that came up during the debate was not dealt with provision of representation, but with collective rights. “The fears of minority groups was a set of rights which included not merely individual rights, but a few collective rights for minorities” (Jha in Bhargava, 2008: 339). But the concession of collective rights left the issue of representation far from being resolved.

Drawing from the above discussion, this chapter has attempted to develop a broader theoretical framework for foregrounding the case studies that have been analyzed in the subsequent chapters. The framework is inclusive of the debate between individual and group rights, ethnicity as a marker of distinct group identity and a means to pursue group interest to the extent of political autonomy and the issue of representation. The moot point of argument in the debate between individual and group rights is inadequacies attach to citizenship rights based on individual equality and hence creates the conditions for demanding group rights. since the particular context of study revolves around ethnic identity movements and role of women in it, the instrumentalist view of ethnicity has been adopted to understand ethnicity as an instrument to pursue group interest. The issue of representation or women’s representation has been invoked for the purpose of understanding the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Two significant points have been elaborated in relation to such interaction. Firstly, the role of women in the identity construction of community and secondly, political representation of women in the bodies of decision making that are result of ethnic assertion. This implies that when ethnic groups are given certain amount of political autonomy as part of group rights, do women get any share of such rights. Understanding of representative has been located within idea of “presence” and descriptive and substantive forms of representation. The idea and forms of representation has been applied in case of women who have been active participants of ethnic movements. Women’s presence in the decision making bodies has been seen in terms of the numbers of representatives in the context of modern democracies. It also involves the contention that if presence it increased, whether it remains only at the level of presence or goes beyond it. Descriptive representation has been related to women as representative of a group by virtue of belonging to the same

sex. Substantive representation has been understood in terms of whether women are able to reflect the interest of women in the policy outcome. Apart from the broader theoretical framework some other conceptual categories have been analyzed in order to substantiate the particular context of the study.

CHAPTER-II

Myth and Reality of Gender Equality in the Societies of North-East India

2.1 Introduction

We live in a world which is organized around the idea that women and men have different bodies, different capabilities, different needs and desires (Holmes, 2007:1). This world works constantly and tirelessly to establish how women and men are different, and thus must have different roles and responsibilities, status and positions. Therefore, the comprehension of this world largely depends on how the relationship between men and women unfolds in different contexts (societies). If the understanding of any society and its institutions needs to be located in the backdrop of this relation, then the fundamental question one needs to address will be, is this a relationship based on equality? The rise of feminism and Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in particular, has brought to the forefront that this relationship is not based on equality, but is largely on subordination, discrimination and exploitation, where women are made subject to such conditions. This position leads to the understanding that this is a relationship based on the power of dominant and dominated, which had not gone without facing serious criticisms and challenges. "In fact feminism always existed, certainly, as long as women have been subordinated, they have resisted that subordination. Sometimes, the resistance has been collective and conscious, at other times, it has been solitary and only half-conscious" (Jaggar, 1983:3).

However, this relation of inequality between men and women went unquestioned and unchallenged for a substantial part of human history until the rise of organized feminism (both as theory and movement). At the same time resurgence of the women's movement in the sixties has made feminism a very significant area of study. "The origins of the women's movement in the western world can be traced back to the French Revolution of 1789" (Osborne, 2001:7-9). Its origin is also traced through the linkage it establishes with other movements, for example, there has been a strong link between

movement for abolition of slavery and feminism. These developments were followed by the issues of women's education and enfranchisement, finally giving way to Women's Liberation Movement.

Historical writings were marked by conspicuous absence of women and political theory (as developed in the west) also remained silent of this relation of inequality and subordination, in the substantial part of its development. The rationale behind such an approach has undoubtedly been rooted in the acceptance of the notion that such inequalities are natural, god gifted and hence immutable and cannot be changed. In order to have a serious engagement with the notion of women's natural inequality, one needs to investigate and address one of the very crucial questions pertaining to the same, are men and women treated differently because they are born into different sexes? Is biology responsible for inequality and subordination? Feminist investigation has questioned the very basis of this supposed to be natural phenomenon, and hence proved that this inequality between sexes is nothing but socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, and given the name of gender, on the basis of which, roles and responsibilities are assigned to men and women, which has hardly anything to do with biological and natural phenomenon. The different status men and women enjoy in society is indeed socially and culturally determined that, almost everywhere, women as a group are considered inferior to men. "They enjoy fewer rights, control fewer resources, work longer hours than men, but their work is either undervalued, or underpaid. They face systemic violence at the hands of men and society, and they have little decision making power in social, economic and political institutions" (Bhasin, 2000:5-6).

Through gender biological males and females are socialized in masculine men and feminine women, and thus assigned different roles of social life. It not only emphasizes difference between men and women but also universal inequality. "Gender is not simply a system of classification, by which biological males and biological females are sorted, separated and socialized in equivalent sex roles. Gender also expresses the universal inequality between women and men. When we speak about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply difference" (Kimmel, 2000: 1).

Gender has become one of the central organizing principles around which social life revolves. Along with race, class and caste, gender has also become one of the axes to understand individual identity and social life, through which we understand our experience. Ann Oakley describes “Gender is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into masculine and feminine” (Oakley,1985: 16). Feminists have brought to the forefront the sex/gender division in order to display the subordinate position of women in a given society. Within such divisions ‘sex refers to the biological apparatus, the male and the female-our chromosomal, chemical, anatomical organisation. “Gender’ refers to the meanings that are attached to those differences within a culture” (Kimmel, 200:3). Therefore, it is not possible to understand women of a particular society without interrogating the gender relations in operation. These relations have a far reaching impact on the socio-economic, political life of women.

According to Gerda Lerner, “traditionalists, whether working within a religious or a ‘scientific’ framework, have regarded women’s subordination as universal, god-given, or natural, hence immutable...what has survived, survived because it was the best, it follows that it should stay that way”(Lerner 1986: 16). So, is the impact of this natural/universal notion that, number of women in different societies have long internalized the belief that they are born inferior and it is natural for them to be subordinate to men. However, rise of consciousness and critique to this position came strongly and in an organized way, as feminists, across the world tried to deconstruct this notion of natural inferiority and subordination. At the same time, they have also questioned the way societal institutions are structured and function, which has been termed as gendered. Such kind of questioning has been triggered by the understanding that these Institutions function in such a manner so as to generate benefit and advantage for men in the society and seldom practice equality in its functioning.

The feminist demand for equality also has an intimate relationship with the development of democracy, both as principle of social organisation and form of government, largely based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Modern nation-states largely endorse democratic notions of right, liberty, justice as enumerated in

their Constitutions. Democratic states have accepted the equality of its 'citizens' who have equal claims to the rights, liberties, opportunities and resources. Not only the Constitution guarantee them, but the institutions of society are expected to deliver them. This has also created the ground for women to lay claims on those rights of the State. However, women in varied societies encounter enormous constraints to enjoy, what they are entitled to as citizens, by virtue of their socially and culturally constructed identity. Therefore, the rationale behind feminist criticism of the concept of citizenship lies behind the fact that women are not treated as equal citizens. "Feminists of all strands have criticized the dominant conceptions of citizenship. They have argued that both the ancient and modern concepts of citizenship have been inimical to women" (Roy, 2005:28). The traditional notion of citizenship was marked by the exclusion of women, making it a space identifiable only with male and public activities. However, there has been constant expansion of the citizenship rights to make it inclusive by including those who were otherwise excluded from its ambit. Therefore, it can be said that the modern notion of citizenship which is based on the concept of 'abstract individual', does not discriminate on the basis of sex, at least in its formal arrangements. At the same time criticisms have been leveled against such notion for its limitations to deal with already existing inequalities, specifically gender inequality.

The conceptualization of the notions of rights, liberty, justice and equality in the tradition of western political thought kept women out of the ambit of such conceptualization. It was only with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of Rights of Women* 1792) and J.S. Mill (*Subjection of Women* 1869), women's question started encircling within the understanding of western tradition. The conspicuous absence of women from such understandings is not only the perceived biological inferiority, but also with lack of rationality. Western political theories have long upheld the notion that rationality is the exclusive faculty of men. The constant denial of public life to women and their confinement family/private sphere has been largely conditioned by the understanding that women are not meant for universalistic interest, but for particularistic one. However, the private sphere has also been a domain of male biasness. Therefore, the visualization of a good society and theorization of same presents a particular way of

representing men and women relationship. “In developing its vision of a good society, every political theory gives at least some indication of women’s and men’s relative position in that society. Each political theory is grounded on some assumption of human nature, thus they have some assumption on nature of men and nature of women” (Jagger, 1983:21). In such visualization women have long been pushed to subordinate positions around the argument of biological inferiority and rational incapability.

The emphasis of liberalism on rationality as a mental faculty of individuals and not related to body and visualization of individuals in abstraction from any social circumstances provides the ground for understanding that human nature cannot be either male or female. Therefore rights are supposed to be conferred on the basis of ‘abstract individuals’. However, divorce from such a position has been seen in the biasness in liberal theory expressed in a manner when women are largely related to the body or reproduction that is ‘nature’ and men to mind and ‘culture’. Therefore, it becomes evident that there is different interpretation of human nature within the theory. However, in the modern context of understanding liberal theory where equality is associated with ‘abstract individualism’ indicating every rational individual is entitled to rights irrespective of race, sex, age or economic class etc. But individuals in the real world are located within their social circumstances and stripping off from the identities emanating from such circumstances and inequalities based on such identities are serious obstacle to overcome by such notion of “abstract Individualism”. Application of such notion in case of women leads to the investigation of certain crucial questions pertaining to women’s locations within their social circumstances. When liberal idea of equal rights heavily depends on individual being the basic unit and is extended to women as well, it hardly deals with the question of existing gender relations in the real social circumstances. When women are located within the belongingness to multiple identities/ within their communities the concept of equal rights takes a whole new dimension. Therefore, in this chapter an attempt has been made to understand women within the particular location of their social circumstance that is their communities and also to understand their role in defense their communities. This has been undertaken on one hand in the backdrop of understanding women as abstract individuals having equal rights and the existing gender

relations within the communities of their location. The context of the chapter is understanding women in the societies of Northeastern region of India in general and Assam in particular.

2.2 Women and Community: The Contextual Understanding

The understandings that have been focused in the discussion above reflect that any given society has a particular way of visualizing the relation between men and women, which is far from being based on equality. The feminist struggle to attain equality for women has confronted with stiff resistance from patriarchal arrangements within communities and families, though formal equality has been ensured to women in democratic polities. However, in order to explore the location of women within communities, one need to be free from the flawed contention that woman is a “homogenous category”^{viii}. Such tendency of presenting homogeneity in initial period of development of western feminism has faced criticism within and also especially from the standpoint of third world feminism. Thus, it has increasingly become important to understand the location of women in the particular context of their societies in order to understand their unequal and subordinate position. In any given society, unequal relation between men and women is conditioned by how identities of both are shaped by their communities and how roles and responsibilities, power and resources are distributed amongst them. Therefore, depending on their location within their communities the status and position of women vary. Further it can be argued that the position of women may vary in a society, depending on the interplay of gender with other social groupings.

Communities play a vital role in shaping the life of women, which at times operate as a space of denial and also of bargaining. However, these communities are structured through operation of gender relations which is also reflective of the power relations within these communities. “The term gender relations refers to the relations of power between men and women which are revealed in a range of practices, ideas, representations, including the division of labour, roles and resources between women and men, and ascribing to them of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioral patterns and so on” (Agarwal, 1996:51). These practices and ideologies

constitute gender relations and at the same operation of gender relations also help in further constituting the same and the whole process is an outcome of a with other hierarchical such as class, caste, and race. However, these socially constructed relations do not operate the same way in different societies or within different communities, which may vary depending on the context. At the same time, it may be argued that these are the sites where women's inequality and subordination is produced. There are multiple sites of operation of gender relations, community being only one of them. However, these sites also provide the scope for struggle for gender equality, when there is contestation to such subordination by various organized efforts. At the same time communities is only one of the sites of operation of gender relations based on inequality, whereas other structures also operate in the similar way including the state. Gender relations also very prominently operate within the larger entity of "Nation"^{ix}.

"A community can be defined in terms of a shared identity based on locations (e.g. a village) and /or a social grouping (religious, ethnic, caste, clan, and so on). A person can be member of several communities simultaneously, for instance, of a caste and religious groupings within a village (or spreading across several villages) as well as of the larger village community containing several castes or religious groups" (Agarwal, 1996: 73). Construction of the notion of "womanhood"^x has been part of each community, though it may not be done in a similar way. Such construction though varies depending on the context generally aims at making women the bearer of the group differences. However, the communities placed in hierarchical position depending on the ethnic, racial, class, religious and other such categories. Therefore, the construction of womanhood also interfaces with such categories to decide the position of women within the communities. The relation between women and communities cannot lose the sight of the fact women are part of several communities and the multiple identities emanating from such communities. Therefore, there is need to locate this relation in the context of which identity predominates at a given time and space and how that dominant identity affects gender relations and gets affected by it.

Though communities operating through gender relations provide a space for them to bargain for equality, in the conflict of resources, decision making and other important spheres women are pushed to a vulnerable position. They are not in a position to gain the same support base from within the communities vis-a-vis men. However, they were made participants of the community norms dictating social behavior. Any attempt of women to question the practices of the community is ridiculed under the pretext that it poses a threat to their culture. Those women are regarded as deviant and deprived of whatever little benefit they were given as the cultural reproducers of the community.

The relation of individual and community has been a determining factor which is core to the understanding of the position of an individual within the larger societal hierarchy and the State. In the context of India, despite constitutional guarantee of equality, people are positioned in an unequal footing because of their group identity. However, such kind inequality has been multiple expressions in case of women. The constitutional guarantee of equality irrespective of sex has deemed to have resolved women's question in India to a larger extent. Continued persistence of gender inequality despite exhaustive provisions of individual rights, in Indian society may largely be reduced to two important reasons, amongst many others. Firstly, the existence of the provision of group rights/community rights, especially for the minorities and the second being the patriarchal composition of the various communities in India. Therefore, without investigating the women's location within communities with patriarchal composition, it will not be possible to understand the position of women within various societies. Therefore, while understanding women in Northeastern region and particularly Assam, this broader framework has to be looked into. It is not only essentially important to understand the patriarchal composition of communities but also the space of resistance created within such communities.

Northeastern region of India presents a picture of plurality, diversity and immense complexity. The terminology "North-East" that has conveniently used to mean all the states in the region is subject of a larger debate. It has been argued that such kind of categorization undermines the diversity and various stages of socio-economic and

political developments of the region. Though there has been a lot of similarities amongst the states of the region in terms of the problems commonly faced by them, “but it would undoubtedly be simplistic to view the problems of the different states through a common North-East perspective” (Misra, 2000:1). The common usage of “North-East” has been regarded as both geographical and political entity which tends to undermine the diversity of the region. But “the distinct historical past and cultural identity of each state or the region” must not be crushed under this common entity” (Misra, 2000:3). Keeping in view such interpretations, this research has used the terminology “Northeastern region of India” and wherever “North-East” has been used, it largely indicates the geographical location that defines it to be a region.

This region has encountered with various complexities in its interaction with both the British and the Indian State system. The understanding of the region largely depends on the comprehension of the complex history and its inclusion into the Indian State at various stages of political development in the post independence era. The uncomfortable relation with the Indian State has been product of multiple contributing factors and rooted in a sense of deprivation, neglect and domination, felt commonly by the region. The repeated reorganisation of the region and the troubled history of accession of the hill areas into Indian federation, the complex demography much affected by scores of immigrant population and immensely diverse culture of the region has been core to the understanding of the socio-economic and political life of the people of the region, which has remained, until recently, an unexplored area to other parts of the country. Demographically, the region has a pre-dominance of tribal population, with a very strong clan and community life, which functions through various traditional norms, values, way of life and Institutions. The diversity of the region is reflected through its demography, languages, cultures and also through various traditional socio-cultural and political institutions. The interaction with modernity has been late and uneven, but modern practices have not totally altered the relation with traditional ways.

The introduction of modern institutions of governance, technology and avenues in agriculture and economy were in addition to the existing traditional institutions in

different spheres. The economy of the region has been largely dependent on the agriculture undertaken in a very traditional way. However, new economic avenues were introduced by the British Government in this region, were mostly beneficial for the people who migrated (or were settled) during the British period for the smooth functioning of their administration. In the post independence period, economic opportunities led to the consolidation of the economic position of those people who were already benefitted during British period, giving them advantage over the local tribal population. Politics in this region has developed or shaped in such a way to give rise to majoritarian local politics later giving way to various identity movements and conflicts mostly on ethnic and nationalist lines. Adding to the injury was the rise of various insurgent groups, which virtually pushed the region into a volatile situation. The dominant politics in the region in the recent past has been the ethnic based identity politics. The rise of ethnic consciousness, which has taken the form of movements, comes in conflict with one or more communities (specially the majority) for the sake of identity preservation and group rights and also the militant connotations of these movements has been core to the understanding of ethnic picture and politics of the region. At the same time, the presence of large numbers of security forces and draconian laws such as Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has affected the normalcy and peace of the region.

In such a complex socio-economic and political context, how does one address the issue of gender? In the backdrop of understanding of the region it becomes evident that, women in this region live a life of extreme complexity. Gender issue is entangled with the issues of security, immigration, militarisation, insurgency, human rights violation and above all ethnic politics (very dominant in the recent past). The women here share a history of marginalization both in the hands of the state and their community. But the history of marginalization and domination of women have long been covered under the representation of women of this region in such a way that they enjoy higher status and position and these societies are based on greater gender equality in comparison other parts of the country. However, dominance of this view, both in academia and otherwise has led to a condition where the deep rooted patriarchal practices are not brought into focus. The contestations to such representation of equality have also been

put forwarded from some quarters. “The gender issue is yet to get adequate attention in the development planning among the large tribal population because of the stereotype idea that tribal societies are free from gender discrimination. This view is basically rooted in the romanticized view of the so-called primitive and small-scale societies documented in the earlier anthropological and ethnographic account” (Nongbri, 2003: 194). The endorsement of the view that in primitive societies the men and women relationship is based on freedom and dignity, by certain section, has also worked as a factor to produce the picture of gender equality. However, there has not been enough evidence to substantiate that there was absence of patriarchal practices.

The ethnographic and administrative view of gender equality in societies does not seem to look into the functioning of the societies within. “Administrator like Dalton and Robinson have recorded the ‘freedom’ of the local women, not only among the hill tribes, but also among the plains people, in both social and family matters and the absence of familiar Indian customs like purdah or female seclusion” (Mahanta,2008:243). There are contradictory views regarding presence of egalitarianism and how gender relations changed in these societies in particular historical junctures. One such view endorses presence of gender equality under traditional institutions and their way of governance including customary laws which was affected by the introduction of modern state system, both British and Indian. However, the other view has argued how these institutions and laws have considerably constrained the lives of women which lead one to believe that patriarchal practices were not alien to these societies. For understanding of the myths and realities of the gender equality there is need of engaging into how the category of women can largely be visualized in this context.

2.3 Understanding the Category of ‘Women’

Keeping in view the complex demographical composition and immense diversity of the region, understanding the category of women is entangled with various other issues. The focal point of reference shall be that women in the societies of Northeastern region of India cannot be put under any homogenous category of ‘Northeastern women’, which will put serious limitations in understanding them in their

realities and locations (societies). The demographic composition of the region is crucial in understanding the category of women in these societies, as some societies are governed by tribal ethos, and some are not. Since the socio-economic and political developments of the region have been uneven, there are several historical interpretations of the interaction of tribal (plains and hills) and non-tribal societies, influencing each other in more than one way. At the same time, the societies here have developed in relation to a history of migration and invasion to this region by foreign rulers at various stages.

The demographic composition, as a complex phenomenon consisting of both tribal and non-tribal communities is accompanied by various other issues in regard to the relations amongst these groups. At the same time, these communities are also marked by internal and external differences, and the principles of governance within the groups, especially of the tribes cannot be regarded as similar, though they maintain certain border ethos which may bear certain similarities with other tribes. Most of the tribes retain their own customs, religious practices, traditional institutions and socio-economic lives. Some tribes living in the plains have come under the influence of the non-tribe caste society and got assimilated into their fold, in terms of conversion to Hinduism, especially the into Neo-Vaishnavism of “Saint Sankaradeva”^{xi} of 14th and 15th century and through the process of Sanskritization developed in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, women of this region have to be understood in the peculiarities of their societies and changes brought into them at various stages.

The colonial history points out that the region was once, excluding the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, put under the administrative unit of Assam, with surrounding hills dominated by hill tribes and the Brahmaputra valley with a mixed population. Brahmaputra valley has been the entry point of various groups of migrants and invaders including British rulers and also the major site of resistance to colonial rule. It has also been the melting pot of various stocks of people and their culture and created what was once known as greater “Assamese Identity”^{xii}. However, there were substantial changes in the demographic composition after the settlement of other groups of migrants in the valley which was encouraged by the British. The tribes in the hills surrounding

Brahmaputra valley were connected to the valley through various means of exchange, though they did not come directly under the political rule of the valley. The idea of “Assamese Identity” was more often related to both tribal and non-tribal population of the valley, than that of the hills. At the same time, the role of Christian missionaries has also been very crucial amongst the hill tribes of the region in terms of spreading both modern education and Christianity in those areas.

In the pre-independence period the idea and belongingness to a common identity developed in Brahmaputra valley was not something all encompassing to include all the communities within its ambit. During the time of British there was consolidation of this idea of “Assamese Identity” through Assamese language in the Brahmaputra valley. But such kind of consolidation also encountered resistance, because of the attempt to establish Assamese as the dominant language of the region which was not supported by communities considering them to be Assamese on the basis of shared territory but not on the basis of language. In the post Independence era, most of the hill tribes asserted their identity and demanded self rule and was accordingly conceded separate states under Indian federation through the process of State reorganisation. Thus, the administrative unit and at the same time ideological notion of composite Assam disintegrated into various small states and Assam was left not only with much less territory but also a much fractured demographic composition.

The diverse and heterogeneous nature of the societies has much bearing on the understanding or location of women within the same. Therefore, when one engages oneself in understanding women in Northeastern region, the need is to visualize them through their societies, both tribal and non-tribal. In addition to this, the conditions of tribal women cannot be understood by following the standard norms of caste society and vice versa. The divisions within the tribal societies have also to be taken into consideration depending on their principle of social organisations. For example, women in matrilineal societies will have different experiences than women within patrilineal and patriarchal societies. While trying to understand the status of women in the region, these peculiarities have been largely ignored, as for instance very few studies have been

conducted to understand tribal women within the norms of their own society. In an attempt to emphasize, how the women of this region, enjoy high status and equality, different from other societies, there is a tendency to avoid the dynamics within societies in order to understand women. Writing about the Nagas, Verrier Elwin, remarks, 'tribal women is in herself exactly the same as any other women, with same position, love, fears, the same devotion to the home, to the husband and children, the same faults and same virtues' (Elwin cited in Zehol 1998:1). On the other hand, in some places Naga women are represented as enjoying higher status, than rest. This kind of discrepancy in the representation of women in Northeast and their status has made it complex to understand them in their realities.

While emphasizing on status of women within a particular society, there is also need of understanding what it is constitutive of. The limitation of applying universal standard for determining the status of women in varied societies has been highlighted as:

On one hand it refers to women's role in the system, which entails rights and duties. Here status is linked with one's role in the system. The other usage of the term status is in the sense of prestige and honour, which may be studied in terms of their legal status and opportunities for participation. However, in the studies about women, such distinctions are overlooked. In studying 'tribes' in relation to the 'other' the values have invariably been either the universal values of enlightenment or the values of the larger society in which freedom is often scorned and hierarchy is much valued. Hardly any attempt has been made to study them in terms of the values prevalent in tribal society. (Xaxa in Sarkar, 2007:172).

The values prevalent in a society determine the life choices of its members. When an effort has been made to understand the status of women of a particular society, the determining factors or the yardstick may necessarily be the values specific to the society, rather than any universal standard. Besides, the generalization of status of women located in different contexts will be a serious limitation of the study. However, four important factors that can be considered as crucial to understand the status of women in any society, and these are social status, economic condition, political empowerment and psychological condition. The status of women in Northeastern region of India may also be discussed in terms of these factors depending on which the whole notion of higher status of women

can be understood and challenged. The gender biasness of the tribal societies are expressed in numerous ways related to various rituals that has been shown the patriarchal practices.

Images of women in tribal societies of the region are rather negative. They are often equated with animals and birds and conceived of as having less intelligence or wisdom. The patriarchal nature of the society is reflected through notions such as consideration of birth of a male child as auspicious, male as the provider of protection to the society, women as subordinate to husband, birth of the female child is welcomed for the reason of helping her mother and brother. At the same time wife is usually not associated with any decision making process (Zehol in Subba & Ghosh, 2003:293).

While talking about women in Northeast and their status, various studies have made certain general observations. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the societies in Northeast are patriarchal in nature, the women in Northeast whether tribal or non-tribal said to have enjoyed a better position than the women of other parts of the country. In the economic arena their control over production and resources goes beyond the home. "In most of the tribal communities, women were in charge of the family. She controlled its decisions and economy. The man represented the family in the society. So the village council was made up of men alone" (Fernandes and Menon 1987:117-119). In fact it has been observed that within the region the tribal women enjoy a better position than their non-tribe or caste society counterparts. These observations have been conditioned by a number of indicators including the absence of dowry, child marriage, purdah, bride burning and other such evils to a large extent and at the same time prevalence of matrilineality, flexible marriage system, bride price, economic role of women, totem based religious practices which have given a unique status to women of this region. In fact the caste societies of this region are also free from many social evils which are part and parcel of social organisation of such societies in other parts. However, this kind of presentation is only one side of the interpretation wherein the other side indicates that women's status in these societies is also a debatable one, conditioned by the fact that women here face various other forms constrains. Therefore, the 'category of women' in

Northeastern region cannot be comprehended from a single standpoint as they are rooted in the specific realities and heterogeneity of their socio-economic and political life.

One of the most complex categories to understand in the context of the study is the category of “women in Assam” or “Assamese women”. Historically, Assam has been the melting pot of various stocks of people and cultures. Therefore, communities here have developed the principles of social organisation in a unique manner by influencing each other. Women in Assam located in both tribal (both hills and plains) and non-tribal communities. In the post independence era, after the reorganisation of state Assam is left with relatively much less hill tribe population. The Brahmaputra valley remains a shared space for various plain tribes including Bodo, Mishing, Tiwa, Lalung etc. along with non-tribe caste societies. At the same time, category of “Assamese women” is a much contested one, because of this particular category of identity has been largely seen as constitutive part of the construction of “Assamese Identity” based on the linguistic identity of the Assamese speaking/majority community who also is supposed to have access to political power. Therefore, this construction of identity has been opposed by other ethnic groups, specially the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra valley. A woman in Assam would prefer to call themselves as “Bodo women”^{xiii}, or “Mishing women” rather than Assamese women in the sense of showing affinity to their group identity, than to the linguistic and cultural identity of the dominant group. These kinds of strict categorization of women have also been the result of the identity consciousness and movements of various communities in Assam. Due to the prevalence of distinct categorization of women in Assam, instead of ‘Assamese Women’ the category of “Women in Assam” has been used in order to understand the status women of the state.

One of the reference points to understand women in Assam is to look into the construction of myths and legends in around them. “The women is represented as Mother Earth associated with the role reproduction and involvement with the rearing of children, as Katyayani, and goddess Kamakhya associated with the fertility cult and “divine powers” (Deka, 2013: 2). During the Ahom period (1228-1838), the society was divided into various ranks and such a classification affected the status of women. The princess,

the women of royal and noble families used to have distinct class based status from that of the women of lower class. In fact, women of lower class could be purchased for slavery. On the other hand some women of the royal family rose to the position of ruling. “In the 18th century Ahom administration was run consecutively by three queens namely Phuleswari alias Pramatheswari (1714 AD), Ambika alias Madambika (1721 AD) and Sarveswari (1739 AD)” (Sharma, 1993: 2). Commenting on the women of Assam, Gait said “women were refined and enlightened and active and versatile in their accomplishment”(Gait, 2008: 257).

The Mughal and the Burmese invasion have been seen as a curse on the women of Assam as they indulged in committing crimes against them. The social reform movement which had substantial impact in some other parts of the country in terms of articulating women’s question by questioning the social evils pertaining to women had very little impact on the lives of woman in Assam. At the same time, despite absence of many social evils, life of woman has remained constantly poor. It has also been mentioned elsewhere that Purdah in the form of Oroni or Veil penetrated into the Assamese society during the British time, as a result of the contact with the Bengali culture, as Bengalis were brought into Assam for administrative service by the British and this has led to the further lowering the position of women. Women in Assam have also been known as good weavers, preparing cloth for the members of the family and despite indicating certain factors leading to the lowering of their status, there has always been an emphasis on how tribal women enjoyed a better position than women belonging to caste societies in Assam.

“Women in tribal areas enjoyed more freedom of movement and association compared to their counterparts in the plains. The evils of dowry and purdah system did not plague the society. Restriction on the life of the widow was less than in a Hindu family. Because of the system of shifting cultivation, women are regarded as the asset of the family and partner of men in cultivation. Women used to take part in dance, music and other social functions. Bride price is very common amongst the tribes of Assam, which was based on the compensation of the loss of a productive member of the family” (Devi, 1994:1-3).

The various stages of development of society and economy, in interaction with the religious and cultural traditions, strong tribal ethos influencing the non-tribal societies and the vice-a-versa, level of education and political participation amongst others are major factors in understanding women's status and position in Assam. However, more or less communities in Assam are based on patriarchal practices. Certain religious traditions developed in the region have also been pointed out for making such practices even stronger. Vaishnavism with its strong patriarchal base introduced a stratified system where women have been compelled to accept their inferior position as wives who spend their lives in serving their families. "Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankardeva believed in the servant-master component which in a way was applied to various relations between king and the subjects, guru and the disciple, God and devotee and husband and wife. Thus, it was based on a model of submission/ domination to a superior authority" (Mahanta, 2008: 349).

Portrayal of women of Assam in various literatures represents not only their agency but also their victimhood under the prevailing social customs and tradition. During the colonial period, the writings of litterateur such as Lakshminath Bezbaruah^{xiv} reflected the picture of women in family and society in Assam. In his famous story "Bhodori" Bezbaruah tried to depict the rural women of Assam as symbol of tolerance and devotion. On the other hand, in an another writing titled "Rudai", there is reflection of women in such a way that despite being tolerant and devoted towards husband, women sometimes are compelled by the circumstances to get her husband physically assaulted by the villagers to make him reform his character" (Deka Hazarika in Baruah 1992: 64-66). On the other hand renowned Assamese writers such as Rajanikanta Bordoloi and Jyotiprasad Agrawala have shown strong women character who came in their own in the male dominated world. Characters such as Monomoti, Pamili, Rahgili, Queen Mother, reflect the merit and excellence of women. However, in the same context women such as Sewali and Kanchan Kunwari represent the victimhood of women due to rigid rule and customs of the society. At the same time, novels such as "Datal Hatir Unye Khoa Hauda"^{xv} by Mamoni Roisom Goswami portrays the plight of a young widow of the

upper caste Brahmin family in terms of the mental torture and suppression of her desires, impulses and material happiness and comfort she undergoes.

During the nationalist movement and in various other movements in the post independence era women of Assam gained substantial public visibility for their active participation in those movements. However, in the post independence period the idea of “Assamese Identity” got more closely associated with the language, culture of the dominant group and received stiff competition. Though many tribes also came within the fold of Hinduism and got assimilated into the caste society, there have been other tribes and ethnic communities that maintained its distinctness in terms of language and culture and also have demanded for their recognition. Therefore, while understanding category of women in Assam the specificities of the communities they are associated with needs to be seriously considered, which is applicable while understanding “Bodo woman” as well which constitutes an important part of the study.

The Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley are the part of the Kachari stock, who “may perhaps be described as the aborigines or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley” (Gait, 2008: 299). They were once the dominant rulers of the valley and later pushed to a dominated position by successive invaders and rulers of the region. In fact in the post independence era Bodos had to wage series of movements in order to protect their identity. As a society, functioning through tribal ethos, Bodo women enjoy some degree of socio-economic mobility, especially in the field of agriculture and market place. The Bodo society has experienced the influence of both Hinduism and Christianity but the language and cultural practices have been maintained to a large extent by the community. Though there has been larger visibility of women in the economic sphere, Bodo society is largely patriarchal in nature, despite Bodo women are not facing the same kind of patriarchal domination as prevalent in a caste society and has remained unknown to the practices of child marriage, infanticide, bride burning, dowry and etc to a larger extent. It has been argued that the interaction with the caste society and the conversion to Hinduism have led to the inclusion of certain social evils in their lives.

The visibility of the Bodo women in the economic sphere is reflected through their significant role in agriculture, fishery, animal husbandry, gathering of fuel etc. The Bodo as a community is not secluded and insulated from the neighboring Bengali and caste Assamese societies and have got influence of the same. In case of marriages, dowry is given to the bride's family in terms of bride price. The common modes of acquiring mates are by negotiation, mutual consent, elopement and intrusion. Bodo women have also been victim of their marginalization in the society as the member of the minority ethnic group. However when Bodo community organized itself for demand of community rights women too organized them to be part of such movements. This has created a new era of public visibility of Bodo women. The backwardness in education, economy, lack of political rights have been commonly felt by the ethnic minorities in Assam who aspires to maintain their distinct identity. Bodo women too are victims of such situation which they have tried to alter through their organized effort. The understanding of the category of women in the context of the Northeastern region and more specifically in the particular context of Assam is not only a difficult task, but also is a phenomenon caught up in multiple complexities. The historical experiences of each community in terms of inter and intra community dealings have shaped the way women come to occupy a position within a community. However, at the general level women of the region have been presented as having a better status and position than other parts of the country, which is subject of wider debate. Therefore, in the next section, an attempt has been made to interrogate the reality of such kind of construction.

2.4 From Myth to the Reality

There have been a lot of arguments about the high status and position of women in Northeastern region of India which in turn has led to the presentation of a picture of gender equality. However, the unveiling of the picture of gender equality needs to be undertaken by putting gender in the interplay of other factors such as kinship ties, class, traditional institutions and laws, State-community conflict, inter and intra community relations and conflicts and more importantly politics of ethnic based identity. In doing so the deep rooted patriarchal practices of these societies get revealed, which have been long

hidden under the veil of gender equality. While enquiring the reality of gender equality, there is need of understanding certain indicators that create the conditions of perceived gender equality in the particular context of the study. Two possible reasons may be identified for construction of such assumption firstly certain degree of women's socio-economic mobility and secondly their role in peace making. However, societies where women come to occupy such role may be regarded as an egalitarian one is a question of much debate. The interrogation may begin by understanding the role of women under the traditional set up. In the study of status of women in tribal societies, women are invariably depicted as having higher social status than their counterparts in caste society. It has been argued time and again that women under traditional set up enjoyed much freedom than later period when various changes were introduced in these societies. These changes said to have brought serious alteration in the gender relations in these societies, as it has introduced patriarchal practices which were hitherto unknown to them. In fact, references have been made to some historical moments which led to the loss of freedom for women in this region. One of these moments has been regarded as the intervention of the colonial state and the subsequent socio-economic changes accompanied by it.

“The division of gender roles has occurred in historical times in Northeast India when many previously egalitarian tribal communities, some of whom were pre-state, were incorporated into a developed state system that of a colonial Indian State” (Mahanta in Phukan, 2008:74). Nevertheless, state system existed even before the entry of the British with incorporation of tribal elements. At the same time there were tribal communities which existed outside the state system, continued their existence with rules and ethos evolved within their communities. In fact the powerful “Ahom Kingdom”^{xvi} that ruled Brahmaputra valley did not disturb their way of life. The communities that the colonial state encountered followed different systems of social organisations including both matrilineal (Khasi, Garo) and patrilineal one. However, by and large the communities followed a kind of agricultural practice where women have been the active economic members both within the community and the family. At the same time many communities had community, clan or village ownership of property. The prevalence of

such practices is not only the indicative of the existence of matrilineal system of social organisation, but also some form of egalitarianism between sexes.

In all tribal societies whether they used the digging stick or hoe and plough, men's role in agriculture was limited to the cutting and cleaning of the jungle and the business of hoeing and ploughing, all other agricultural operations were performed by women. Besides this the supplementary activities women like horticulture, livestock rearing, sericulture, weaving, pottery, basketry and associated trade greatly sustained the tribal economy and gave it a sound basis (Mahanta in Sangari, 2009: 343).

Therefore such practices have shown not only the economic independence of women but other advantages enjoyed by them under such social organisation laying the foundations of claims of gender equality. There also exist certain amount of autonomy in matters of marriage, divorce and remarriage of widows. For example in "Khasi society the women enjoy a great deal of autonomy and respect due to their economic independence. Women are revered in Khasi society as the originators of lineage, as guardians of ancestral property and as the keepers of the bones of the dead in the clan" (I.M Siem in Mahanta 2009: 344). In other tribes such as Nagas, although there was demarcation of the spheres of hunting and warfare, which was exclusively men's domain, from the spheres of women's activity, the economic role and role of peacemaking of women were highly revered.

Distinctive changes have been in these societies due to Sanskritization and conversion to Christianity. The process of Sanskritization has taken both tribal and non-tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley into its fold, whereas role of Christian missionaries have been very effective in the hill areas. "With Sanskritization they are opting for early marriage as a matter of prestige, and discouraging widow remarriage as well as divorce and separation" (Burman 1998:14). There were significant changes in the lives of women in the context of the conversion to Christianity. It opened up the space for tribal women to participate in religious worship side by side men, a phenomenon that was denied to them in the earlier religious traditions. It also made modern education accessible to them. But on the other hand, it introduced a variety of restrictions in the name of ethics and laws of the state, which went against the kind of freedom they

enjoyed under traditional social set-up. Both Hinduization and Christianization led to a number of restrictions on women. The British State system has been held more responsible for bringing changes in the gender relations. The colonial state though was not interested in interfering in the socio-cultural spheres of these societies, but the coming of the missionaries gave a new turn to the functioning of these societies, leaving a greater impact on the gender relations in these societies. The introduction of colonial laws in marriage, inheritance, property rights, brought in patriarchal elements in these matters. However, holding the state system responsible for creating gender inequality would not be a holistic presentation of the women in these societies without interrogating the intra community practices.

The British State system which introduced variety of changes in mode of production has said to have adversely impacted on the economic role of women which has been highly revered. It has also been the reason for women losing the economic power which women enjoyed under traditional mode of production. The introduction of a market-oriented money economy said to have a negative impact on the barter economy on which women had a large share. The division into modern and traditional sector in the state's economy, with women relegated exclusively to the later, had also been seen as women being pushed to peripheral position in economy. Despite their high work participation, their dependence on men increased. Though, the colonial State has been largely held responsible for the change in gender relations in these societies, one cannot deny the impact of other powerful States which brought revision to these relations much before colonial State intruded. The powerful Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley was also seen as altering the gender relations which not only brought patriarchal norms but also introduced new methods of production redefining men's work and women's work specifically in the field of agriculture.

The larger picture that can be deduced from the above discussion is that the emergence of patriarchal practices in these societies have been related to the emergence of the feudal State to some and the colonial State to the larger extent, and the economic and social changes brought along with these state systems. In both the cases, it has been

pointed out that the change in the mode of production with the changing state system has adversely affected the economic role of women. Therefore, it appears that women had enjoyed greater degree of freedom under traditional institutions and customary laws. However, the constraints on women's freedom and equality by those institutions and laws has to be taken into consideration in order to understand the holistic picture of the supposed gender equality in these societies. Gender equality has to be tested in the backdrop of certain important questions such as, Are customary laws based on gender equality? Were traditional Institutions representative? Were women in control of agricultural production in the traditional set up? Although women take a huge chunk of economic responsibility, there is denial of equal right to property to them. The system of inheritance among the most tribes is invariably in favor of men. Even in matrilineal societies where ownership of land is transmitted through women, control lies with men.

This is true among all the matrilineal tribes of Northeast India such as Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Lalung, Koch etc. Women also face many constraints in their access to community land. Although in most tribal societies large tracts of land are set aside for common use, access to them is marked by sharp inequality along class and gender lines. Tribal women rarely have any effective role in the management of the community resources, as it is entrusted to the Village Council (Nonbri, 2003: 199-200).

The tribal customary laws, which include people's beliefs, customs, social mores, precepts, rites and usages practiced since ancient times, cannot be taken as always conducive to the interest of women. With few exceptions most of the customary laws, particularly those related to property and marriage can be regarded as oppressive towards women. Among several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, women are treated mere as commodities which men could easily procure through financial settlement in the form of bride-price. The contradictions in the functioning of these societies come in wide open when the demarcation of public and private sphere reveals that, politics, war, administration has been regarded as the public and exclusive sphere of men, where as kinship relations and household economy has been considered as part of private sphere. This kind of demarcation is present in the matrilineal societies. For example, even in the matrilineal societies in Meghalaya women have little access to the traditional village and

state durbars (councils), which are concerned with public administration and control and management of their land and forests. It is important to note that matrilineality per se does not make women superior to men. On the contrary, practically in all matrilineal societies, while descent and inheritance are transmitted through women, jural authority is vested in the hands of men. “Women’s capacities to utilize the development opportunities are constrained by their historical and political disadvantage. This is particularly true of the tribal women whose long political exile has alienated them from important areas of decision making both at levels of the community and the State” (Nongbri, 2003:225). Therefore, it can be said that matrilineal tribes such as Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya, following customary laws, cannot claim to be free from patriarchal domination.

The consumption of homemade alcohol, though considered to be part and parcel of tribal way of life, has also come to be associated with wife beating. Along with their non-presence in the decision making bodies, discrimination at work and wages has remained unchanged. Encounter with modernity not only introduced education, but also systems such as dowry. Therefore, to argue for gender equality is much contested in these societies. “Though women of Northeast work very hard, both inside and outside home and contribute to family economy, the issue of gender equality is far from being discussed and analyzed, let alone achieving it” (C.R. Marak, 2008:111). Peacemaking is one of the major arenas of women’s public visibility in Northeast region. Naga women, along with their important role in economic production, also play a very crucial role in peace making. In fact Naga women have taken major initiative to resolve the conflicts facing their society in form of formation of women’s organisations such as Naga Mothers Association (NMA). Motherhood has been used as a tool to appeal for peace in society. However, their effort at peacemaking has not generated enough ground for them to enter into other public sphere such as politics. “Women are extremely constrained in terms of entering into the political sphere. The political parties in general and overall political culture are clearly male-dominated. Women are not seen as a political constituency and are often projected as not being interested in politics. In fact stereotypical gender roles are so much rooted in the society that women are hardly concerned or aware of their constitutional and legal rights” (N. Angami, 2008: 96-97). In fact in the state of Manipur,

which has continuously remained under conflict and turmoil situation women have come up to put the society in order. Women in Manipur are known for their activism both in economic and peacemaking front. Formation of groups such Meira Paibis (Torchbearers) bear the witness of women's role in conflict resolution. Traditionally Manipuri women were actively involved in handloom and handicraft activities. Women have been both producers and sellers in the economic activities. They have also been the seller of the products of male workers. They have a very crucial role in the market, which they have used not only as a forum of public discussion but also as a bargaining space. However rise of insurgency and severe violations of human rights have put women with no choice but to come forward for peacemaking in the society. The conflict situation, presence of huge numbers of security forces, prevalence of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), has put serious constraints in their family, economic life and many women became victim of such situation. "In the prolonged armed conflict, women have been particularly vulnerable to the repressive policies of the government and the deterioration of law and order situation in Manipur. There are many cases of harassment, torture, sexual abuse and rape of women by security personnel since 1980" (Ksh. B. Devi, 2008: 104). However, gaining political agency through peacemaking to impact on the existing gender relations has not been the reality of these societies wherein such role is seen nothing but as an extension of domestic role.

When peacemaking has been considered as one of the indicators of enjoyment of high status of women, it is essentially important to understand the conditions which compel women to take up such role leading to their public visibility. The moot point of enquiry shall concentrate on what drives women to take peacemaking as their responsibility and does it have any impact on the gender relations in the society? Traditionally, women took up the role of peacemaking so as to act as a mediator in the wars and conflicts amongst the communities and clans, and due to such conflicts women live under constant fear of losing their sons and husbands. In the post independence period, conflicts multiplied in this region, reducing it to a conflict ridden region. Demands for statehood, secession from Indian union, autonomy within state, ethnic assertions and such other issues have made peace a distant dream for the region. Rise of

militancy and deployment of heavy security forces led the situation to be more miserable. From the 80's there has been an immense rise of movements centered on the issues of ethnic identity. In such a situation women not only came up as peacemakers but also for the defense of community rights, which has been expressed through their participate at mass level in the movements for the same.

In a conflict situation, though women take up the role of peacemaking women's rights becomes extremely vulnerable both at the hands of State and community. In the phase of conflicts both state and communities reinforce patriarchal values. It has been seen in the world over that violence of an armed conflict is adversely inflicted in the body of women, as women and children are the worst victims of such a situation. Violence against women is the manifestation of the historical unequal relations of power between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement. Community conflicts are fought through the bodies of the women. "The militarization and terror in this area have increased both because of local movements and the state's response to them. In such an armed conflict situation, women as victims of sexual and physical abuse are the commonest category" (Chenoy, 2002:138).

In Northeastern region, conflict is linked up with the question of ethnicity and identity, which has led to control over women's mobility, their bodies and how they express themselves. Assertion of identity is often exaggerated and patriarchal and fundamentalist values and ideologies are reinforced. The women are expected to keep the 'honor' of the community or the collectivity by becoming the custodians of tradition and culture. There is pressure on women from within the community to uphold culture and ethnic identities which obstruct the questioning of gender biased customary laws and practices. By and large, within both tribal and non-tribal societies women are held subordinate to men. The stereotyping of the role of men and women and the way division of labour is done between two sexes the household works invariably is tied with women. This kind of ideological underpinning to the division of labour between the sexes has not only contributed to the devaluation of women's work, where the productive activities are

seen to be part of their natural functions as reproducer of the family, it also provides the moral basis for differential distribution of the material and power resources within the family.

Therefore, it can be said that gender inequality is not alien to the societies of Northeastern region of India. The attempt at projecting a picture of gender equality explains only one side of the story. Patriarchy does not operate in similar manner in all the societies. Although many practices which put constrain to the freedom of women, are not in practice at length in these societies as compared to some other societies in rest of India, but there is presence of some other which treat women in an unequal manner. The context may be different, the societal dynamics may vary, but patriarchal practices are expressed and utilized in a manner which is specific to the society and communities within it. The patriarchal control women face here may vary in degree, but there cannot be negation of its presence.

2.5 Locating Women in Movements/Defense of the Community

History is witness to a plethora of movements occurred in varied societies at different junctures in order to bring changes to the existing order that generates inequality and discrimination, lack of freedom and justice. Struggle for freedom and equality has been integral part of human history. Resistance against various inequalities necessitates the need for organised opposition to those structures of the society that emanates them. Therefore, struggle against tyrannical rule, slavery, racism, have proven time and again that there has always been a quest for democratization ensuring equality and non-discrimination. The unequal relationship between individuals, for that matter among different communities on the basis of race, class, caste, nationality has been a reality and so are the struggles and movements against them. One of the major bases of such inequalities is sex based inequality, between men and women, struggle against which has brought about a challenge to many established notions in the society.

While looking at various struggles/movements that occurred at different historical moment of it is essential interrogate the role women come to occupy within the same.

Women have constituted an important force in various movements that took place in different societies. The historical account of women's role and contribution in struggles against various inequalities and discrimination has largely remained forgotten or unacknowledged. Feminist historians have pointed out that much before the rise of feminism and organized women's movement, women took part in many other movements, acknowledgement of which has been selectively excluded from the historical accounts. The silence of mainstream historians and theorists regarding women's participation indicates that women were denied any significant role in making and unmaking of history. However participation in different movements also gave women the space to be conscious about their own confinements, inequalities and discrimination they face in any given society. Women have not only participated in various other movements but have raised the issues of their own confinements within those movements and outside. This has laid the foundation for the rise of women's movement in the west and later on in other parts of the world.

Of all these movements where women came out to be a huge force, crossing the barriers of their private confinements, nationalist movements are the crucial ones that occupy a central place in political history of the world. This is especially true of the third world countries where one can witness a different trajectory of women's movement, from that of the west, due to its close affinity with nationalist movement. Jayawardena (1994:2) was of the view that 'feminism was not imposed on the third world by the west, rather than historical circumstances produced important material and ideological changes that affected women, even though the impact of imperialism and western thought was admittedly among the significant elements in these historical circumstances'. Democratic movements for women's rights and feminist struggles in Asia took root against the backdrop of anti-colonial movement that shook the domination of imperialism. The effort of the third world bourgeoisie to westernize and educate women within the confines of the traditional patriarchal framework has led to the consciousness amongst women, especially those who were benefitted by the education to raise their demands.

However, one of the biggest challenges to understand feminism in the third world is the location of women's movement in relation to categories of caste, class, race and so on. The intervention of the colonial rule in the third world countries did not come along with any aim of radical changes in the existing social inequalities rather consolidated the existing forms of such inequalities. Therefore, when the colonial state system was created along with masculine line it also transformed existing patriarchies and caste/class hierarchies. Sangari and Vaid (1989:1-2) stated that patriarchies are not systems that are added on to caste and class but are intrinsic to the very formation of and transformation within these categories. Colonial relations of rule form the backdrop of the critique of both levels and it is the notion of practice of ruling that may allow for an understanding of the contradictory sex, race, class and caste positioning of third world women in relation to the state, and thus may suggest ways of formulating historically the location of third world women's feminist struggle (Mohanty Talpade, 2003).

Indian feminism or women's movement too developed within such a trajectory. However, feminist writers are not in agreement regarding influence of western feminism on that of Indian and the labeling of 'feminism' in the context of Indian women's movement.

Feminism in the west emerged as a powerful challenge to existing power structures and gender equations at the level of the family, the economy and the polity. Whereas in women's rights movement in India, the struggle did not acquire the overtones of gender warfare as it did in the West where women faced fierce hostility from most politically active men in their endeavors to win equality (Kishwar in Choudhury, 2005: 35).

Liddle and Joshi (1985) refer to the difference in the nature of male domination in India and the west. On the other hand, influence of west has been acknowledged by many other feminist activists and theorists. At the same time, much emphasis was put on the difference between west and Indian women's movement, precisely because women's issues were largely located within the nationalist agenda, that came in opposition to colonial rule. Thus, the emphasis on difference and distinction with the west was, nothing but inevitable in order to negate the colonial influence. However, in this process, internal

distinctions and difference both within nationalist project and women's movement has been largely neglected.

While establishing the attachment of the women's movement with the nationalist movement, it is imperative to mention that, it is not the only historical moment where women's question was raised. Much before women's question encircled within nationalist movement, social reform movement raised them for the first time. "What we today call the Indian Women's Movement (IMW) emerged as a part of the Social Reform Movement 1800s" (Gandhi & Shah, 1992: 16). These movements said to have opened up a whole new horizon for women and at the same time brought to the light the existing gender inequalities more sharply. Although the mobilisation of women within nationalist movement in the third world did not radically redefine their role in the society, yet it did open up a new space for them to articulate their own issues. At the same time, it brought the issue of women's status in these societies to the forefront. The deep rooted relationship between nationalism and women's movement in India does not mean that nationalist movement was out of patriarchal influence. Women being part of the political struggle also questioned patriarchy both within and outside. "The Indian women's movement attacked both male supremacy and foreign domination as it reached to the analysis that neither male domination nor imperialism alone accounts for women's subordination, but that both act upon the gender division, and are linked in perpetuating women's oppression" (Liddle and Joshi, 1985: 72). It has also been seen that apart from nationalist movement women got associated with various other movements. "While the Indian women's movement is influenced by, and influences, western debate on feminism, it is unusual within feminisms in the strong link it has forged with other social movements" (Ganguly, 2007: 7).

The holistic understanding of Indian nationalism is not possible from a single standpoint, which needs employment of varied methods and approaches. The analysis and understanding of both colonialism and rise of nationalism in opposition to it has also triggered the debate regarding position of women within both. At the same time, it cannot be denied that nationalist movement created a space for political mobilisation for both

men and women. It has also been widely accepted that participation of women and their contribution was very important for the success of the nationalist movement. However, in order to create the homogeneous nature of Indian nationalism, much of the divisions and hierarchies of Indian society were overlooked, especially gender divisions and inequality. Both colonial structure and traditional hierarchy constituted gender inequality in Indian society. In fact within the nationalist movement, the mobilisation for political independence restricted the debate on women's rights.

The broader nationalist agenda stressed on the creation of an ideal of womanhood in India. The articulation of this "womanhood" which was basically regarded as a middle class construction is intimately related with the rise of an educated middle class and emergence of a new private and public sphere in colonial India. According to Partha Chatterjee (1989: 236-37)

A re-articulation of Indian womanhood was crucial in the resolution of the 'constitutive contradiction' in the formation of an Indian identity. The central problem of Indian nationalism, he suggests, was the problem of modernising the nation on western terms while at the same time retaining an essential national identity as the basis for a political claim to nationhood. Nationalist thought dealt with this contradiction by distinguishing the spiritual from the material and the inner from the outer. Nationalists could now afford to imitate the west in the outer or the material sphere while retaining the spiritual or the inner sphere as an 'uncolonised space' wherein the essence of Indianness could be located. This definition of the two spheres was related to the socially prescribed roles for men and women.

However, it was a very limited agenda, as the modernising project of nationalism was not necessarily focused on fighting the existing patriarchal norms of Indian society out rightly. "The ideological construct of the modern Indian woman as superior to orthodox, uneducated women, to the women of lower caste/class, and to the western/westernised woman was key to the emerging social order in India, characterized by the consolidation of the nationalist bourgeoisie." (Sinha in Sarkar, 2007: 218). Despite the ambiguities around women's movement in India, historically it can be traced back more or less to three important moments, social reform movements, Indian nationalist movement and formation of various women's organisations. At the same time, women were actively

engaged into various local level movements including peasant movement, students' movement, anti price rise, left movement and so on both before and after Independence. Thus, the location of the nerve centre of the women's movement in India is not an easy task. Ambiguity persists in relation to the scope and nature of women's movement. "The women's movement in India is in reality is made up of various strands. What one means, when refers to women's movement actually depends on one's own perspective, ideological position and the actual political situation" (Sen in Ray, 2012:519).

In the context of India the colonial experience has largely been regarded as site of women's encounter with the public sphere. "The first historical accounts of Indian women date from nineteenth century and are a product of colonial experience" (Forbes, 1998:2). In the early part of that century, the glaring social evils affecting women's position in the society became the subject of discussion. As this particular aspect of the society was focused on, women's position in the society has been linked to the backwardness of the country by the imperialist rulers, women's emancipation initially came about through the men led social reform movements. Various factors led to these movements, primarily influence of English education. At the same time attempt has also been made to go back to a glorious past, when women were given high esteem. However, such understanding of history has not gone without criticism. For Uma Chakravarti (1989:28) "it has led to a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth". Nevertheless the major question that was confronted by the reformers in the 19th century was how to modernize women? 'The issues tackled by the reform movement including sati, widow remarriage, polygamy and women's property rights were raised by bourgeoisie, male social reformers of urban areas who tended to idealize women's role as wife and mother in the context of patriarchy' (Jayawardene, 1994:92). However, the call for women's participation in the nationalist movement brought about a new turn in the history of women's movement. It began as early as 1905 with Swadeshi movement's boycott of British made goods and Institutions.

There were divergent views within India's women's movement as regards to the participation in the nationalist movement. The transition from social reform movement to the nationalist movement cannot be said to have happened instantly. From 1910 onwards it has been seen that some women got actively engaged with the issues of women's rights. "Mass participation of women in the nationalist movement slowly narrowed the gap between the reformist and nationalist women. The involvement of really large number of women in the nationalist movement began sometime after the Rowlatt Act was passed in 1919" (Kumar, 1993: 62). This was further strengthened civil disobedience movement. Much of it is attributed to Gandhi's call for participation in the nationalist movement. There are three major ways in which national movement first and the Indian state later imagined the role of women. These are "(a) women as agents and recipients of development, (b) women's political participation in the nation as equal citizens of a state that does not discriminate on the grounds of gender, (c) women as emblems of 'national culture' (Choudhury in Rege, 2003:341).

While women's question encircled in the 19th century through the reform movements, but with the intensification of the reform movements, they could not be restricted to reform issues only. Formations of different organisations such as All India Women's Conference and women within the national movement insisted on their greater economic and political participation. The legacy of women revolutionaries, trade union activists, and underground nationalist is as much part of the historical legacy that the Indian state inherited. The anti-imperialist movement in India brought a new kind of awakening among women. "But at the same time there were different streams of woman within the anti-imperialist anti-feudal struggle posited different, representing contentious images of identities for women" (Sangari and Vaid 1989).

The moment that led to the largest involvement of women in the nationalist movement and also marked the way for their political activism later on, was the call of Mahatma Gandhi. His entry into India's freedom struggle itself was considered to be a crucial event which led the movement to acquire the mass character. It definitely brought about a new dimension in the women's contribution to the nationalist struggle. "Gandhi

represents a crucial break from the attitude of many of the leaders of the reform movements of the late nineteenth century, who tended to see women as passive recipients of more humane treatment through the initiative of enlightened male effort” (Kishwar, 1985: 1691). Gandhi interpreted the role of women in Swaraj in a much serious way which is reflected in his attempt link women’s struggle with the struggle for national independence in the first non-cooperation movement of 1921. Though such participation has been tied to the domestic responsibilities a massive entry of women into salt satyagraha in 1930 drew women further to the public sphere. Participation in public and political life brought with it a new prestige and status *vis-a-vis* their male counterparts. This was a major reason why as early as 1931, the Congress party passed a resolution at its Karachi annual session committing itself to the political equality of women, regardless of their status and qualifications. “It is significant that at that time, women in most European countries had not yet won the right to vote, despite a much longer history of struggle on this issue” (Kishwar, 1985:1697). In 1931, the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress issued a declaration on the Fundamental Rights of Citizenship in India whereby it committed itself to women’s equality. The declaration reads as follows-

- All citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex.
- No disability attaches to any citizen, by reason of his or her religion, caste, creed or sex, in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and in the exercise of any trader or calling.
- The franchise shall be on the basis of universal adult suffrage.
- Women shall have the right to vote, to represent and the right to hold public offices. (Report of the Sub Committee, ‘Women’s role in Planned Economy’, 1947:37-38, Kasturi in Choudhury, 2004: 136).

There have also been evidences of women’s participation in other movements, apart from the nationalist one. “The Telengana and Tebhaga movements are two very

important historical evidences of women being part of various other movements apart from the nationalist movement” (Sen in Ray, 2012:522-24). Women’s active participation in the nationalist movement and articulation of women’s question within that space has finally culminated in the provision of the Constitution of India, where equality irrespective of sex has been assured. This gave women hope and aspiration to realize their dream in a free democratic country where democratic consolidation was taking roots after independence. But in the subsequent years it has been proved that the gender equality has been far from being realized, creating the grounds for resurgence of women’s movement in the 60s in India. Much of it was due to the feeling of deprivation due to the failure of the parliamentary democracy to deliver on the promises made. This situation triggered people’s movement in various parts of the country where once again woman became important constituents.

In contemporary India the resurgence of the women’s movement and its contours have to be seen in the light of certain important events.

(1) the crisis of the state and the government in the 70s going into the emergency, (2) the post emergency upsurge in favour of civil rights (3) the mushrooming of women’s organisation in the early 1980s and the arrival of women’s issue on the agenda. (4) the mid 1980s, marked by a fundamentalist advance, and the 1990s, when crisis has deepened with regard to state, government and society (Agnihotri & Mazumder , 1995: 1869).

The detachment of women’s movement from other people’s movements made the way for the emergence of ‘autonomous women’s movement’ from the 1970s onwards. However, such kind of detachment cannot be regarded as a phenomenon that occurred throughout the country. It reveals that a “vigorous, and uneven women’s movement has been in existence in India for well over a decade. Two major strands in the movement are identified as women’s movement in conjunction with mass organisations or political parties and the autonomous women’s movement” (Sen in Ray, 2012:531).

From the above discussion, it has been witnessed that women constituted a very crucial part in the movements for collective cause, which is particularly true of the third world countries due to their common experience of colonial rule. In the context of India

as well women not only attached themselves with nationalist movement, but also with many other people's finally making way for autonomous women's movement. However, women's movement in India is also an amalgamation of various strand and differences within the same. "All women and women's organisations which consider themselves part of the IWM have their starting premise the belief that the women are an oppressed section in society, though they may differ in their understanding of class and gender, the origins of women's oppression and its perpetuation. The second shared belief is that women's oppression is not inevitable, nor a part of the 'natural' order in society and can be eliminated. Thirdly women within the movement believe that there exists a sexual division of labour in society" (Gandhi and Shah, 1992: 24-25).

2.6 Women in Movements: The case of Assam

In the backdrop of uneven nature of women's movement in India, it is also essentially important to understand it in relation to the regional dynamics. The existence of local feminisms, developed in relation to other local movements, constitutes a very important aspect of analyzing women's movement in India. These local level movements concern itself with particular interest or interests of a community. In absence of strong autonomous women's movements, women's issues are raised within these movements, which most of the time gets secondary attention vis-a-vis the primary goal of these movements. By virtue of the membership in the community women are drawn to these movements and in turn women create a space to raise the issue of their own concern in the society. These spaces have motivated the creations of different women's organisations in the local level as well, mostly within these movements and also outside of it. But whether these organisations have actually provided the platform for women's emancipation is a much contested question.

The Northeastern region has remained a fertile ground for various movements and therefore it becomes essential to understand the role of women within them, as women constitute a major force within these movements. Historically the participation of women in movements in this part can largely be traced to the influence of nationalist movement. Nationalist movement not only witnessed the participation of women of this region, but

also women's organisations of the time also directed its activities towards the movement. Formation of women's organisations has occupied a substantial part of women's activism in this part of the country. For example in Assam, women are actively involved in various women's collectivities/committees, which were called Mahila Samities. In the other Northeastern states as well women have formed some very prominent and active women's organisations. Thus, the location of women and formation of organisations within these movements or relations to such movements provide substantial ground for understanding women's movement in this region. The demands of these organisations within these movements, issues taken up by them, programmes followed them constitute a major area of enquiring gender inequality in these societies.

Movements for autonomy and self determination remain a very important arena where participation of women is hugely drawn. Though demands for self determination have been raised from the region on various stages and the state of Assam witnessed a series of movements in the post independence period. From the 1980s onwards starting with the famous Assam Movement based on the question of Assamese identity and nationalism, there emerged range of ethnic movements demanding various rights including political autonomy. A particular way of construction of Assamese identity during the Assam movement brought to the forefront many existing ethnic divisions and deep rooted inequalities more sharply and made Assam a fertile ground for ethnic assertions. These movements broadly aim at securing self rule for the specific community, citing the distinctness of their ethnic origin. The distinctness is reflected in their cultural life, language and history and preservation of which is deemed very essential as they feel threatened by other communities (mainly the majority) of imposition and assimilation. Along with that there is demand of economic development in the areas of their concentration. The expression of these movements also varies from agitation with considerable mass support to violence and militancy. However, a very little has been done to analyze women and their issues within these movements. However, in order to situate women within the movements of the 80s in Assam, it is important to trace the history of their participation in various movements from the pre-independence period.

Women's participation in mass movements in this region in general and Assam in particular can largely be located within the nationalist movement. However, it has been argued that visible changes in the lives of women were witnessed after the entry of British since 1826. "The British occupation of Assam in 1826 is the starting point for any modernist narrative relating to Assam. Ideas of formal education, particularly women's education, social organisation for social purpose and not based on kin or religion as in the past, printing and reading of books and journals were new ideas, were unknown earlier" (Mahanta, 2008: 3). The entry of the Baptist missionaries in 1836 gave a whole new turn to the history of this region, as they became party to the linguistic identity struggle of the Assamese people.

However, in the successive revolts against the British rule by the Ahom rulers, women were part of the revolutionary activities and they also became victims of such activities. A major attempt to revolt against British came during the time of sepoy mutiny under the leadership of Maniram Dewan in 1857. "But the bid to attack the British was foiled and Maniram Dewan and Peali Baruah were hanged publicly and two women of the royal family Rupahi Aidew and Lumbai Aidew suffered confiscation of property due to their involvement in the rebellion" (Sharma, 1993:15-17). The next stage of revolt against the British administration was the post-mutiny agrarian uprisings. The post mutiny developments in Assam were marked by the formation of a number of Raj Mels (assemblies of countryside people) throughout the province for ventilating the local grievances and molding public opinion against the British. Two of the major peasant uprisings against British were Phulaguri Dhawa in Nagaon and battle of Patharughat in Darrang district. Though there is no explicit evidence of women being active participants of these movements, but going by the role of women in the agrarian economy in these societies, it cannot be plainly assumed that women were aloof from such movements.

The entry of Baptist missionaries in Assam has been considered to be a crucial moment in Assam not only in terms of introduction of modern education, but also for consolidation of linguistic nationalism. Such developments also triggered the debate on women's education which was widely debated in the Baptist journal Orunodoi and in

other Assamese journals of the time. This debate was basically concentrated within the visible struggle between custom and tradition and the idea of modern education for women. “The struggle between modern ideas and deep entrenched custom and traditions was strongest on the issue of western education in general and women’s education and women’s freedom in particular” (Mahanta, 2008:3). For bringing women into the fold of education, which was a difficult task during that period, Christian missionaries, prominent leaders of Assamese society and various organisations played very significant role. In the late nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century women’s organisations, women’s magazines took up the issue of women’s education. Women’s organisations formed in the pre-independence period took women’s education as one of the major goals. At the same time publication of journals such as ‘Ghar-Jeuti’ further gave boost to women’s issues in the pre-independence period. However even before women organisations were formed in Assam, especially at the all Assam level, some women defied their confinements and utilised other platforms/organisations such as Assam Chatra Sanmilan, Assam Sahitya Sabha to voice their concerns and issues.

The mass participation of women in the nationalist movement gave a new dimension to their activism expressed till now through various organisations and writings. However, while focusing on the issue of their rights, women were equally concern about striking a balance between public and domestic life. The campaign for women’s education and participation in the nationalist movement was never in negation of the domestic responsibility of women. “The nationalist discourse of the pre-independence period intersects with women’s rights discourse with women trying to accommodate themselves to both without any conflict of interest between the personal and social goals” (Mahanta, 2008: 5). However, much of the women’s issues got subsumed in the nationalist fervor once the influence of the nationalist movement intensified in this region. Similarly, the understanding of the nationalist movement in Assam is associated with the parallel growth of Assamese nationalism, which in fact preceded the activities of the non-cooperation movement and entry of Mahatma Gandhi into Indian political scenario. The foundation of Assamese nationalism was largely based on the issue of rightful position of Assamese language, which was replaced by Bengali as

the official language by the British rulers. The participation in the nationalist movement was accompanied by a strong sense of Assamese nationalism during the pre-independence era. Such nationalist aspiration has been carried forward in the post independence as well, although there have been lot of resentment on the part of smaller ethnic communities to the projection of such ‘Assamese Nationalism’ which was accused of being hegemonic.

The Assam Mahila Samiti (later known as Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti) as the first state level organisation was under the inspiring leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani, played a major role in the mobilisation of women in the nationalist movement. The mass mobilization of women in nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties came through the Assam Mahila Samiti, which led to the large scale participation of women in the nationalist movement. The ongoing political changes in the country and Gandhi’s visit to Assam, motivated women to be active participants in the nationalist movement. Apart from Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to Assam in 1921 another significant event of the period was the decision to celebrate ‘joymoti Utsab’ by young educated men of Sivasagar district in 1914. This festival was considered to be a very significant moment as it enlisted nationalist sentiments amongst young women and girls. This revival of Joymoti, who has been portrayed as sati, martyr, patriot and national heroine, was conditioned by the construction the idea of an ideal woman, who sacrificed her life for her husband and the nation, to be emulated by young women in Assam. Otherwise there has been historical ambiguity regarding the portrayal of Joymoti, who was revived during the nationalist movement and remained neglected prior to that. “The legend of Joymoti begins to evolve around the last part of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries amidst the swirling nationalist discourses, and alongside the discourse of tradition and modernity that were sweeping across India” (Kothari in Nath ,2016: 68). During both civil disobedience and quit India movement women’s participation has been very active and at mass scale in Assam. Motivated by the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi many women laid their lives for the nationalist cause. During the Quit India movement women such as Kanaklata Baruah, Bhogeswari Phukononi faced the bullets of the British. Apart from that many other prominent women took various ways in order to contribute towards the

goal of political freedom. Women of this region have stood up for the cause of their community and the nation whenever needed. The post independence era has also witnessed the active role of women in the defense of their community.

From the 80s onwards the resurgence of identity politics in a very dominant way has brought into the forefront the question of women's stake into it. Identity movements have come up on a large scale wherein amongst all other identities ethnic identity has been made an important tool to pursue group interest. Particularly in the state of Assam, these movements have not only brought about the question of discrimination experienced by the ethnic groups, but also the exiting social cleavages to the forefront. Ethnic assertions have not only led to conflict between the majority and minorities, but amongst minority ethnic groups as well. On the eve of independence Assam was left with much political turmoil and problems that were far from being resolved. The issue of linguistic identity has always occupied substantial part of identity politics in this region. The Assamese middle class in its incessant effort to establish the supremacy of language tended to ignore the ethnic aspirations of other communities. The growth of Assamese national identity became inextricably linked with the question of recognition of the Assamese language. This was expressed through the Official Language Movement in the 60s and the Medium of Instruction Movement in the 70s fuelling resentment among the tribes, especially in the hills who were not ready to accept the linguistics hegemony. Thus, from 60s onwards assertion by many hill tribes led to the creation of separate states out of the territory of Assam. By 80s the outbreak of Assam Movement changed the social and political scenario in Assam in such a large way that the fallout of that has led to the emergence of a new set ethnic movements leaving the ethnic picture a very complex one. While coming back to the question of Assam Movement, mass mobilization of for which was based on the issue of illegal immigration and preservation of Assamese Identity, women came to constitute a major force within it. The movement led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGP) which later came to be known as Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and formed the next government after the movement drew a lot of women into the fold of the movement.

The emotional fervour generated by Assam Movement was first of its kind in the history of Assam, where young women studying in colleges and universities boycotted their classrooms in order to be part of the movement. Women in rural areas too wholeheartedly joined the force to fight for Assamese identity, which was considered to be threatened by the issue of illegal influx, impacting on the socio-cultural, economic and political life of the people. It also marked the formation of various women's organisations within the movement. This movement also transcended the divide of tribal and non-tribal population of the State, who came together to fight for the common cause. "The Assam Movement was characterized by the mass representation of women. But one ever saw any woman make it to the ranks of their decision making bodies" (Behal in Fernandes & Barbara, 2002: 145). "Assam Movement was successful because of the large scale participation of woman. But when, AGP came to power it nominated only two women as its candidate for state elections" (Nag in Biswas & Tomas, 2006:217). Nevertheless the Assam movement provided great possibilities for organisation and mobilization of women.

In the similar way, participation of women on a large scale can be witnessed during the Bodo Movement in Assam. Women were drawn at mass scale for the cause of the community and goals of the movement. Though Bodo struggle for community rights has a long historical root, the struggle for identity assertion became sharp in the 80s as there was sense of betrayal felt by the plain tribes of Assam, including Bodos, during the course and outcome of the Assam agitation. The intensification of Bodo Movement after the Assam Movement included various stages of the movement which was expressed through both peaceful and violent methods. The emergence of various tribal women's organisations both before and after independence is an expression of lack of confidence and failure to represent women of all communities by the All Assam Women's Organisations. The history of existence of tribal women organisations has been subsumed under the effort to mainstreaming women's movement and to locate it within the nationalist discourse.

During the Bodo Movement there came up new generation of women's organisations such as All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF)

formed in 1986 which later took the name of All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993. Another very important organisation that came up for the cause of Bodo women is Bodo Women's Justice Forum. These organisations formed both during the Bodo movement and after it took up the issue of community rights and at the same time articulated women's issues. The constitution of AATWWF mentions that

it is considered expedient to form a federation of women folk belonging to all tribal groups of entire Assam to unite themselves in a common platform through mutual understanding being imbibed into a common ideology with a view to fighting for ensuring rights and justice of the tribal women in the spheres of socio-economic, political, educational, cultural and for their emancipation from their socio-domestic drudgery and thereby enable themselves in rendering services to the promotion, welfare and preservation of the indigenous self identity of all tribal groups living in Assam"(AATWWF 1991 in Sen Choudhury, 2004:74).

The aims and objective of the organisation includes social, ethnic and women's issues in North east India, which is reflective of the fact that women's issues were combined with the issue of community identity. Women's organisations formed within identity movements in fact reflect more on the objective of the movement, which is considered far stronger than women's issues. In fact these organisations put more emphasis on the achievement of the movement goals than having independent programmes for them.

2.7 Conclusion

The discussion in the chapter largely focused on the women's location within their communities drew attention to the fact that women constitute a major force of these movements in the particular context of the study. In the process, it also enquires the gender relations operative within different communities and the myths and realities of gender equality. The chapter engaged itself in understanding the economic activities and role of peace-making undertaken by the women in North-East India and also active role played by them in various movements for community rights. However, whether such participation of women bring about changes in the existing gender relations and generate significant representation of women in the decision making process are much debated issues, which has been taken up in a more detailed way in the subsequent chapters. Tribal

women have been active in agricultural production and work very hard to meet the daily necessity of the household. But the ownership of land and property has remained in the hands of men. On the other hand as culture is inflicted through the bodies of women and they were made to be the carrier of the culture of their community (both good and bad practices), there is every possibility of it leading to the curtailment of individual freedom. Therefore, it is very crucial to understand how women's organisations within these movements address these questions. Thus, in the next chapter an attempt will be made to understand the women's organisations in relation to movements of identity assertion and reflect on the issue of political representation and gender equality.

CHAPTER III

Movements, Organisations and Locations of Women: The case of Assam

3.1 Introduction

Formation of organisations has been an integral part of any social movement, and they become the means through which the objective of the movement is carried forward. The collective action of the people who become part of such movements is shaped by these organisations. “They are the ones that project beliefs, ideologies and strategies in a collective manner and indeed often become synonymous with the movement” (Gandhi & Shah, 1998:273). As regard to women’s movement in India, various organisations have played crucial role. Though the historical development of women’s movement in India has been an uneven one and its beginning can largely be referred to social reform movement and the nationalist movement, the formation of women’s organisations has remained crucial part of it.

The space created by these movements made the conditions conducive for the formation of various women’s organisations, which in turn articulated women related issues within such spaces. Such kind of formations have been witnessed both at national and local levels. Women’s organisations provided the much needed platform for the women, who were brought to the public sphere through mass mobilisation, to voice the issues that concern them. These organisations took up a wide range of issues concerning socio, economic, cultural and political advancement of Indian women. They constituted one of the major actors of women’s movement in India. Though there are marked differences in the programs and objectives of these organisations, the common point of their operation is their concern to raise women’s issues, sometimes being part of other movements and sometimes without it. The spread of education, reform efforts against social evils and struggle against colonialism largely constituted the background to spread consciousness amongst women regarding their position in the society vis-a-vis men.

These developments led to the emergence of a group of women leaders, who in turn took lead in the establishment of various women specific organisations.

One of the major developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century is the educational experiment in order to create 'new women' and the ideal 'motherhood', which gave women the first exposure to the outside world. Though the purpose of education was essentially to locate the 'new women' within domestic sphere, but women who got a chance to interact with other women, communities took it beyond household. The organisations for women were initially established by men during the reform movement period and with the encouragement by male guardian, women started being part of various organisations and later came to form their own. "These organisations became the medium for the expression of women's opinion. At the same time they were a training ground for women who would later take up leadership roles in politics and social institutions" (Forbes, 1998:64).

The pre-independence period witnessed the formation of many all India level women's organisations. However, how far these organisations were able to represent the interests and aspirations of women of all sections of the society is a much contested question. Due to the diversity of issues related within women's movement in India there exists numerous organisations at all levels. "The Indian Women's Movement has hundreds of organisations, but no single one can be called representative of it" (Shah & Gandhi, 1998:273). The formation of women's organisation continued in the post independence period as well. Not all organisations were formed exclusively to raise women specific issues, they were also formed in response to the immediate crisis the society is facing. Association of women with various other movements provided them the platform to form their own collectives and thus raise their issues. Nonetheless, women's organisations are very crucial part of women's movement in India. Doubts have been raised on various occasions regarding their functioning in the achievement of gender equality. Thus any study on women's organisation must necessarily focus on their efforts on the issues of redefining socially defined role for women and also on their political representation, making women substantially important in the decision making process.

In the backdrop of such developments, this chapter will engage itself in understanding some of the very important questions in relation to women's organisations in Assam, as part of the specific case study of the proposed work. An attempt has been made not only to locate these organisations within some of the important movements, but also to understand the history of women's movement in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. Understanding of women's movement and organisations depends on the particular context of its development. In the context of the study it is not possible to understand these developments without locating them with other movements and the space created within them for women's activism. This is also because of the way women's movements has developed in certain region, where the autonomous status of such movement is a much debated one. Based on the objectives of the study this chapter primarily concentrates in understanding the following research questions.

- Does the participation of women in the ethnic movement lead to the radicalization of their role and position in other spheres of life, (read as social, economic and political)?
- Does the space of social and economic mobility created by the participation of women in the movements lead to redefinition of gender relations to certain extent?
- What is the relationship between the women's organisations and the ethnic movements in which they are located in?
- Were women organisations able to successfully raise women's issues from within the movement?
- How do different women's organisations situated in different contexts/communities interact with each other?

While making an attempt to analyze the above mentioned research questions the chapter tries to test the following hypothesis

- Socio-economic mobility and accessibility to limited public space does not necessarily lead to enhancement of women's position in decision making both in private sphere and public institutions.

3.2 History of Women's Organisations in India

The first women organisations in India were started by male members who were part of the religious reformist associations, and thus they were confined to small numbers of women only. They were basically part of the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Parthana Samaj. At the same time, these male guided organisations were not free from practicing considerable limitations on women. "While male inspired and male guided organisations for women did invaluable work in educating women and providing them with their first experience with public work, they also imposed limitations. Specifically, male reformers regarded the household as the primary focus and fundamental arena of activity for women. They envisioned the household run by modernised women who had imbibed scientific ideas about hygiene and child-rearing." (Forbes, 1998:68). At the same time many local level organisations also made its way. "The decade 1910-1920 was one in which first attempts at setting up all-India women's organisations were made. 'Mahila Parishad' or 'ladies' congress' at Madras was one of the first attempts at coming together of large scale women in the year 1908" (Kumar, 1993:54). In this context Forbes has mentioned about the efforts to bring about Indian women into common platform in the following statement,

From the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century women started forming their own organisations, all over India. The aim was to bring women together and discuss women's issues. In the year 1910, Saraladevi Chaudhurani founded the Barat Stree Mahamandal with the intention of forming an All-India organisation. She called for a permanent association for Indian women and criticised men for their unwillingness to allow women independent action (Forbes, 1998:70).

Formations of such women's organisations were not only marked by women articulating their interests but also their emergence in the leadership role. Women leaders during that period defined women's issues in terms of female education, child marriage, the observance of purdah, and women's status in the family. But Sarala Devi's attempt at

forming an all India women's organisation did not achieve the desired goal. "In the year 1917, the Women's India Association was found by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs Dadabhoy and Mrs Ambujammal" (Kumar, 1993:54). The formation of this organisation was preceded by the entry of Annie Besant in Indian politics and the formation of Home Rule League. Besant who presided over the Calcutta Congress session of 1917 stressed on the participation of women in the movement.

At this juncture, it is essentially important to mention that in the initial period of the development of women's organisations and leadership, the question of equality did not emerge in the discourse. It was only when the mass mobilisation of women took place during 1920s, making women's participation crucial for nationalist cause, the question of women's equality started emerging. This was termed as the first conscious attempt to unite Indian womanhood which has been explained as:

Thus by the 1920s two very different rationales for women's rights were being expressed: the one that women's rights should be recognised because of women's socially useful role as mothers, the other that women, having the same needs, desires and capacities as men, were entitled to the same rights. The former held that the biological difference between men and women affected the sexes qualitatively, the latter that the biological differences did not determine the 'nature' of each sex. (Kumar, 1993: 66).

From The initial reformist period there was various other issues that started making appearances regarding women's question in India and it was followed by creation of new sets of women's organisations. The formation of Women's India Association was followed by the National Council of Indian Women (1925) and the All-India Women's Conference (1927). "Both the Women's Indian Association and the National Council of Indian Women claimed to represent all Indian women, but they were far removed from the masses of women whom they confidently sought to benefit. They targeted the government for solutions and advice on what they considered problems. They concentrated on 'petition politics' because such activity best suited their stations and purposes. Their contacts, through family, marriage, and social interaction, gave them far more credibility than was warranted by their numbers or experience" (Forbes, 1996).

All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) was seen to be an exception to all these organisations, which actually can claim to have brought some sort of representation to women in India. AIWC, through various demands gave a nationalist representation to women, where women could relate to issues raised by the organisation. One such effort was through the campaign for the Hindu Child Marriage Bill (1927) introduced by Harbilas Sarada and known as the Sarada Bill. The Child Marriage Bill, brought about a consensus in the women's movement in India. "In the course of the campaign women's organisations acquired a national profile and gained legitimacy and credibility in representing Indian women. By the early 1930s women's organisations emerged as a consolidated force and were able to respond to national and international issues. They participated in every committee and planning group set up to discuss India's future. Women, it almost seemed, had been accepted as an equal partner in the nation-to-be" (Sen, 200:14-17). But with freedom movement at the centre stage, women's organisations started falling back. Independence was accompanied by lots of other challenges wherein the women's movements and organisations entered into a phase of lull. From the 60s onwards, with the revival of various people's movement, women's movement entered into a different phase. Moreover, emergence of autonomous women's movements also brought about various women's organisations with specific women's related issues. Thus women's organisations in post independence period got connected with people's struggle or took independent stand exclusively on women's issues. At the various local or regional levels, there has been emergence of varied new social movements in the post independence era. Assam has witnessed rise of such movements in the form of identity movements in a massive scale from 80s onwards starting with the Assam Movement and followed by the ethnic assertions by smaller ethnic communities. Therefore, women's movement in such context needs to be located within these developments as women have not only participated but organized themselves within such movements.

3.3 Women's Organisations in Context: North-East India and Assam

While trying to study women's organisations in Assam, the understanding of historical background of women's movement and organisation is essentially important.

This is because of the peculiar nature of women's movement this particular region has witnessed in general and Assam in particular. At present there exist some very prominent women's organisations in different states in India's Northeastern region. However, if we go back to history, it is found that women's groups/collectivities have existed from a very long time in this region, especially in Assam, traces of which can be found in the British period. It needs to be mentioned that the geographical area which is termed as North-East (though this terminology has attracted much debate) today is significantly different from whatever it was during the administration of British. Much of the area was under the administrative unit of undivided Assam, at the same time some princely states also existed. During the British period, spread of education along with the rise of a small educated section, identity consciousness for the rightful position of the Assamese language and the nationalist movement had far reaching influence on the lives of common people as well as women, especially in the valley. But it cannot be argued that such developments had similar influence in hill areas as well, since some of them did not come directly under British administration. There was presence and influence of Christian missionaries. Efforts were made to spread women's education, though in a limited manner. At the same time, the rise of Assamese nationalism around the issue of language and the nationalist movement for political freedom created the ground for women to be part of the public sphere. Women started organising themselves in various groups and finally made the way for All-Assam based women's organisations. These organisations took up the issues of women's education and socio-economic backwardness and played crucial role of organising women in the nationalist movement.

In the Northeastern region of India in the post-independence era, all major communities have demanded their own political unit, which were conceded to some through the linguistic reorganisation of state. But the majority-minority tussles have far from being resolved. Various other communities, ethnic communities per se, are still sticking to their demands. Rise of insurgency along with ethnic assertion has been one of the major issues of tension in this area. Along with that presence of huge numbers of security personnel, prevalence of Armed Forces Special Power Act in some of the areas and violation of human rights has kept the region in a volatile situation. Women have

been traditionally seen as a peacemaker in these societies. As part of the extension of their role as mothers women have come together for the establishment of peace in their respective societies. Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and Meira Paibis are two very important organisations in this regard. At this juncture it is very important to mention that women's organisations formed in the post independence era have mostly taken up issue of peace making as their prime goal, as a response to the conflict situation they are located in. The impact of conflict on women was far more adverse in terms of loss of their husbands, brothers and sons, who at times were underground or killed by the security forces. In such a situation women are left with the burden of running the household, and at the same time face atrocities at various levels. Thus to raise issues only specific to women per se could not be the sole concern of these organisations, as peace making, to fight against violation of human rights also constitute their major concern. Thus to put the society into order was much more crucial than achieving gender equality in the first place.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that there were efforts made by the women's organisation to articulate issue of gender equality within the space of peace making. Women's organisations in Northeastern region have engaged themselves in conflict resolution, though acknowledgement and achievement of such role has remained a different question to address. At the same time some women's organisations have used the sites of conflict resolution and peacemaking as an arena for addressing gender inequality, promoting women's equal rights and advancing women's political participation. But whether the intervention of women's organisations in these areas to impact positively on gender equality is much debated issue.

Thus the interpretation of women's movement and organisations in this part of the country has taken place in the broader context of movements for self determination and demand for political autonomy. Very rarely there has been attempt to understand women's movement on its own right, because women's organisations have mostly taken up the issues concerning the community and the society. At the same time it cannot be denied women's issues were raised within the same space. It is very important to

understand that the space within which these organisations operate is a space which many other actors share. Women's organisations' relations to the community, local councils, clan groups, party organisations etc also determine the nature of women's movement in this part of the region. Nevertheless, women's movement has to be understood in terms of their goals and activities along with the conviction and ideology of the leadership.

There is no unanimity whether the proactive role of women's organisations in the context of conflict, contribute to women's agency and gender equality or push them to more vulnerability once the conflict situation is over. Claims have been made by certain organisations that women's voices are heard more in the time of conflict than otherwise. On the other hand concerns were also raised regarding their vulnerability in the post conflict situation. In a state of conflict, women are prone to become controlled and victim not only in the hands of the power structure outside the community, but within the communities as well. Therefore, the marginality of women can be witnessed within their own community and also in institutional politics. However, on the other hand, arguments are also put forwarded to highlight women's agency in terms of negotiating space for action, through the process of peace making in the conflict ridden areas. References have been made to the strategic use of gender roles, such as motherhood in the masculine space of conflict. "Women do not accept their position of vulnerability passively and have innovatively created alliance at times with the Indian state and at other times with the rebel movements to create a space in which they can be heard, and that can be considered as their own space of empowerment" (Banerjee, 2014:57). The understanding of women's movement in the various states of the region, through the activities of the women's organisations, has to be rooted in the particular context of its existence, where the space of activism has been shaped by certain larger interests of the communities. Therefore, the task of women's organisation has been more towards creating a space within the tussles between state and the community conflict, majority and minority communities and issues of self determination and human rights etc, rather than redefinition of gender roles. Having mentioned these peculiarities the study will further explore the specific cases in the context of Assam.

As laid down in the objectives, this study is an attempt to understand the location of women within identity movement by looking at their participation as articulated by the women's organisations within the same space. The study of participation of women and formation of such organisation within the space of group identity become important in order to understand how women's issues have been reflected within this public sphere impacting on the radicalisation of their positions in various other fields. For understanding women's stake within the identity movements, three women's organisations formed during various historical moments, have been taken up as the case studies of the proposed work. The cases have been arranged in a way to relate these women's organisations to the historical contexts of the Nationalist Movement, Assam Movement and the Bodo Movement. Although the focus has primarily been on the ethnic movements, the setting of the historical background was considered to be vital for understanding the historical continuity and changes of women's movement and its relation with other forms of movements. For the purpose of a systematic organisation of the work, the case study analysis of this chapter has been divided into two parts. In the first part, the historical context of the formation of the organisations has been studied. One of the constraints faced during the historical analysis was non-availability of extensive historical accounts on women's organisations. Therefore, the historical analysis of the women's organisations depended on a variety of materials collected from various sources.

The second section of the case study analysis is based on the data collected through interviews based on an interview schedule, which were conducted amongst the members and leaders of three women's organisations. This section not only tries to understand the activities of the women's organisations in the historical context but also in the present context of their activism. While understanding the activities of the first organisation, that is Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti (APMS), established in 1926, its activities during the nationalist movement could not be traced through personal interviews, because there were not many women who could narrate the personal accounts of its activities in relation to the nationalist movement. Therefore, such analysis was based on secondary literature. The activities of this organisation in the present context has

been analysed through primary data. In case of the second organisation, Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP) formed in relation to the Assam Movement, primary data could be utilised both in the context of activities during Assam Movement and after that. While understanding its present context it may be mentioned that the organisation has largely been defunct from 1996. The understanding of the third organisation, All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF), has been more extensive because of its continued engagement with women's issues and continuation of its activities after the Bodo Movement.

3.4 Case Study Analysis

The nationalist movement in Assam was the first major moment where women gained public visibility. From the 80s onwards, in Assam, there was resurgence of various movements of identity assertion. The rise of the historic Assam Movement, which lasted for over six years, was another major expression of identity assertion. Assam Movement was followed by identity assertion of smaller ethnic communities. Though various ethnic communities participated in the Assam Movement, for a common cause, but they could not show conformity with any idea of imposition and pressed for the preservation of their distinct ethnic identity. Hence, they had another set of movements for identity assertion. During these movements women participated in huge numbers and many women organisations were formed within such space.

In Assam, women's collectivities, in the name of Mahila Samities were very much a reality at village level much before the formation of women's organisation at All-Assam level. "The traditional work pattern of the communities here, with specific emphasis to the rural areas, creates the condition for women and young girls to be part of the informal labour collectives. Women had some degree of freedom to engage themselves in the agricultural activities and at the same time to come together" (Behal in Fernandes, 2002:140). The nationalist movement marked the emergence of All Assam women's organisation. Various Mahila Samities were formed at the village and the district level, during the freedom movement, which came under the Assam Mahila Samiti later known as the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (henceforth APMS) the first All

Assam women's organisations. During nationalist movement, through these Mahila Samities, women became visible in the public sphere in huge numbers.

Formation of women's organisation in Assam needs to be located within the historical moments of formations of various other organisations, such as Assam Association (1903), Rayot Sabha, Chatra Sanmilani (1916), Axom Sahitya Sabha (1917), in the first half of the 20th century. These organisations came up as part of the spread of modern education, though in a limited manner, and rise of Assamese nationalism amongst the small educated section. "All these organisations having as their aim the development of the Assamese people were inter-linked, as more or less same people joined in them. The conferences that discussed all social and political issues concerning the interest of the Assamese people were confined to men" (Mahanta, 2008:93). However, the first batch of educated women started associating themselves with these organisations. Among them the most prominent was Chandraprabha Saikiani, who is known to be the founder of women's movement, more specifically women's organisations in this part of the country. It is her tireless effort that the first all Assam women's organisation in the name of Assam Mahila Samiti (later known as Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti) was formed in 1926.

3.4.1 The Historical and the Present Context of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS)

In her *Mahila Samitir Ittibriti* (The History of Mahila Samiti), Chandraprabha Saikiani writes,

It was the time in the year of 1917-18, there were very few platforms where people can come together. Axom Sahiya Sabha, Assam Association and Assam Chatra Samillan were the three big forums where people came together. In Assam, rise of women's consciousness largely depended on these organisations. In the year 1918, in the session of Assam Chatra Sanmilan, some girl students took part for the first time. In that meeting Chandraprabha Saikiani for the first time gave a speech against opium. This was the first speech by any women in a public meeting. In the annual session of Axom Sahitya Sabha in the year 1919, two women, Rajabala Das and Chandraprabha Saikiani joined. In that meeting Saikiani gave a speech on caste system and untouchability. These were the spaces where women's activism started gaining ground and led the way for the formation of women's organisations in Assam" (Saikiani, 1961:1).

It is impossible to understand the history of women's organisations and movement in Assam without understanding the life and time of Chandrapabha Saikiani. She can be credited of leading almost a single handed effort for emancipation of women in Assam. Her ideas were way ahead of their time and her life both public and personal was marked by tremendous struggle. The history of the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti has not only to be seen in terms of the socio-political changes facing the society, but also in relation to her personal experiences, who dared to be single mother in that point in time where women were not even allowed to walk out alone outside their private sphere. Her life is representation of the struggle of Assamese women in the early part of 20th century for education, for political rights and to fight against social injustice and discrimination. However, instead of fighting her battles in an individual private level, though she did not cease to do that, Saikiani chose rather to merge her personal struggle with that of the masses of Assamese women. She made the Mahila Samiti her life's work. So any attempt to write an account of the Samiti must put her in the centre (Mahanta, 2008:91).

Belonging to a very remote village of Daisingari in the Kamrup District, she faced tremendous obstacle in acquiring formal education. In absence of any primary school in her own village, she and her younger sister went to school in another village, defying the restrictions on women's education of the time. Despite facing serious constraints in obtaining her education, she started a lower primary school for girl children at the age of 13. Saikiani and her sister's enthusiasm for higher education brought them in to Nogaon Mission School with the aid of the benevolent district education officer. Her first revolt started in the Mission School when she opposed to the discrimination meted out to a Hindu girl. Pushpalata Das, famous Gandhian and women leader from Assam, in an interview with an Assamese daily^{xvii} said "Chandrapabha's first revolt was against the injustices in the Nowgong Normal School for girls run by the Baptist Missionaries. A poor Hindu girl came to study there from a distant village and she was told to change her religion by the superintendent. As she refused to do so, she was allowed a seat only in the godown. Chandrapabha organised other girls against this injustice and protested which made Ms. Long, the warden, to provide the girl with a seat in the hostel and withdrew her

remarks that “Indian girls live in worst houses than the Godown.” (Assamese Daily, Khobor, 16th March 2002).

The association with various other male led organisations, the contribution of certain educated women of the time, and Saikiani’s personal crusade against women’s confinement led to the formation of women’s organisations in Assam. The formation of Assam Mahila Samiti was also preceded by formation of some other women’s organisations at local/district level. The aim of the women organisations was not only to bring women into a common platform, but also unite them to be active participant in the Indian freedom struggle. Saikiani’s effort to motivate women for nationalist cause and unite them through formation of women’s organisation got the major impetus when Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam and Tezpur in 1921. “This particular event motivated Chandraprabha Saikiani to form Tezpur Mahila Samiti and Gandhiji inaugurated this particular organisation. These historical moments not only sowed the seeds of women’s movement but also led the initiative for women’s liberation and development” (Dogra translated by Chodhury, 33-35). In addition to that Gandhiji had also inaugurated the ‘Xipini Bhoral’ (storehouse of women weavers) where khaadi and pat munga (traditional Assamese silk) fabric would be woven on handloom by women. Gandhiji’s praise for the weaving skill of women of Assam has been reflected in his piece “Lovely Assam”^{xviii} where women are regarded as excellent weaver by nature. These developments have contributed towards defining the role common women in the nationalist movement.

In her *Itibritti* Saikiani^{xix} further explains,

In the year 1919, Tezpur Mahila Samiti, was established. Saikiani took the major initiative in the establishment of the same. This committee took up women’s education and ‘purdah system’ very seriously. Kironmoyee Agarwala was made the President and Chandraprabha Saikiani was the Secretary. This committee for the first time passed resolution against the ‘purdah system’ and women decided to go out walking rather than on chariot where women sit in a closed arrangement. At the same time there was a huge difference between rich and poor women, so much so that they never used to sit or take food together in social gatherings and otherwise. This committee, for the first time changed this arrangement based on class (Saikiani, 1961:3).

From such explanations it can be deduced that such kind of women's organisation not only concentrated in women's education, but also took on the existing caste and class hierarchy. In fact, before the formation of Tezpur Mahila Samiti, efforts were made to form women's organisation in some other parts of the region. The need for a welfare organisation was felt much before Independence and with the effort of women such as Hemaprabha Das, Dibya Prabha Bhuyan, Kunti Phukanani a voluntary organisation was established in the name of Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in 1915. "This organisation has been the torchbearer of women's organisation in Assam. In Nogaon District social workers including Khagendra Priya Baruah, Swarnalata Baruah formed 'Nagaon Mahila Samity' in the year 1917. These Mahila Samities campaigned against social injustices such as child-marriage, veil, untouchability etc. at the same time they advocated for spread of women's education, training for women in the field of weaving, formed Xipini bhoral, handloom centre, and celebrated Joymoti Utsav, who was considered to be the symbol of chastity and patriotism for women in Assam" (Baruah in Smaranika, 1990:37).

These organisations laid the foundation for the emergence of Assam Mahila Samiti (Later APMS), the first All Assam Women's Organisation led by Chandraprabha Sakiani. A close look at her effort at organising women and her writings on women's issues, equal rights and nationalism indicate how she was trying to link women's emancipation with the cause of national freedom. Her first piece "Devi" possibly the first short story published by an Assamese woman, appeared in Assamese magazine Banhi in 1921 under the maiden name of Kumari Chandraprabha Das. The theme, the struggle of a child widow, and more importantly, its presentation from a feminist perspective bear her unique stamp. In one of the interviews Aparna Mahanta shares,

Rather than representing her women characters as love interest of the hero, or as idealisation of the nation, Saikiani's women characters are flesh and blood representations placed in a familiar milieu, torn by very human impulses and desires. In the later period in *Daibagya Duhita (Daughter of the Astrologer) (1947)*, she again takes up issues of female desire and agency in a contemporary context against the backdrop of the freedom struggle in a more matured way. At a time when extra marital or illicit sex, abortion, illegitimacy and unwed motherhood and prostitution were unmentionable topics, even though widespread, Saikiani boldly engages with them from women's point of view. She subverts the classification of "fallen women" given to

women who fail to conform to the norm. Her another work Pitri Bhitha is about women's property rights, which is again a challenge to the societal stereotype of women's role and duties (Mahanta's interview in NElit Review).

In the backdrop of these events the first All Assam women's organisation made its way and was formed in 1926. This organisation not only worked as the common platform for women of Assam, but also took active participation in the nationalist movement. In fact, in the peak years of the nationalist movement this women organisation worked as the leading force in mobilising women. The event that occurred in the annual session of the Axom Sahitya Sabha in 1925, can be regarded as the defining moment for the formation of Assam Mahila Samiti. "In the annual meet of the Sabha in the year 1925, women were made to sit behind the curtains made out of bamboo. Chandraprabha Saikiani, in that particular meeting raised serious opposition to such provision and appealed the women to defy the same and women broke the curtain and came out. In the same meeting, the need was expressed to have an All Assam Women's Organisation. Thus in the year 1926, during the annual session of Axom Sahitya Sabha, 'Axam Mahila Samiti' was formed" (Bhattacharjee in Smaranika 1990: 23-27). Therefore, it may be said that the foundation of APMS was laid when women decided to fight their humiliation by discarding 'purdah System' in a symbolic way.

Pushpalata Das (interview in an English Daily, Assam Tribune 16th March 1999) writes

Assam Mahila Samiti can take the pride of being the first democratic organisation of the world. The idea was conceived in 1914 and it took shape in 1921 and today it is the most powerful organisation, which has a root in almost all the villages of Assam. Every unit select their representatives most democratically. Before division of Assam representatives used to come from Manipur, Nagaland, NEFA (now Arunachal) Khasi, Jayantia, Garo Hills (now Meghalaya). Almost all the hills and plain districts of Assam used to send their representatives for annual conferences Assam Mahila Samiti, which is affiliated to the associate and country women of the world.

After the formation of APMS, Saikiani took major initiative to open its branches in all the districts. Prominent women of the time Amalprabha Das, Rajabala Das, Pushpalata Das and many other came forward to help in the endeavour. The organisation also got

patronage from some male leaders of the time, though it received lot of criticism from various quarters. Under the influence of Gandhian philosophy she became active participant in Congress politics and took immense effort to spread the philosophy at the village level. Gandhi's visit to Assam also influenced mass of the women to be part of the nationalist movement. For the first time women in Assam started seeing their work in weaving having political relevance. Saikiani was the first Assamese women to ride a bicycle and visit places after places to make people aware of the economic, social and educational development. Her utmost emphasis was to spread women's education. Apart from that she was engaged in the activities of organising volunteer force for weaving, support to inter-caste marriage, prohibition of opium, eradication of untouchability. "Her opinion that 'women cannot be free, unless the nation is free' itself is the evidence of her devotion to the nationalist cause. She thought it to be crucially important that women should be active participant in politics. Responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi, all the branches of the Assam Mahila Samiti opposed the group planning of the British Government. She filed nominations from Congress in Bajali in the year 1957, lost the election. But she did not give up the fight for equality in politics." (Das, in khobor 16th March, 2002).

APMS has maintained its existence since 1926, as one of the prominent representatives of women's movement in Assam. It played a very significant role in the freedom struggle and the leadership was committed to Gandhain philosophy. It fulfilled the need for the establishment of a common platform for women. Apart from the role in nationalist movement, it has worked tirelessly for the betterment of women in various sectors. This organisation has been formed within nationalist aspiration of both Assamese and pan Indian context. It gives us the historical trace of the women's aspirations to achieve equality within the identity/nationalist consciousness. After concentrating on the historical development, the focus of the study will now shift to the understanding of the activities of APMS in the post independence era in terms of achieving substantial gain for women in various sectors.

The understanding of the present activities of APMS, in the beginning the aims and objectives of the organisation as jotted down in the Constitution of APMS^{xx} (p:1-2) has been focused.

- The aim of the organisation is to help women of all communities to develop their skills and give them education of all types so that they can play the role of capable citizens of the country.
- To remain an autonomous and non political body and engage in social and economic activities for the welfare of the country.
- To work towards the demand of economic, social and political rights for women and at the same time demand for opportunities for them in these fields.
- To work for the development of Assam and actively work for the welfare of mother and child.
- To work towards making women and children important citizens of the country.
- To work in the direction of development of economic life of women and demand for what is due for women in social, political other spheres of life.
- The organisation endeavours to take programmes for women and child education.
- To actively work in the field of social reform and make provision for the shelter, training and rehabilitation of women who are victims of violence.
- In order to provide advice and have discussion on family disputes, the organisation proposes to establish counselling centres. It also endeavours to provide legal help for the security of women by establishing legal aid centre at every district.
- To organise awareness programme in association with doctors, medical officers and workers for the benefit of pregnant women and mothers of newly born babies.

- To take up welfare policies for women and children irrespective of their caste and religion.
- To organise seminars, workshops to spread awareness amongst women about socio-economic, political issues, public health, legal security etc.
- To publish newsletters on issues beneficial for women and girl child.
- To co-operate with welfare organisations, government departments and NGOs working in the field of women and child welfare.
- All donations and aids shall be deposited in the name APMS
- The income of the Samiti shall only be spent with the approval of the working committee.
- To work toward communal harmony.
- To work for world peace.

To meet with the aims and objectives APMS has the following departments (APMS Constitution, P:3)

- General
- Economy and vocational training
- Social welfare
- Education
- Public health

Organisational structure (APMS Constitution,P:3)

- General Committee (Members who are selected to be part of the Annual Sessions of APMS, Members of all District and Primary Committee)
- Provincial Working Committee (President, Secretary and three members of each District Committee, and one member of the Village Committee selected by District Committee)
- Standing Committee (Local office bearers and members)
- District Mahila Samiti (Not less than 40 members)
- Primary Mahila Samiti (Not less than 30 members)

The understanding of APMS from the historical to the present context has focused on the continuities and changes it has undergone. As enshrined in its Constitution of this organisation, socio-economic and political upliftment of women of all sections, not only single out its claim of being representative, but also its commitment of overall development of women. However, one needs to critically engage how far these goals have been achieved and the following analysis will focus on the particular question asked to its leaders/office bearers and members through personal interviews and focus group discussion.

The participation of women in the nationalist movement through APMS has been very crucial for giving a mass character to the movement in this part of the country. Therefore, the understanding of its present role becomes increasingly important to see whether their active engagement has undergone withdrawal or different direction. The question in this regard was put forwarded, in the manner of *Being the first All Assam women's organisation and active participant in the nationalist movement, how do you see the role of this organisation in the present context?*

This organisation bears a very vibrant history, rooted in the nationalist movement and under the leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani. The current President, who is in her 80's recollected the experience of her association with APMS. This organisation has

worked tirelessly for the empowerment of women, basically in social and economic sectors. Mrs Nilima Kakoti narrates “*The members of the organisation visited village to village to spread awareness regarding importance of education for girls and women. On the other hand skill development has remained one of the major goals of the organisation so that women become economically less dependent on men. Economic dependence on male members of the family is one of the major reasons for non-enjoyment of freedom by women*”. (Interview taken by researcher, on 7th July 2016, Guwahati).

Following one of the objectives, the Central committee of the organisation is running two cells, one is consultancy and other is the legal cell. They try to help women in terms of family issues, domestic violence, dowry, relationship issues etc. The issues which could be solved through consultation, efforts are made to solve within the consultation capacity of the committee. The committee has made women aware about registering their cases, in terms of filing FIR, which they were not able to do before, because of the fear of the male member of the family and police. The Joint secretary comments “*the attitude of the police has hardly changed despite so much of effort of the organisation. They are sceptical about registering the complaints of domestic violence against women saying women should not make an issue, even if husbands beat them occasionally. What can you do when there is so much of problem with mentality?*”(Interview taken on 7th July 2016, Guwahati). The district committees of the organisation are also directed to have consultancy and legal cell to help women who are subjected to domestic violence and other family issues. Apart from that the major areas of their activity which is concentrated around socio-economic development of women, this organisation has responded to any immediate crisis the society faces including flood and other such situations.

The question of gender equality remains a major concern of any women’s organisation. To understand the approach of women’s organisation on this issue, specific questions such as ***Has the socio-economic activities of the organisation (as its main objectives) brought about a change in the lives of women in terms of their social and family status or led to redefinition of gender relations to some extent?*** Had been asked.

Very interesting responses can be seen as regard to the question of gender equality from the leadership of APMS. For so many years of its existence as an All-Assam women's organisation, they could hardly claim to have achieved any substantial success in the field of gender equality. This organisation has given importance in making women financially independent, by giving training in skill development, weaving, collaborating with NGOs and self help groups. At the same time fighting with social evils of dowry, witch hunting, domestic violence etc. But that has not led to any major impact on the existing gender relations, not even any substantial change in the division of labour. One of the APMS leaders opined '*In order to achieve equality between men and women there has to be acceptance of gender inequality.*' But the problem with our society is there is no acceptance of this inequality, especially in the private sphere. Unless and until inequality in the family is taken care of women can never have equality even if they have some amount of economic independence. In fact, same kind of views were echoed by the secretary of the Tezpur Mahila Samiti, Minakshi Barua, one of the oldest District committees, when she said that "*the major problem that women face today is the domination within the family, which they do not gain courage to fight back because of social pressure*" (interview taken on 15th March 2016, Tezpur).

The history of the organisation reveals its association with the nationalist movement and the same space was also of women's activism. However, there has been rise of other movements in Assam in the post independence period, especially in the 80s, thus in order to understand the relation of this organisation with other such movements, specific questions were forwarded to the respondents, ***How did this organisation respond to the other major movements in the post independence period? How does it relate to other women's organisations?***

In the post Independence period, APMS directed itself to be a social welfare organisation. Since, it has a history of association with a larger movement, it was thought to be important to enquire about its stake in the movement that occurred in the post independence period in Assam such as the Assam Movement. Though during the Assam Movement, it did not take an official stand on participation of its members, but women

belonging to this organisation actively got involved in the movement in their individual capacity. In fact, the president recollected how APMS arranged for community kitchen in order to provide food to the protesting masses as a voluntary service. President Nilima Kakoty said *“I cannot give an official statement on part of the organisation on its role in Assam Movement. But Assam Movement was a mass movement. It was the issue of our identity. We cannot remain aloof to it. Women members of this organisation participated in it on their individual capacity and responded to the calls of the movement leaders. At the same time members of this organisation took voluntary work to support the protesters in various ways.”*(Interview taken on 7th July 2016, Guwahati).

Being an All-Assam organisation for women, there was moral support for the cause of preservation of Assamese identity. This organisation used to have representation from all areas of undivided Assam. It has also maintained relation with other women’s organisation of the region and within Assam. Therefore, women’s organisations formed during Assam movement and otherwise had a link with this organisation. But doubts have been expressed regarding any continuous exchange between organisations, which can be termed as occasional. The other organisations under this study has different context of operation, namely within identity movement, wherein one such organisation is located within the space which is in opposition to the idea of “Assamese Identity”.

This work is not only an attempt to understand women’s participation in movements through various movements, but also to understand women’s political representation. Therefore, women organisations were specifically asked question about their stake on women’s political rights, such as ***How does this organisation work towards demanding political rights (by maintaining a non political status)?***

Politics is the sphere where women have not made much progress in independent India. The founding leadership of this organisation not only pressed for equal political rights for women, but contested elections. But eventually the organisation has shifted its attention more to the socio-economic sector. The Secretary says *“politics is not very easy for women keeping in view the constraints they face in public life.”*(Interview taken on June 20th, 2016 Guwahati) Though it has remained a non-political organisation, effort has

been made to make women aware of their political rights, especially through the village level committees. At the village level awareness programmes have been arranged to make women aware of the reservation policy at the grassroots level.

3.4.2: Assam Movement and Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP)

Assam Movement is considered one of the most important historical moments and mass movements in Assam in the post independence era. The time, memory and experience of the movement still enlist wave of emotions amongst the people who participated and supported the movement. The emotional outburst of the people was unprecedented. The slogans such as *Joi Aai Axom* (Long Live Mother Assam), which say *Lachit* (*Lachit Borphukan* was a military commander of Ahom kingdom who fought against Mughals and defeated them and remains a symbol of courage for generations of Assamese) is not there, hundreds of *Lachits* march, which say *Mula* (*Mula Gabharu* was a very courageous women warrior) is not there hundreds of *Mulas* march, if you are Assamese, come out in groups' ran through the blood of the people who jumped into the movement for the cause of detection, deletion, deportation of illegal immigrants and preservation of Assamese identity. The history of the movement and its purpose has been explained as:

In post Independence history of Assam, the Assam Movement from 1979-1985 remained the most important historical event. The movement that started with the demand of detection, deletion and deportation of foreign immigrants took the form of movement for identity preservation. The movement led by All Assam Students' Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, took the form of a mass movement as it was based on the historical reality of immigration to this particular area. The unprecedented participation of people in the movement indicated the gravity of the problem of immigration in Assam (Nath, 2015: 15, translated).

Assam Movement is not a product of an immediate reaction to the problem of immigration. Seeds of such a huge mass outburst for identity preservation had been sown long back, most precisely in the British period, though people migrated to this land much before British had entered. British policy of settling people from outside slowly brought the demographic change to Assam and started creating pressure on land, especially on the

cultivable land of the tribal population. Not only British administration, but the provincial Governments in Assam, encouraged the settlement of people from outside of Assam. In fact, in the post independence era flow of people from various places continued, especially from some districts of East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh). Though Assam witnessed flow of people from different areas, the immigrants from East Pakistan were taken to be the major threat to the identity of the people of Assam. The situation attracted much significance, when the process of immigration continued after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Immigration was not only seen as a threat to land and economy of the people but a threat to very existence, culture and identity of the local people. The year 1979, became the defining year for the rise of the six year long unprecedented mass movement for identity preservation. This year the proposed by-elections to the parliamentary constituency of Mangaldoi, brought to the light the inclusion of huge numbers of illegal immigrants or doubtful voters in the electoral roll, triggering public resentment. Thus on 8th June, 1979, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) called for a 12 hours long Assam Bandh starting the program of the movement.

Myron Weiner argues that,

The Assamese often think of themselves as a 'forgotten' and 'neglected' state within the Indian union and as a neglected people in danger of being overwhelmed by migrant people and absorbed by neighbouring state (Weiner, 1978:83).

Motivated by the feeling of being wiped out of their own land, educated Assamese middle class with the student power being the strongest constituent put forwarded the case of Assamese nationalism and identity. However, the issue of Assamese nationalism has been an issue of serious debate in the post independence period as not all communities show conformity with its content, which is much concentrated within the issue of linguistic nationalism. At the same time it has to be mentioned that such an idea of Assamese nationalism developed during the British period simultaneously with the influence of nationalist movement in Assam. "Assamese nationalism took shape at a time when Indian sub-continent was experiencing a mass movement against the British rule. This movement did influence the formation of national consciousness among the

smaller nationalities of India like Assamese. The specificity of the British period lies in the fact that there was a double or parallel movement that marked Assam, i.e...against British Rule and the right for her cultural identity and linguistic independence”(Bauah, in Sangman, 1994:244).

The emergence of Assamese nationalism can be largely traced back to the activities of the emerging educated elite in the mid of the nineteenth century and the middle class in the later part of the nineteenth century. Expression of such nationalism has been seen in the post independence period in terms of various movements for the rightful position of Assamese language and the major culmination was through the Assam Movement. However, this kind of nationalism has been criticised as being chauvinistic, which failed to respond and became insensitive towards the aspirations of smaller ethnic groups in Assam. Prominent intellectual Amalendu Guha has termed it as ‘little nationalism’ (Guha,1980:1698) which has become chauvinist in its expression in the Assam Movement. However, the impact of immigration both before and after independence on the culture, economy, demography and politics have to be seen within the historical context. Even though ‘Assam Movement’ against the illegal immigrants was criticized of being the chauvinist expression of the Assamese middle class, but it is not possible to deny the threat of immigrants felt by the local people which culminated in the mass support for the movement.

The Movement took various programmes, including boycott, procession, torch light march, road and railway tracks blockade, picketing and so on over the six long years and people participated in it in massive numbers. Students from colleges and universities took the front role which in a way became a student led movement. People made supreme sacrifices and many young lives were lost during the movement. The people who lost their lives were referred to as ‘martyrs’ and their sacrifices brought more intensity to the movement and gave rise to waves of sentiments among the protesters. The movement which largely remained peaceful by following Gandhian way of protests, also witnessed incidence of violence, including the infamous Nellie massacre. In fact, people not supporting the movement, especially people belonging to left ideology were subjected to

attack by the supporters of the movement. The protesters faced severe atrocities in the hands of the government and security forces. Those six years of protest have witnessed the loss of lives, property being destroyed, and women being raped and molested, injuring and wounding innumerable people. Never before in the history of Assam, such unprecedented mobilisation was witnessed where, people were mobilised and motivated to such an extent that people took the nationalist cause or the preservation of their identity as the utmost important issue of their lives.

After the prolonged agitation by the AASU and allied organisations, the government became anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problems of foreigners in Assam. Talks were held at the Prime Minister and Home Minister's level during the period of 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March 1985 which resulted in the signing of the historic Assam Accord and accordingly the movement was called off. The assembly election was called in Assam and a new government was formed with the overwhelming support of the people and it was led by the leaders of the movement. It is also true that several of the plain tribes may be said to have acquired a dual 'nationality' or identity in the sense that many of them considered themselves to be both tribal and Assamese. However, amongst the majority of the tribes, this sense of solidarity came under severe strain once the Assam Accord was signed. They came to view the Accord as a move intended to safeguard only the identity of the Assamese-speaking people, while totally ignoring the grave dangers posed to tribal identity, chiefly because of land alienation, non-recognition of language and culture.

In this significant movement women constituted a significant force. But their contribution became a story which faded away due to the lack of acknowledgement and recognition. Women and young girls came out in huge numbers for the nationalist cause and made every possible effort to make the programs of the movement successful. At the call of the leadership, especially AASU leaders, women became part of all the programs of the movement. Thirty five years have passed and women's contribution is still waiting due recognition. In the present context women who actively participated in movement

visualise the movement as one which could neither generate benefit for them, nor fulfil the promises of the movement as agreed by the Assam Accord. Many accounts on the movement have been written in the aftermath of the movement without mentioning about the contribution of women. Some historical account of the movement from the perspective of women is available in the narratives, diaries and novels written by women leaders of the movement.

One of such narratives on the Assam Movement, by a women activist was published in an Assamese journal Satsori in the year 1987. It narrates:

The movement followed Gandhian ideology to which women could no longer remain aloof. The programme of the movement included Satyagraha, Assam bandh, road blockade, non-co-operation, civil disobedience, picketing in necessary places, breaking of curfew, boycotting government programmes etc. In fact, there were several other programmes which were included as demanded by the situation which includes, torch light procession, procession with use of various musical instruments, specially drums. Women co-operated in all such programmes. Apart from APMS, and its District Samities, many other women's organisations came up during that period. Mahila Sammanay Rakhi Samiti, Mula Gabharu Santha, Mahila Sammanay Parishad, Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad, Sanatan Dharmi Mahila Samaj etc. women came either through organisations or at individual level to participate in the movement. When Khargeswar Talukdar was martyred as the first martyr of Assam Movement, the eruption of emotions amongst women was at its peak and motherhood was taken as a weapon to be part of the movement. Women became fearless to the atrocities of the security forces as they witnessed the atrocities and injustices to young people, their children. In one of the incidents where women including Bimalee Goswami, Shehalata Chakravarty and Monorama Bhattacharya sat on the railway tract in Guwahati, in order to stop patrol being taken away from Assam. Women were convinced that if they do not participate in the movement Assam will never be free from the problems and injustices they are facing. Therefore, they made their domestic duties as secondary and took the cause of the movement as the primary. Women defied curfew at the cost of their lives and got severely injured by the lathi charge of police. As the movement took momentum the government used strong hand to dominate the same. Atrocities on young girls, men and women became the order of the day. Lathi charge on non violent protesters, putting them in prison and deployment of armed forces made the life of women miserable. Many women, in places such as South Kamrup faced the trauma of being molested and raped by security forces in front of the male members of the family, who were tied by the rope. The decision to have election without correcting the electoral rolls took the movement to a different level altogether. In trying to stop the election procedures many men

and women were killed by police firing. Taking advantage of the situation many Assamese villages were attacked allegedly by the illegal immigrants. In a village called Somoria, near Boko, when people tried to stop such acts, one old woman and two teenage girls were killed. Mukuni Bala Rai, the mother of Salmara Anchalik Students' Union president was killed by police at her own courtyard (Bhattacharya, 1987:23-19).

The narrative itself is an evidence of the supreme sacrifices made by women during the course of the movement. The violence was inflicted in the bodies of women, many of whom faced rape and molestation. One such tragic incident was narrated by Nibha Bora (pseudonym) about another fellow leader. She narrates "*she was one of the leading ladies in the movement, who was raped in her own house and could not overcome the mental trauma afterwards. She remained mentally unsound for rest of her life.*" As far as the role of women in the movement is concerned, it can be seen that women formed various organisations during the movement directed towards realising the goal of the movement. At the same time women and young girls came forward in their individual capacities, especially students from colleges and universities to be part of the movement. In fact, many students lost their academic years during the movement. To co-ordinate the women participating in the movement there was creation of Women's Co-ordination Committee which guided women in various programmes of the movement. Women were the major force to shield the male leaders of the movement. It may also be noted that during the time of the movement there was rise of the underground outfit United Liberation Front of Axom (ULFA) which formally came into being on 7th April, 1979. Not to mention that there was support for the organisation from within the movement as it raised question against discrimination, oppression, injustices meted out to the people of Assam by the Indian Government. Some prominent members were drawn to the organisation from the rank and file of the movement leaders. In fact, some women leaders involved in the movement helped the organisation leaders by safely delivering arms from one place to the other. Thus women in all capacities have participated and made ultimate sacrifices for the movement. The historical analysis of the movement will be followed by the analysis data collected through the interview of the women leaders active in the movement and the organisations.

Out of the many organisations established during the movement this case study has been conducted on Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad which was established on 26th December, 1979. This organisation was very active during the movement period and still maintaining its existence, where many others became defunct, though not in a very proactive way. This organisation had few very active members who tried tirelessly to organise women and make the movement successful. The founding president Abha Bora narrates “we were some eleven members in the organisation who were very active and participated in the movement despite some of us were wives of government officials. The nationalist cause made us fearless. Though we followed the programmes of the movement, we were not dictated by the movement leaders. We were committed towards our community. We had our own banner. We reached to women who were in trouble during the movement and after the movement we continued our work for welfare of women (Interview on 2nd august 2016, Guwahati)”.

In the context of the historical understanding of the Assam movement, the following analysis will be based on the activities of AJMP in the historical and present context.

Table 3.1: Role of women in Assam Movement

| How do you see the role of women in the Assam Movement? | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|----|-----------|----|---------------|---|-----------------------|---|-------|-----|
| | Very Important | | Important | | Not Important | | Can't Say/ Don't Know | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Women leaders/AJMP | 9 | 60 | 6 | 40 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |

Assam Movement has witnessed the participation of women at an unprecedented way. Women responded to every call of the movement leaders and actively participated in the various programmes of the movement. Women leaders both from the organisation and outside it hold the view that women played a very important role in the movement as

60% of the respondent have opined in favour of the same which is reflected in the table 3.1. Not only women in Assam were active, some women residing in other states have also contributed their part in the movement. One of the prominent leaders Kanika Bardoloi narrated her experience as “*my husband was a government servant and had a transferable job. During the peak time of the movement I was away from Assam and tried to create awareness about the movement amongst outside people. Especially in Calcutta, people misunderstood the movement to be ‘Bongali Kheda’ Movement (drive away Bengalis). I made it an effort to make people understand that it is a movement for identity preservation and to drive away illegal immigrants. I have organised the protest in Shillong as part of the movement programme. And finally when I came back to Assam took part in the various programmes of the movement.*” (Interview taken on 19th July 2016 , Guwahati).

Table 3.2: Women’s issues raised during the Assam Movement

| Were women’s issues raised during the Assam Movement? | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------|----|----|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Women leaders/AJMP | 15 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 15 | 100% |

Table 3.3: Frequency of women’s issues raised during the Assam Movement

| How often were they raised | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|------------|-----|-------|-----|--------------|-----|-------|------|
| | Very Often | | Often | | Not so Often | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | Count | % |
| Women leaders/AJMP | 3 | 20% | 7 | 47% | 5 | 33% | 15 | 100% |

Both the above mentioned tables (3.2 & 3.3) contain questions regarding the articulation of women's issues during the course of the movement. The movement for all purpose was a movement for identity preservation and women were motivated along nationalist lines. Thus it was not meant to have issues exclusively for women. However, as women came out to form organisations within it and continued their effort to promote the cause of the movement; women's issues got a platform to be raised. At the same time when women started facing atrocities, molestation/rape in the hands of security forces, their issues gained prominence within the movement, as women's organisations not only protested but rendered support to the victims. Therefore, 47% of the respondents relied that women's issues were often raised during the movement. It can also be noted that rather than as part of independent agenda of women's organisations, women's issues were mostly raised in relation to their victimhood and atrocities that they faced during the movement. It was only aftermath of the movement, women's organisation which survived fell back to welfare programme for women.

One of the major objectives of the study undertaken is to understand how participation of women in mass movements leads to the enhancement and re-definition of their role in the larger society and to understand how effectively women are able to have a better deal for them due to their massive visibility in the public sphere. Therefore, questions such as *Has mass participation of women in the movement been able to seal a good deal for women (in terms of enhancement of socio, economic and political role)?* were put in this direction.

In case of Assam Movement it can be said that women did not actively participate in the movement aiming that it will generate socio-economic gain for them. Women leader Mitali Kayastha (pseudonym) said *"we did not fight for the preservation of our identity in order to gain some sort of benefit. We were motivated by nationalist aspirations. We wanted something for the whole community. The best possible way to give a good deal to women was to share political power with them, which did not happen in reality. The way the outcome of the movement was appropriated by some sections of*

the leadership was not desirable. We don't regret our participation in the movement, but of course how the new government dealt the situation after the movement frustrates us."

Women who participated in the movement were motivated emotionally. The only motive they were concerned was the preservation of identity, which has come under the threat of the foreigners. In fact, women's organisation within the movement rather than giving emphasis to an independent programme of the movement, promoted the cause of the movement. Talking of the gain for women in the movement one of the women writers of Assam expresses her view about the appropriation of women's support during the movement, "*in Assam movement women gained nothing but were emotionally appropriated for the cause of the movement. It was as if they came to the field by making adjustment with the kitchen work and fell back to the same once the movement was over.*"

In any given movement women are drawn to give a mass character to it and they are also expected to be the bearer of the group identity. Therefore, questions were asked about the ways by which women were drawn to be part of the movement. ***How women were motivated for mass participation and what were the activities that women participated during the movement?***

The response came in the form of women's active participation in all the programmes of the movement at the call of the movement leaders that includes picketing, protest march, blockade, torch light march, civil disobedience. Women leaders travelled throughout the state to generate support for the movement. Whenever women faced any atrocity in the hands of the security forces women leaders visited them and raised question of justice for them. Women were motivated along nationalist line, the threat to Assamese culture and identity. It is very significant to mention that the mass participation in Assam Movement surpassed the tribal non-tribal divide in Assam. Both tribal and non-tribal women came together and played very active role in the movement. The divisions within the Assamese society, especially linguistic one, did not come up so sharply as tribal leaders both men and women took active part on the movement.

Assam movement has been the space where many women's organisation sprouted and it worked as a common platform for women to advance the goal of the movement. However, to understand role of women organisations in raising women's issues and specific questions such as *How do you see the role of women's organisation during the movement? Why have the women's organisation become mostly dysfunctional after the movement?* were put to the women leaders of the organisations during that time.

Women became part of various organisations within the movement, whereas the motive was directed towards realisation of the goal of the movement. When these organisations started losing its ground aftermath of the movement, it was said that their main motive has been lost. The organisations that continued beyond the movement are struggling for the next generation of leadership. Thirty five years down the line these organisations could not maintain the vigour of the time of the movement. AJMP has maintained its existence in form of women's welfare organisation. The founding president Abha Bora was of the opinion that *“women's organisation during the time of the movement played very important role. Without their contribution the success story of the movement would have not been the same. When I think of the time, it still gives me a different feeling. We women did not care about what society will say or how families will react, some inner power drove us. The cause of motherland drove us so immensely that we were not fearful to accept any challenges. We got jailed, faced atrocities, but still fought for our identity. When today when we see how the leaders of movement has changed their political affiliations and could not hold to regionalism we get deeply pained. Sometimes the feeling comes that we were being used by the some sections of the movement leadership.”*

Women organisations were involved in a variety of activities in the course of the movement which increasingly made the public space available for women, which were otherwise not the sphere of their activity. When asked *what are the activities the organisation was engaged in during the movement and after it?* the responses reveal the wide variety of activities they were engaged in.

During the course of the movement, the organisation was dedicatedly involved for the cause of the movement. Identity issue was the motivating factor of their organised effort. Activities such as procession, picketing, break of curfew have been part of the daily activity of the organisation. This organisation had its own ‘Tadanta Got’(Investigation wing) which on its own investigated the cases of atrocities, molestation, rape and killing of innocent women. This organisation also aggressively opposed the unlawful detainment of women in various lock ups. One of the organisation members explained “*we regularly visited the Jalukbari and Panbazar lock ups to see how women are kept and worked persistently for their release. There was no limit to the various activities we got engaged in, including visiting of a village at 1.30 at night which was situated in a far of place, ahead of Kokrajhar District, where we had information of selling of poisoned arrows to Bangladeshis to kill Assamese people.*”

After the movement came to an end in the year 1985, the organisation directed their organisation to social work targeting empowerment including fighting against social evils. Till 1996 it worked very actively to fight against liquor, opium, drugs and organised awareness programs. At the same time it also emphasised on road construction, establishment of weaving centres, Namghars (prayer halls). At the same time this organisation gave importance to helping women who faced violence, both state sponsored or otherwise. In the post Assam Movement period, the tribal and non-tribal social divisions came out very sharply due to variety of reasons. There was rise of ethnic assertion of smaller groups within which there was rise of other women’s organisations. Therefore, women organisation within Assam Movement was asked about its relation with other such organisations in the manner ***How do you relate to other organisations, especially of tribal women’s organisation?***

During the Assam movement, many tribal women took active part along with men. Despite having opposition to construction of Assamese identity along with the aspirations of the Assamese language speakers, immigration was seen as the common enemy and both tribal and non-tribal Assamese came together. While women organisations formed during the Assam movement had kept a link with other women’s

organisation formed by tribal women inspired by demand of self-determination of their communities, this kind of communication were not on regular basis. AJPM president said “*we protested against women being raped in 12 no Bhumka village during the Bodo Movement and also the rape incidents in the South Kamrup area*”. At the same time Bodo women took advice from these organisations during their movement. While talking about the relation of tribal and non-tribal based women’s organisation one has to understand the context of their formation and existence. The space being identity movement, which has pitted many ethnic communities up against Assamese speaking caste Hindus, the government led by them and ideology which is insensitive to tribal aspirations. This kind of context has not created the conditions for regular interaction of the organisations representing different communities, but their occasional interaction cannot be denied.

While analysing the Assam Movement and women’s participation in it, the interplay of gender relations within the movement is essential to understand. To investigate the patriarchal composition of the movement and how women perceive it, question was put in form of ***Do you think the movement was male dominated one?***

Assam Movement was led and guided by AASU and AGSP and allied organisations. There is hardly any dispute that movement had predominantly male leadership. Within the male dominated domain, a section of women leaders came up who were very active during the course of movement. However, the programmes and agendas have been laid mostly by the male leaders and women organised themselves to carry out those. Women responded to every call of the movement leaders. Kanika Bordoloi said “*we did not think of the movement being male dominated. Those kinds of thoughts did not guide us. Women leadership made equal sacrifice and participated actively and fearlessly. But once government was formed women’s voices were dominated by one sections of leadership. Decisions were taken where consultations of women were not taken. There was again lot of politics over the creation of women’s wing of the ruling party. Overall there was sidelining of active women leaders.*”

3.4.3: Bodo Movement and All Bodo Women's Welfare Organisation (ABWWF)

The rise of identity politics in Indian politics and its prominence in Assam has been elaborated as:

The Indian politics in the last few decades has become increasingly besieged by the politics of identity emanating from awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness and assertion of ethnic interest. The identity assertions of various ethnic groups have been articulated through religion, language, culture, region, caste and race. This problem is very acute in Assam. The diverse groups inhabiting this state have been pressing either for the creation of separate and autonomous state on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities (Phukan, 1997:123).

The ethnic groups in Assam have been asserting time and again their non-conformity with the idea "Assamese identity", though they were not able to make fruitful gain of their demands in the pre-independence period. In the post independence period more organised efforts were made by certain ethnic groups for the same, of which Bodos being the most prominent one. The feeling of deprivation, neglect and discrimination have taken deep root amongst the ethnic groups, due to non-recognition and insensitiveness towards their aspirations by the ruling elite and middle class in the post independence era, who were mostly Assamese speaking caste Hindus.

The development of Assamese nationalism, based on the linguistic aspiration of the Assamese speaking people and their competition with the immigrant population in economic field in the British period did not give importance to the smaller identities such as Bodos. "This position on the part of the Assamese leadership led to the formation of various association by the educated sections of these ethnic groups such as Kachari Sanmilan (1921), Kachari Student Association (1922) All Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (1918) All Assan Tribal League (1933), Boro Maha Sanmilan (1924), The Mishing Bane Kcbang (1924) etc" (Phukan, 1997:124).

"The Bodo movement for autonomy or the Bodoland Movement can be called the second generation of ethnic movement", the first generation of movement being the creation of linguistic states after independence (Chakalder, 2004). Historically, there

were different stages of the growth of the Bodo movement. The aspiration of the Bodo community and demand for autonomy became very intense, after the Bodo Movement. An analysis of the historical process of the development of the Bodo community reveals the emergence of a Bodo educated elite from the beginning of the twentieth century. They articulated the idea of a separate Bodo identity throughout the period of 1930s and 1940s. The process of articulation of such an identity began with the entry of this class into politics, ask for constitutional safeguards and become divided over the issue of aligning themselves with all India political culture or maintaining a separate political status. The culmination of this process was seen in the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 which was destined to play a vanguard role in awakening and arousing a sense of self respect among the Bodos in the decades to come.

The redrawing of the boundaries on the linguistic basis could not solve the problem of ethnic minorities especially in case of North-East India. In Assam it has been witnessed that despite most hill areas were recreated as separate states, the problem of ethnic minorities persisted in a larger way. Bodo Movement was outcome of such a situation, where despite being the aboriginal, they do not see their language and culture being recognised in public sphere, neither their economic conditions and political aspirations were given due attention. The passing of Official Language Act, making Assamese the official language in the state, met with sharp resentment from other ethnic groups. This led to a situation where movement for preservation of Bodo Identity and demand for political autonomy sharpened.

The ethnic assertion of Bodos is a defiance of the cultural hegemony of the Assamese speaking non-tribal, who are also in the helm of the political power, are accused of remaining indifferent to the land alienation and other threats faced by the ethnic minorities, especially the plain tribes of Assam. In the post Assam Movement period, Bodos, who also claim to be the original and authentic inhabitant, came together to oppose the deliberate policy of assamisation through which attempts were made for imposition of Assamese language and culture upon the tribes undemocratically. That is why, in the recent years, Assamese ethnic emotions have been challenged more often

within Assam than in the rest of the country. “Whenever the Assamese leaders equated the territorial identity of Assam, with the identity of Assamese speakers of Brahmaputra valley, they pushed the other ethnic groups to seek security through their own autonomous structure”(Dasgupta:350).

The historical accounts of such development can be seen in the post independence, when in order to demand autonomy for the plain tribes, not exclusively for Bodos, many organisations were formed. Organisations such as Plain Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) were formed in 1967 apprehending the future of plain tribes in Assam. The PTCA made the demand for autonomy for plain tribes for the first time in 1967. Such kind of demand has been made on various occasions even before the formation of this organisation, but PTCA made a direct demand for a separate homeland for Bodos. In the coming years All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) took the leadership of the movement. At the same time Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the literary organisation, kept its continuous effort to spread consciousness amongst the Bodos regarding their linguistic and national identity.

ABSU and PTCA demanded a separate political unit for the plain tribes of Assam in the form of a union Territory to be called as ‘Udayachal’. On the other hand Bodo Sahitya Sabha gained full support from the ABSU and thus launched a vigorous but peaceful movement demanding introduction of Bodo language as a medium of instruction up to the secondary stage of the education in maximum number of Bodo populated areas. Subsequently, Bodo medium of instruction was introduced in primary level in 1963 and secondary stage in 1968. (Bhattacharjee:281).

The Bodo movement took the mass character from 1987 onwards, when young student leader Upendra Nath Brahma was elected as the president of ABSU in 1986. From 1987 onwards Bodo Movement became a student led movement until 1993. The agitation between 1987-93 occurred in the backdrop of Assam Movement, outcome of which was not seen as sensitive towards the aspirations of the non-Assamese speaking tribes of Assam, by the Bodo leadership. It was felt by the Bodo leadership that, despite their contribution in the Assam Movement, their aspirations were not taken care of. By

the late 1980s the ABSU took a hard line and sponsored popular movement for realizing its objectives through struggle. The ABSU began mobilizing the Bodos through pamphlets against Assamese chauvinism. The Assamese people (speakers) were blamed for alienation of the tribes of Assam. The ABSU organized mass movement from 1987 with a goal to achieve a separate state by the year 1990 on the northern Bank of Brahmaputra. The ABSU and the Bodo people's Action committee (BPAC), an umbrella organisation formed to spread consciousness among the Bodo people, united the Bodo people and other non political organisations which extended tremendous help to the leadership of ABSU and BPAC. The ABSU leaders raised the slogan of "divide Assam fifty-fifty". They submitted a memorandum to the then Governor of Assam with a 92 points demand.

In response to the movement in the year 1992, Bodoland Autonomous Council was created, which failed to meet with the aspiration of the Bodo people. From 1993 the struggle for a new state for Bodos entered into a different phase. This time the movement turned violent with Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the underground outfit took the lead in violent activities. After prolonged struggle in the year 2003, under the revised provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was created as a structure of autonomy to meet with the aspiration of political rights and identity preservation of the community. At the same time it cannot be claimed that the Bodo aspiration for autonomy has come to an end, as some fractions are still struggling for an independent state for Bodos outside the territory of India. Nevertheless, the long standing movement, with use of both violent and non-violent methods came to an end to a large extent with the creation of BTC.

During different phases of ethnic assertion of the Bodos women played a very important role. With the special emphasis from the year 1987-1993, women have taken active part in all the programs of the movement. The organisation and participation of women in the movement was through All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF), formed in 14th July 1986, which was later named as All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in the year 1993. It was under the patronage and

encourage of the ABSU leader Upendra Nath Brahma where women came together to form this organisation for the welfare and development of tribal women of Assam. From the time of its inception this organisation has worked very closely with ABSU leaders. In fact, during the ABSU led period of Bodoland Movement specifically from 1986 to 1993, this organisation played proactive role in the movement. Initially, it was aimed at welfare of all tribal women, but later made its activities more confined to the Bodo women. The Constitution of ABWWF mentions about the history of its original formation.

The Constitution “resolved to form a strong Tribal Women’s organisation in state level to unite all tribal women folks belonging to the Scheduled Tribes in Assam under Article 342 of the Constitution of India also that of Adivasi and the like down trodden, communities akin to tribal groups living in Assam through mutual understandings in order to fight for the solution of the manifold problems aiming at ensuring the rights and justices to the all-round security, welfare and promotion and efforts being imbibed in a common ideology under the collective leadership and responsibility of AATWWF during this critical juncture” and accordingly, AATWWF came into being on this day of the 14th July, 1986.”(Constitution of ABWWF, p.4-5)

The ideology of the Constitution further goes on to say “to grow fraternity among all Bodo women through mutual understanding and co-sharing of the nationalities, tragedies with the sense of belonging to ensure the Bodo women’s welfare, security and emancipation through the principle of self determination within the framework of Indian Nationalism and Constitution.” And “to stand for equal rights and justice in socio-economic freedom under socialism in order to free Bodo women from the chain of socio-economic bondage.” (Constitution of ABWWF, p.4).

The historical understanding of the various developments within Bodo Movement and role of women have been further discussed by the following analysis of investigating the activities of the ABWWF, both in the historical and present context.

Aims and objectives of the organisations lays down the foundation of the activities it attempts to undertake in addressing the issues and concerns of Bodo women. The following are the objectives of the organisation.

- To move for the fulfilment of the will and aspirations of the women folk belonging to the Bodo community
- To build up a strong bond of unity and also foster brotherly and sisterly feelings among the Bodo people in general.
- To fight for equal rights, status, honour of the Bodo women in socio-political and individual life in the society.
- To remove the social evil practices and injustices (if any) from the society which seem to have become the cause of retardation of Bodo women in their upliftment in different fields.
- To move both the state government and the central government for having security to the daily life and status of the unsophisticated Bodo women from being victimised out of the systematic preys of the gang-rapist and abductors.
- To fight for making arrangement of the due percentage reservation quotas in all Government jobs and other educational and economic facilities for Bodo women particularly in Bodo majority area which may be announced by the concerned authorities time to time.
- To move to the government for providing required medical care and facilities to the downtrodden Bodo women and their children.
- To move the government for giving special exemption to the Bodo people from the implementation of the family planning schemes considering the numerical strength of the Bodo people compared to that others in modern state of Parliamentary Democracy.

- To encourage Bodo women to launch a co-operative movement by organising various co-operative societies with commercial and self depending outlook in different sectors like weaving and textile production agri-pisci culture, sericulture, life-stock, ideal super market, transportation, conduct and like many other possibilities which ventures may be brought about into grand success with financial support of the concerning authorities.
- To move both the state governments and central government to protect the land and properties of Bodo people in order to ensure their socio-economic life and all round property.
- To move the state government and the central government to make necessary arrangements for the employment of both educated and non-educated Bodo female 'human resources'.
- To make both state and the union government to utilise the money released from the centre under the sub-plan Women and Social Welfare and IRDP schemes etc. properly to that the very aims and objectives of the above cited schemes may be achieved by way of providing actual economic benefits with money materials to the needy individuals, families, socio-economic and cultural societies organised by Bodo women.
- To raise voice for the Human Rights and Civil Liberties of all the downtrodden, over all exploited, oppressed, depressed and suppressed Bodo groups and the like minority nationalities in order to save prestige and status of women folk in particular and also the man-folk, in general.
- To stand for overall security, preservation and flourishing of the prestigious linguistic, cultural, historical and traditional heritage of Bodo community in the country.
- To establish socio-cultural relations particularly among aboriginal Bodos to maintain sisterly relations with other genuine socio-cultural democratic

women organisations which are fighting for the welfare and upliftment of women folk in general.

- To take pioneering role in negotiating and co-ordinating different likeminded organisations in the time of crisis arising out of the differences in the time of action and programme undertaken by various organisations through mutual resolving process in the view of fighting democratically for the complete welfare, security and upliftment of Bodo women folk in particular and that of the other women as a whole.

The ABBWWF shall honour the genuine urge and aspirations of the Bodo groups living in the country in respect of preserving their distinct self Identity and thereby shall stand in a common chain of unity and understanding.

Organisational Structure

- Central Committee (Members selected from different District Committee in ABWWF's conference of the end of each term)
- District Committee (Members selected from different Anchalik Committee)
- Anchalik Committee (Constituted within a revenue Circle or Block selected from different Unit Committee)
- Unit Committee (Not more than 14 villages, members selected from different village committee)
- Village Committee (Constituted within a village with the members selected from each individual family)

The leadership of ABWWF has been held by educated Bodo women of middle class families and its reach is basically confined to Bodoland Territorial Administrative District Area and women belonging to Bodo community, though initially it was meant for women of all plain tribes in Assam.

Table 3.4: Role of women in Bodo Movement

| How do you see the role of women in the Bodo Movement? | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|-----|-----------|-----|---------------|---|-----------|-----|-------|------|
| | Very Important | | Important | | Not Important | | Can't Say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 8 | 54% | 4 | 26% | 0 | 0 | 3 | 20% | 15 | 100% |

Women leaders of the movement saw the participation of women in the movement to be very crucial for the success of the movement. 54% of the respondents have replied that women have played very important, whereas 26% said it was an important role. Overall women leaders of ABWWF have stressed on the contribution of women in the Bodo Movement in a very significant way. In any mass movement where community rights are involved women are drawn for the cause of the community. Within the Bodo Movement as well, male leadership encouraged women to come out in organised manner and form organisations to co-ordinate the movement activities. It has been expressed during the course of the movement, women were called by the leaders especially All Bodo Students' Union to be active participants and carry forward the goals of the movement, and they worked as the two sides of the same coin. Women were motivated to be part of the nationalist cause to which they responded to. Women do identify themselves with the nationalist cause and see the root cause of the problem as domination and imposition by other communities, primarily the majority, which also leads to massive insecurity of women. The necessity of such movements is also commonly accepted by women and within the space of self determination rights of the community women's rights are also sought. As women came forward and supported the cause of the movement and at the same time motivated the common women, they too could realise the discrimination and backwardness their community is meted with vis-a-vis others in all spheres.

Supriya Rani Brahma, the founding Secretary of the organisation narrated, “*Bodo community has remained very backward in comparison to other communities, especially caste Hindu Assamese speaking one, with very little spread of education and amenities for development. At the same time there was intrusion into their lands by outsiders. They were dependent on forests and rivers for their sustenance. When women go for gathering food, fishing, they were abused and raped by outsiders. This agitated both men and women. Thus with spread of education and coming up of leadership they became aware of the discrimination meted to their community and women were also motivated to understand the cause of the community.*” (Date June 14th 2016, place: District Bongaigaon)

Table 3.5: Women’s issues raised during Bodo Movement

| Were women’s issues raised during the Bodo Movement? | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|----|---|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 15 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |

Formation of women’s organisation was mainly to motivate and organise women to come together and make them aware of the threat the community faces and give the movement a mass character. But ABWWF had the agenda of women’s welfare in the socio-economic field along with community rights. Thus the space of the movement was used to raise women’s questions.

Table 3.6: Frequency of women’s issues raised in Bodo Movement

| How often were they raised? | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------|----|-------|-----|--------------|-----|-------|------|
| | Very Often | | Often | | Not so Often | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 0 | 0% | 12 | 80% | 3 | 20% | 15 | 100% |

Bodo Movement for community rights has a long history and demand of self-determination and that has been raised on various occasions, before the rise of intense demand of a separate state. Assam Movement has been termed as the defining moment which led the most intensive phase of Bodo Movement under the leadership of ABSU and Upendra Nath Brahma. 80% of the women leaders opined that women’s issues were raised during the course of the movement, which was mainly related to the atrocities, rape and molestation faced by young girls and women in the hands of the police and security forces and the need to fight for their justice. At the same time, issues of social evils directly related to women and lack of economic independence for them were taken up in collaboration with ABSU leaders. The achievement of political autonomy was the prime motive of the movement and it was thought the conditions of women will improve once the community will be free from outside oppression. However, ABWWF along with demand of community rights, appropriated the space for ethnic movement to raise protest against the atrocities against women by security forces in the name of suppressing the movement.

ABWWF advisor Mithinga Basumatary narrates *“During the movement, women leader felt that interest of the community is greater than the interest of women. The discriminations in terms of imposition of dress codes, language, and pressure of the encroachers on land of Bodo community were also felt by women. During the movement the cause of the community was given priority, though women’s issues were also raised*

within it. For example issue of rape has been taken up very prominently. Police atrocities were on a rise after the breakout of the movement. Women were called to protect their private sphere, children and agitators. In fact, in certain places women were raped in mass scale. Women agitated against these and demanded that perpetrators should be brought to justice. Massive agitation by women was taken out when 10 women were raped in the 12 No. Bhumka village under the Kokrajhar District in the year 1988.”

During the course of the movement, two important issues related to women were raised, namely rape and killing of innocent women. During the movement period, more precisely in the late 80s innocent minors, teenagers and married women were brutally gang-raped, and molested by Assam police, Punjab Commandos, Army of Kumaon Regiment. Apart from that many innocent women were killed. ABWWF raised severe protests against these crimes against women. The most shocking incident happened in the year 1988 when 10 women, aged between 12 to 50 years were raped by Assam police over two days of violence in 12 No. Bhumka village. Due to the tireless effort of the ABWWF the cases of Bhumka was registered.

Table 3.7: Conditions of women after Bodo Movement

| Do you agree that the conditions of Bodo women have improved after the movement? | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|----|----------------|-----|-------------|----|-----------|-----|-------|------|
| | Agree | | Somewhat Agree | | Don't Agree | | Can't Say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 0 | 0% | 9 | 60% | 0 | 0% | 6 | 40% | 15 | 100% |

Bodo community saw the movement as the means to achieve community rights, political autonomy to fight against the discrimination and lack of development faced by the community. Therefore, the hope was expressed that the movement will bring desired goal and improvement in the lives of common Bodos including women. Autonomy and

new political structure for the community was seen to be the way to bring overall development to the community. 60% of the respondents has viewed that there have been some changes in the lives of women aftermath of the movement.

Table 3.8: Areas where women’s conditions have improved

| In which of the following sector women’s conditions have improved? | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|----------|----|-------|------|
| | Family | | Economy | | Society | | Politics | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 3 | 20% | 7 | 47% | 4 | 26% | 1 | 7% | 15 | 100% |

The movement seem to have brought about economic changes to the lives of women, which is not seen so significantly in case of politics. 47% of the respondents have responded that women have gained economic benefit after participation in the movement and creation of the territorial council. This organisation has focused on making women economically independent. On the other hand 26% of respondent believe social conditions have improved in terms of spread of education, awareness against social evils. ABWWF has worked towards the development of economic condition of women. Bodo society has the tradition of keeping life stocks as a means of economic gain. Women were encouraged to concentrate on those sectors. Bodo women are excellent weavers. Traditionally women weave the clothes needed for the household. Women were encouraged to weave for commercial use as well. However, it is also essentially important to understand that Bodo women’s economic engagements were not only the result of their participation in the movement only. Traditionally women were engaged in activities such as food gathering, weaving, and rearing live stocks and agricultural activities. However, women were not commercially benefitting out of these activities. At the same time the evil of alcoholism brought much negative impact in the society severely affecting the lives of women. ABWWF advisor Mithinga Daimary narrated “*consuming homemade liquor has been a tradition of Bodo society. When men return*

from the day long work in the field they take it for relaxation. This liquor was made of complete home products. But its evil impact came out when its consumption went out of proportion and being prepared commercially.”

But slowly alcohol became rampant in the market and they were made by using such products which had adverse affect on health. Women started selling alcohol for earning as men were already getting addicted to it and thus became lazy to work for their earning. The movement leaders, especially women took up the issue and made women understand that earning should be through proper and dignified economic activities. Women were encouraged to do weaving on a commercial basis. At the same time they were encouraged to expand their kitchen garden for the market purpose. On the other hand, the liquor market has been replaced by all women market in Kokrajhar. In fact, women leaders along with the students’ leaders protested against the attempt of some businessmen to make duplicate pattern of the Bodo traditional clothes (Dokhona) and sell out in the market for cheap price. That was a big threat to local women weaver. Now in the present context women have taken up various other activities, including contractor of road projects and such other projects.

ABWWF from its very inception and throughout 80s has worked on two lines, first to promote the cause of the movement and second for the overall development of tribal women. They have targeted sectors such as economic development and fight against social evils. During the course of the movement along with the help of ABSU leaders they took up the issue of equal rights for women in property and economic independence for women. In the social sector apart from spreading awareness about education, they have fought against evils such as witch hunting, polygamy, alcoholism, women trafficking etc. Though they cannot claim to have achieved much success, but they feel conditions have improved after the creation of the autonomous structure for them. But, at the same time, this has far from being equality achieved in the field of family relations and women’s role in politics. Phulani Basumatary the current Secretary of ABWWF says *“equality for women is a far off dream. They were traditionally engaged in economic activities and after the movement they have become more*

independent in terms of economic activities, but we cannot say they have achieved equality at per men. Nowhere are they equal, be it economy, society, politics or family.”

In all the case studies undertaken in this particular study women’s participation in particular has been understood in terms of the activities and issues undertaken and raised during the movement. This was aimed at understanding the space women have created within the movement and therefore specific question such as ***what were the activities that women participated in during the movement?*** was put to the women leaders.

Women were organized through ABWWF, during the Bodo movement for the purpose of giving the movement the mass base, and they were mobilised by the leadership to come forward for the common cause of the community. This pattern has been a common one, witnessed in all major movements in Assam, where women are drawn into the movement along with the issue of group identity. The Assam Movement for the cause of Assamese nationalism and the Bodo movement, for the Bodo nationalist cause have drawn women into their folds on the same line. Movement leadership, predominantly male, have enlisted nationalist feeling amongst women and their crucial role for the nationalist cause of the community. Once the movement goals are achieved or partially achieved, it hardly addresses to the question of gender equality or give women their due share. Bodo women were very active during the period of 1986-1993 of the movement. As the organisation was the product of the movement itself, it worked in close relation with the movement leaders of ABSU. According to AWWAF leadership *“We were like the two sides of the same coin.”*

From the 1993, the leadership of the movement was taken over by Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). As the non-violent phase of the movement was taken over by violent activities, women gave tacit support to the movement by involving them more into welfare activities. During that period, when women were actively involved in the non-violent activities of the movement, in terms of responding to all the programmes of the movement, including picketing, protest, road blockade non-cooperation etc. They were engaged in protection of their food grain, children and gave shield to the movement leaders and workers during the military operations. During the movement there were

severe atrocities on the movement leaders by the security forces. Search operations were conducted in the houses of the movement activists and in their absence women and children were harassed. It has gone to the extent of poisoning their paddy fields and water wells. Women leaders went home to home to make them aware of how to protect their children, to protect themselves and their property. Supriya Rani Brahma narrates *“the memories of the time and atrocities still haunt us today. Police atrocities were on a rise after the breakout of the movement. Women were called to protect their private sphere, children and agitators. In fact, in certain places women were raped in mass scale. Women agitated against these and demanded that perpetrators should be brought to justice. Some of them could achieve justice, but some could not.”*

The organisation members made all possible effort to make women understand how important to have education for themselves and their children. It is one of the weapons to fight with the backwardness the community is facing, at the same time they were made aware of the causes of the movement and how the very existence of their community is at stake. Women workers held meetings with the village head for protection of women who stay alone at home in the absence of their male members. Kanan Basumatary said, *“Since, we did not have much amenities to be part of all the programmes of the movement, we used to request some affluent families to lend their cars to reach to the event venue.”*

Having locating the women’s organisation within the community based movement of their formation, it is also essentially important to understand its existence in the present context. When women leaders were asked about the changes after the movement through specific question, ***what are the changes undergone by the organisations from the time of the movement?*** the responses were directing to the new role assumed by the organisation.

The time and the spirit of the movement were very different. The people were emotionally motivated. The identity of the community was perceived as under threat. Much of the vigour of the women’s organisation, during the movement has come to an end. The organisation has been reduced to more of a social welfare organisation. The

organisation leaders have claimed that they could bring about changes in the lives of the women and the community itself. Some of the major issues taken up by the organisation even after the movement were polygamy, anti-alcoholism and drug awareness. Polygamy in the Bodo society has severely impacted on the lives of women. Polygamy and lack of proper family planning, made their life economically miserable. Children are not given proper education. ABWWF raised this issue and now polygamy has reduced to a considerable number. At the same time women took out strong campaigns and rallies against alcoholism. In fact, during the time of the movement with the help of the students' leaders and volunteers, they could achieve tremendous success in reducing the consumption of alcohol. At the same time Bodo youth is coming under influence of drug creating massive problem in the society. This organisation took out massive anti-drug rally in 2010 to spread awareness against it. Atrocities against women have always been protested by the organisation. In cases of rape, witch hunting, molestation ABWWF has raised their voices and fought restlessly to bring perpetrators to justice. But at the same time they complain of patriarchal control and political interference while dealing with the issue of justice for victim women.

Bodo society has the practice keeping young girls from poor families as domestic help by affluent families. They take the responsibility of the girls and protect them from any unwanted situation. But many Bodo girls were taken out of their homes and made forced sex worker. Women's organisations took up the issue of those girls and put the effort to get them back. They had to pursue the parents of those girls, who unaware of their real jobs, thought that at least they are getting the money earned by the girls. The organisation really had to work hard to make the parents understand that the girls should be brought back. With lot of effort they could bring back some girls, but failed to bring many other, who were already been sent to different parts of the country and outside as sex worker. Apart from these ABBWF takes up the issues immediately faced by the society, as and when needed. There is a feeling amongst the women leaders that the Bodo society has been influenced by the evil practices of the caste society and adopted some practices which were alien to them such as Dowry. In fact, practice of community

marriage was very much prevalent, which has been replaced to a larger extent by the influence of the caste society. ABWWF has also fought against the practice of dowry.

Table 3.9: Comparing importance of community rights and women’s rights

| Are community rights more important than women's right? | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|-----|----------------|----|------|-----|-----------|----|-------|------|
| | Community Rights | | Women’s Rights | | Both | | Can’t Say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 12 | 80% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 20% | 0 | 0% | 15 | 100% |

Community rights have been considered very important by ABWWF leaders. When community rights are not secured, they become slave to other communities. Bodos also faced the same situation in terms of loss of their land, imposition of language and culture and forceful uniformity. Resistance to such attempts should aim at preservation of community rights. 80% of the respondent believed that community rights are essential, whereas 20% believe that both women rights and community rights are important. When community rights are not secured, there is very less possibility of women’s rights being secured. One of the members viewed that *“when our community is at danger, our nationalist aspirations are not taken care of, how we expect women’s rights will be given priority in a male dominated society such as ours.”*

Table 3.10: Women and identity of the community

| Is it the duty of women to carry forward the identity of the community? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|----|----|-----------|-----|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | Can’t Say | | Total | |
| | No | % | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| ABWWF | 12 | 80% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 20% | 15 | 100% |

Women leaders of ABWWF at large feel that women as mothers and potential mothers need to be dutiful to the community as the protector of the culture and identity of the community, or else they will be threatened and assimilated by outsiders or more powerful communities. 80% of respondents were of the opinion that it is the duty of the women to carry forward and transmit the identity of the community to the next generation. It is the duty of the mother to teach the culture and practices of the community to the next generation. Thus women should not only be the biological reproducer of the community but also the cultural reproducers. It is the duty of the mother to educate the children and maintain the culture of the community. ABWWF advisor narrates “*who else if not women protect the culture of the community.*”

The holistic understanding of women’s organisations who are also the major constituencies in understanding women’s movement in this part of the country depends also on the interaction of different women’s organisation. At the same time, one should not lose the sight of the fact that women Bodoland Territorial Council area has substantial non-Bodo population. Therefore, it is essentially important to whether ABWWF could reach to the non-Bodo women of within the area. Therefore, specific question such as *how do you relate to other women organisations? How do you address the issues of non –Bodo women of the BTC area?* were asked.

ABWWF for all purpose was a women’s organisation for all tribal women across Assam. It tried to work on the deplorable condition of tribal women in all spheres of life. Lack of education, existence of various social evils, absence of economic independence and property rights have made tribal women extremely backward vis-a-vis non-tribal women. In the initial period of its organisations the women leaders visited all over Assam to convince the tribal women of that they should come together for their welfare. The founding Secretary further narrates “*we tried very hard to make it an all Assam organisation for tribal women, but not much success was achieved in this regard and we had to concentrate more on Bodo women. During the Bodoland movement we had well co-ordination with other women’s organisation established prior to us. As we*

participated in the Assam Movement, it gave us the platform to relate to other women's organisations."

At the same time women of other communities in Bodoland or BTAD area have created their own organisations for promotion of their issues. The leadership of ABWWF has many times stressed that the organisation aims at development of everyone in the area. This particular question has to be contested within the historical understanding of development of identity movement and politics around it in Assam. The rift between Assamese speaking caste Hindus and those ethnic communities has become quite sharp in present context. The ethnic communities have long resisted the attempts of the political leadership, dominated by Assamese speaking elite and middle class, for forced assimilation. That has been at the core of ethnic situation being is so volatile in case of Assam.

One of the major concerns of the discourse on group rights is the constitution of the right demanding communities. Therefore, the movements, ethnic movements per se, forwarding the cause of communities have to be tested against its commitment to the principle of equality especially gender equality. Therefore, the constitution of movements also needs to be enquired and for this purpose questions such as ***Do you think the movement was democratic or male dominated?*** were put.

There was amount of scepticism on the part of the women leaders to accept the movement being a male dominated one, as the formation of women's organisation and the motivation to be part of the movement was articulated by male leadership. Women followed the programmes of the movement as decided by the male members and were also shielding male protesters from the atrocities of the forces. At the same time ABSU leaders worked with ABWWF in addressing problems faced by women in the Bodo society. There was a co-ordination, but major decisions have been taken by the male leaders of the movement. *"They were our guides and we did not think in terms of oppression within movement as we fought for the common cause."* opines the advisor. However, when the question of sharing political power came up, the whole equation took a new turn, discussion on which will be followed in the next chapter.

3.5 The Comparative Perspective

The cases that have been discussed so far in this chapter attempt to put the women's organisations within their historical context and their present situation. This has been done in relation with the objective of this study and the specific questions were directed towards realising its objective. An attempt has also been made to make a comparative analysis of the cases, although they have their own peculiarities of existence. The following analysis is part of such an exercise where certain common questions were put before the respondents, which specifically target at understanding location of women within the movements.

Table 3.11: Women's participation and gender relations

| Do you think participation of women in various movements changes the gender relations in the society? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|----|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can't say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 3 | 20 | 9 | 60 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 2 | 13 | 9 | 60 | 4 | 27 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 4 | 27 | 8 | 53 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| Table Count | 9 | 20 | 26 | 58 | 10 | 22 | 45 | 100 |

In the above mentioned table 3.11 majority of the respondent of the total sample size have denied any change in the existing gender relations, due to women's mass participation in various movements. The change in the gender relations have been interpreted in terms of the change in the socio-economic, familial and political role of women as a result of the participation in the movement. Only 20% of the respondents have replied that some changes can be witnessed in the lives of women in aftermath of

the movement. But they are negligible to bring out redefinition of gender relations in the society. Whereas some economic changes can be seen in the lives of women, particularly, in case of the third movement, as some women could take advantage of the newly structured political arrangement in the aftermath of the movement. But largely they were not benefitted by the outcome of the movements. 58% of the respondents have said that women's position do not go through any radicalisation due to their participation in the movements, most specifically in the decision making process. It was viewed that unless and until equality is established in the family, radicalisation of women in other sphere is not possible. The visibility of women in the movement is time bound, which they have to withdraw once the movement comes to some sort of conclusion.

Table 3.12: Success women's organisations and women's issues

| How do you assess the success of women's organisation in addressing women's issues? | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------------|----|---------------------|----|-------------------|----|----------------------|---|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Successful | | Somewhat successful | | Not so successful | | Can't say/Don't know | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 2 | 13 | 7 | 47 | 6 | 40 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 3 | 20 | 8 | 53 | 4 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 4 | 27 | 9 | 60 | 2 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |
| Table total | 9 | 20 | 24 | 53 | 12 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 45 | 100 |

While addressing the issue of success of women's organisation majority of the respondents see it as achieving some amount of success as 53% respondents have viewed in favour of somewhat successful. On the other hand 27% of them responded that it was not so successful. The organisations that were formed during the movement could not gain much from the fruits of the movement, especially after Assam and Bodo movement.

3.6 Conclusion

In summing up the chapter, it can be mentioned that, the major concerns it wanted to address has been the relation between identity movements and women's organisations within it and depending on this core understanding the other issues such as location of women within the discourse of group identity, space of women's activism and effort at addressing question of gender equality has been analysed. Two fold analysis pattern has been followed wherein the first deals with the historical context of the movement and rise of women's organisations within it and the activities of these organisations within and outside the movement has been the concern of the second. The elaborations on the third organisation have been extensive because of the uninterrupted activity of the organisation. The first two organisations provided the crucial historical link. There is variety of reasons for picking up such ethnic movement and women's organisations have been elaborated while discussing the rationale behind the work. Study of ethnic movements in Assam has neglected the study of women's organisations within such movements. The contradiction of ethnic identity and women's identity has not been given due focus because all the effort has been directed to understand the differences amongst ethnic communities and with the majority one. Keeping in view such crucial issues, the analysis of this chapter has been directed towards addressing the research questions put forwarded in the initial part of the chapter and it has been seen that women have played very important role in various movements in this part of the region, starting with the nationalist movement. In the 80s onwards women were drawn in huge numbers in movements for identity preservation with special reference to Assam Movement and Bodo Movement. These movements have created the space for women to form organisations and articulate their issues and interests. These organisations not only played active role in the movement but carried forward their programmes after the movement in various fields for the upliftment of women of the society.

Despite such effort the question remains how far have we defied the socially and culturally defined gender role? What about equality in substantive manner, in the form of political representation of women? If women's activism is directed towards achieving

incremental changes without questioning the existing power structure, then the possibility of redefining the gender relations within communities, in a society hugely divided on ethnic lines is not likely to be possible. The analysis has brought to the light that nothing much has changed in the gender relations as an outcome of the movement. Women's role and mobility in the public sphere has been sporadic not continuous. Women continue to have inferior socio-economic and familial status. The structures of autonomy given to communities or change in government do not offer the rightful deal for women in the aftermath of the movement. However, within patriarchal structure of the movement women have created a space for women to demand their rights. Socio-economic mobility for women has been ensured to certain extent through participation in the movements and due to the persistent effort of the organisation. In concluding the analysis of this chapter one can safely argue that women's engagements in the movements and role of the women's organisations have created a space for women's rights and through which certain incremental changes can be seen which is far from having any substantial impact on the gender relations in the society. One of the prime reasons for this can be seen as the lack of decision making power of women or negligible political representation. Therefore, by carrying forward the argument from here the next chapter will specifically deal with the question of political representation and its relation to the particular context of the study. The attempt will problematize the issues of participation and political representation, through the channels of identity movements and women's organisations.

CHAPTER IV

Understanding Participation and Political Representation: The Women's Question in Assam

4.1 Introduction

Representation has remained one of the fundamental issues concerning a modern democracy. The inclusion of people who were previously excluded from the ambit of representation enlarges claims of equality in a democracy. The previous chapter attempted at introducing and analysing the case studies of the work for a deeper understanding of the location of women within identity movements for collective rights, and the activism and negotiation of women's issues, through the various women's organisations. It specifically concentrated in analysing the formation and activities of women's organisations to understand women's space within the identity construction of their communities or groups and at the same time how do women utilise the space for putting forward a case for women's rights. Women's participation has been identified both in terms of their role in pursuing collective goals in the identity movements and in pursuance of women's interest. While attempting at such an analysing the contestations and convergence of group rights and individual rights have constituted the background of the study. One of limitations or gaps of such analysis conducted on identity movements in the particular context of the study, has been the lack of engagement with the question of women's participation and establishing a link with the issue of their political representation within the space of the movement. Therefore, this chapter tries to deal with the issue of women's political representation and an attempt has been made to study the women's organisations in relation to their activism for equal political rights for women. The focal point of reference in this regard flows from the fact that the identity movements were followed by formation of new governments and political structures, especially in case of Assam Movement and Bodo Movement, wherein the issue of women's representation has been conveniently neglected despite their tremendous contribution to the movement. Thus it becomes essentially important to understand women's organisations' engagement with issue of political representation.

Political Representation, especially for women, is intimately related to the claims of modern democracies which endorses the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Both political participation and representation remains crucial for ensuring active engagement of people in the political process. The participation in the political process has largely been ensured by the system of citizenship rights, including universal adult suffrage entitling citizens equal worth in the political system. At the conceptual level political participation remains the channel through which people reflect their interest and preferences and pressurize the government to promote those preferences. “By political participation we refer to those legal acts by the private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take”(Verba,1987:1).

Political participation and representation when intersects with the category of gender, presents a serious contestation to the claims of democracies. Narrowly understood political participation involves the selection of government and the people who take actions and decisions, on behalf of other people, how do one go about the question of certain group of people, women per se, not being part of such formation or do not get represented in such government. Women’s political participation cannot be restricted to the extent of their participation in the election of representatives, without having representation in the representative bodies. If women’s concerns are always regarded as non-political and hindrances are created in their entry to political life or in the bodies of decision making, claims of democracy remains questionable. Most democracies in the world, not to talk about other forms, have failed to create a space for the equal representation of women in political institutions. Political institutions and leadership which otherwise claim to endorse the idea of women’s empowerment, take a hostile stand while coming to the question of women’s equal representation. Political marginalization is even true for women who enjoy relatively more autonomy in a particular societal context. In a democracy such as India, where Universal Adult Franchise is in practice and no real qualification has been set for being a representative in the legislative bodies, the number of women representatives has remained poor in the post independence era. In fact, in certain cases there is decline in the number of women representatives. “As long as

working in the political realm involves endless petition mongering to uncaring, unaccountable authorities, as long as decision making remains remote and in the hands of the bureaucrats, as long as politics cannot be easily integrated into the everyday life of people without causing severe disturbances in domestic life, men are likely to control and dominate it” (Kishwar, 1999:145).

Feminist struggle for equal political rights expressed through the suffrage movement is considered to be a very crucial moment towards achievement of political equality in the form of voting rights. Political equality for women cannot be essentially restricted to voting rights, without having substantial representation in the bodies of decision making. Women cannot be located outside the realm of political decision making and therefore campaign for women’s right to vote has been linked to a parallel campaign for women’s right to be elected. Modern democracies (liberal democracies per se), have ensured voting rights to women and simultaneously there has been rise in their political participation (exercise of voting rights). But under-representation of women in politics also unfolds the relation between gender and democracy. While unveiling the relation between under-representation of women and claims of democracy, questions have been raised regarding in what manner the democratic state perceives women as equal citizen? There can possibly be two very important ways of understanding this question. The first one considers women as the passive recipient of the state policies, which are largely gender biased and the second is which makes them part of the policy making by increasing their representation in the bodies of decision making. Political representation, therefore, has remained a fundamental feminist concern and equality of representation has constantly been in the agenda of women’s movement by the end of 20th century. Despite being taken up seriously in the agenda of women’s movement and repeated demands for equal representation, women are very thinly represented in the decision making bodies of almost all democracies. Political participation and representation of woman has to be contextualised in the backdrop of historical exclusion of women in political/public sphere. “Historically, when issues of political representation were discussed, traditional gendering went unnoticed until the suffrage movements claimed votes for women” (Lovenduski, 2005:8). The larger understanding of women’s

representation and the conditions of their entry into conventional politics cannot be confined to the perspective of the State, rather it is also intimately related to women's location within families and communities, which operates through particular cultural traditions and social structure. Such arrangements not only create exclusive space for women's activity but also restrict their access to resources which enable them to be in active politics.

4.2 Exploring the Indian Context

In the context of Indian democracy, the issues of political participation and representation have remained very crucial. Over the years the process of democratization and deepening of democracy have not only led to the inclusion of the hitherto excluded groups in the Indian democratic system, but also to the rise of political participation. At the same time there has also been over emphasis on electoral process and politics rather than other aspects of political participation. Other aspects of political participation which include the opportunity to be a candidate, to contest, to campaign and get elected in order to hold public offices, especially at the level of government are crucially important for functioning of a democracy and in these spheres women have largely been kept marginalised. In India, the consistent demands of women's movement's, and claims of the democratically elected government to have specific agendas and programmes for women, have not contributed towards increasing women's representatives in decision making bodies in the post independence period.

In fact, one can witness a stagnant state of representation of women in Lok Sabha and also there has been a decline of women's representation in the legislatures of certain states. What explains such a situation? Women in India are tied up with specific socio-cultural conditions of the societies and region, with different advantages and disadvantages in terms of education and resources. The diverse nature of their location and position has not affected their under representation, which has remained constant across India. Many arguments have been put forwarded to understand the inhospitable nature of Indian politics towards women. One of the most crucial reasons has been identified as pervasive gender discrimination which has given rise to a particular political

culture in India, which not only discourages women to be part of politics, but also ignores and discriminates against them even if they enter into the field. It has also been argued that even if women enter into active politics through the scheme of reservation and their representation is increased, it is unlikely that this political culture would be easily replaced. “If women join in politics in greater numbers through the present scheme of reservation, this change alone is not going to create a new political culture by itself” (Madhu Kishwar, 1999:142). On the one hand there is increase of number of women as voters and their involvement in political struggle and various people’s movement and on the other there is no substantial increase of women’s representation. It has been witnessed that women’s activism has been channelized through activities outside those political and representative structures and such activism has been restricted from entering into the political space.

Until now the representation of women in parliament and the state assemblies has stagnated at under 10 per cent, and women’s presence at all levels of government has been negligible. Women’s virtual absence within formal political institutions has been balanced by their vibrancy in politics outside such structures. Women were participants in the freedom struggle, in peasant revolts and revolutionary terrorism before independence and have been at the centre of people’s campaigns, protest activities and grassroots movements of many types since the 1970s (Sen in Swarup et al. 1994).

The following table is an indication of the low level of representation of women in the Lok Sabha since independence.

Table 4.1: Women’s representation in Lok Sabha since 1952

| S No | Year | Number of women MPs | Percentage of Women MPs |
|------|------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | 1952 | 24 | 4.41% |
| 2 | 1957 | 24 | 4.41% |
| 3 | 1962 | 37 | 6.85% |
| 4 | 1967 | 33 | 5.96% |
| 5 | 1971 | 28 | 5.06% |
| 6 | 1977 | 21 | 3.77% |
| 7 | 1980 | 32 | 5.65% |
| 8 | 1984 | 43 | 7.93% |
| 9 | 1989 | 29 | 5.24% |
| 10 | 1991 | 39 | 7.56% |
| 11 | 1996 | 40 | 7.44% |
| 12 | 1998 | 43 | 8.05% |
| 13 | 1999 | 49 | 9.15% |
| 14 | 2004 | 45 | 8.87% |
| 15 | 2009 | 59 | 11.42% |
| 16 | 2014 | 66 | 12.89% |

Website: *Lok Sabha.nic.in*

(<http://www.loksabha.nic.in/Members/lokprelist.aspx?lsno=15>)

Explanation of such phenomenon in terms of the minimal representation of women in the Lok Sabha cannot be only explained through women’s location within their families and communities which operate through patriarchal practices, but it is also intimately related to the endorsement of public patriarchy in the functioning of the state

institutions. Patriarchy operates within different categories of social formations such as caste, class, ethnic origin, region, religion and so on interacts with public patriarchy of state institutions to shape men and women relationship in the society and thus determine their prospects in politics as well. Issue of women's representation is not only related to the increase of women members in the bodies of decision making, but it is a larger question of gender equality and inclusion of marginalised and under-represented in the fold of representative bodies.

One of the reasons which have severely constrained women's equal representation has been identified as their location within multiple identities. The Indian context has witnessed the politicization of identities working as an obstacle to the realisation of equal political role of women. Women are not able to take advantage of these identities as they operate through male bias and the group resources have been conveniently used by the males for advancement of their power in the public/political realm. "On the one hand women are struggling for and being helped to move towards equal participation in the public arena, on the other, they are growing hostage to their multiple identities, since women's rights are fast becoming a site of politico-religious contestation"(Kasturi in Mala Khullar, 2005:178). The growing conflict of group identities and demand for group rights within India has led to further impingement on enjoyment of rights by women. Despite having certain rational grounds for concession of group right, reservations towards the provision of group rights have been raised by women members during the Constituent Assembly debates. "While they were fully sensitive to the rights of minorities, they yet insisted that the freedom to practice one's faith ought not to mean the state would not legislate against obnoxious social customs observed in the name of religion" (Sen, 2000: 28-29). But the ideals that were enshrined in the Constitution of India and the methods the State devised to realise these ideals proved to be ameliorative rather than enabling and radical. In other words, "the claims of women as citizens would be measured mediated and, if necessary, subsumed in the claims made on their persons and liberty by their families, kin and community. In India, the state at times functioned and continues to function as an agent of public patriarchy" (Geetha, 2007:).

The overall understanding of women's representation in the bodies of decision making and its foregrounding in the Indian context leads to the understanding that, the poor state of representation is largely outcome of many contributing factors which functions within network of families, communities and state and their endorsement of patriarchy. In this process women remain tied to the socially and culturally defined roles within structures of family and community and any demands of equality made on the State have been dealt with in a way which is far away from aiming at equality of representation. In this process women are merely reduced to the recipients to the welfare policies of the state, which the state initiates to meet with the demands of women's activism albeit it's tacit consent to the patriarchal practices.

This chapter is an attempt to understand the issues women's political representation in the context of their participation in different movements for identity preservation based on the analysis of the particular case studies undertaken for the proposed research work. It has particularly attempted to understand the role of women's organisations, formed within the movements and their activism or lack of it to articulate the issue of women's equal political rights. This chapter is a continuation of the analysis of the previous chapter concentrated on the participation of women in identity/ethnic movements, formation of women's organisation, activities of women's organisations and its impact on the existing gender relations in the society. In this chapter the issue of women's political rights, in terms of their representation in the bodies of decision making, particularly the one which came after such movements has been taken up. An attempt has been made to understand women's organisation's demand for representation and effort to challenge the state institutions which have failed to ensure representation to women and have remained largely male dominated. Based on the general objectives of the study in this chapter an attempt has been made to address the following research questions.

- Does active participation of women in identity (ethnic) movements for preservation of group identity and demands of group rights create a space that leads to their political representation in the bodies of decision making?

- Why women's organisations formed within the space of the movements have not succeeded in challenging the male dominated identity movements and political structures?
- Is women's question a political one or are they merely a 'constituency' for political gain?

While trying to analyze the above mentioned research questions, an attempt have been made in this chapter to test the following hypotheses.

- Women's active participation in the identity (ethnic) movements and activism towards collective aspiration of the communities they are located in does not substantially impact on the existing gender relations or lead to their representation in different structures of decision making.
- Women's organisations formed within the space of identity movements do not pose a serious challenge to patriarchal constitution of identity movements and the power structures of the state.

The questions raised and analyzed in this chapter have been particularly aimed at specific issue of representation and accordingly a set of common questions and another set of separate questions were put in-front of the women's organisations. It needs to be mentioned that although this chapter discusses a general understanding of representation, the question of representation in this case has been discussed within the context of identity movements. Before proceeding to the case study analysis a brief reference has been given regarding the understanding of representation in Assam.

4. 3 Understanding Women's Representation in Assam

Women's political representation, as has been mentioned earlier is closely related to the dynamics of particular societies. While understanding the issue of women's representation in the societies of North-East India and specifically Assam, one has to go beyond the traditional role of women in agriculture and peacemaking which represents a

myth of gender equality. This enquiry also needs to be understood in relation to and their active participation in various people's movement and situating women in institutions of decision making both traditional and modern. The analysis of the previous chapter largely presented the picture which shows that women's organisations' activism has not impacted on the existing gender relations in any substantive way. This chapter concerns itself in understanding whether participation of women in identity movements and women's activism through organisations impacts on the issue of women's representation both in terms of descriptive and substantive representation. Women have been historically marginalised in politics and in bodies of decision making which includes both traditional and modern institutions. There is total absence of women in the traditional institutions of decision making including both judicial and political. Even within modern political institutions women are very thinly represented. Different administrative experiments to govern North-East India including those of the Sixth Scheduled areas have not generated considerable political gain for women.

Looking at the traditional community institutions, one can witness the total absence of women. For instance Nagas have the community halls called 'Morung Ghar'(community hall) where all men assemble to decide on various important issues of the village, especially issues of public sphere such as war. Amongst the Tiwa tribe there is the provision of community halls called 'Deka Chang'(community hall for youth), where young men of the village stay together and the elderly males transfer knowledge to the younger generation about various issues of village. At the same time young men were taught different skills. Women are completely prohibited from such spaces. Community life was so organised that women were kept out of the ambit of decision making in public matters. This does not mean that they were the holders of power in the private sphere. Traditional political and judicial institutions have been the exclusive monopoly of men, where decisions are taken in such manner that they are very often biased towards men.

Introduction of modern institutions of governance in the post independence era has not been able to alter the influence of traditional institutions, specifically in the tribal areas where social life is very closely and strongly knitted around kin and community

ties. Presence of age old customary practices in land and other social sectors have kept women in a vulnerable position as most of these laws reduce women to secondary positions by denying them property rights and decision making powers. In Naga villages there are no 'Gaonburis' (women head of village) though the 'Gaonburas' (headman of village) play a major role in every customary law court and their decisions are final. In fact, in matrilineal societies such as Meghalaya, not much has been achieved in matter of women's political representation. Matrilineal system has many a time been mistaken for exercising gender equality. Here, women do enjoy certain amount of liberty in matters of family and community, but when the question of political decision making comes, women are pushed to the periphery.

The state of Assam, which was a much larger entity at the time of independence and got reorganised several times, is also no exception when the issue of women's representation is concerned. In the legislative assembly, district councils and panchayats, women's representation is negligible. Despite women's very active role in the nationalist movement and a vibrant history of women's organisation women's entry into politics has been constrained by multiple factors. In the post independence era, there has not been any subsequent rise in the number of women policy makers. Politics in this part of the country has been dominated by identity concerns of various communities. Linguistic nationalism has dominated the pre and post independence period to a large extent, whereas from the 80s onwards preservation of indigenous identity, from the threat of the illegal immigrants became the major concern, which has been followed by ethnic based identity movements. The scenario of women's representation has not even changed after one of the most significant movements in the history of North-East India that is the Assam Movement. The government formed after the movement by the movement leaders did not give adequate representation to women despite their tremendous contribution. So was the case with Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), after the Bodoland Movement, when women were denied representation. The following table will throw light on the pattern of women's representation in the Legislative Assembly in Assam.

Table 4.2: Women’s representation in Assam Legislative Assembly since 1952

| Sl.No | Year | Total number of elected representatives | Number of elected women representative | Percentage (%) |
|-------|------|---|--|----------------|
| 1 | 1952 | 94 | 2 | 2.13 |
| 2 | 1957 | 96 | 5 | 5.21 |
| 3 | 1962 | 105 | 4 | 3.81 |
| 4 | 1967 | 126 | 6 | 4.76 |
| 5 | 1972 | 114 | 8 | 7.02 |
| 6 | 1978 | 126 | 1 | 0.79 |
| 7 | 1983 | 126 | 2 | 1.59 |
| 8 | 1985 | 126 | 4 | 3.17 |
| 9 | 1991 | 126 | 5 | 3.93 |
| 10 | 1996 | 126 | 6 | 4.76 |
| 11 | 2001 | 126 | 10 | 7.94 |
| 12 | 2006 | 126 | 13 | 10.32 |
| 13 | 2011 | 126 | 13 | 10.32 |
| 14 | 2016 | 126 | 8 | 6.35 |

Source: www.assamassembly.gov.in/ala-since/1937.html

The above mentioned table is indicative of the fact that in Assam women’s representation in the state Assembly has never reached 12% from the time of independence. The most interesting observation can be seen in case of the 1985 government after the Assam Movement where only 3.17% of women could make it to the assembly including women contestants from all parties. When the same government came to power in 1996, only 4.76% of women made it to the Assembly including representatives from all parties. In the last Assembly elections where a record of 84.18% of women voters exercised their franchise, but only 6.35% of women could make it to the Assembly. This table apart from indicating the constant inadequate representation of women also brings to light two important facts firstly women’s participation in Assam

Movement was taken for granted with no substantial political gain for them. Secondly, even if women voters exercise their voting rights in a very higher rate (last assembly elections in 2016), it does not necessarily lead to election of women's representatives.

4.4 The Case Study Analysis: Part One: The Comparative Analysis

In this chapter the case study analysis has been divided into three parts. The first part has concentrated in analyzing the responses of all three women's organisations under the study to certain common questions which were asked specifically on issues of women and politics with special reference to the issue of representation. The attempt of the first section is to arrive at a comparative analysis of the approaches of women's organisations to the question of women's representation.

At the very outset it may be pointed out that whatever little writing on women's organisation has been referred to while undertaking the study, it has come out clearly that women's organisations in this part of the country have not been very successful in putting forward the case of women's representation. Renowned academician and feminist writer Aparna Mahanta (interview taken on 16th July 2016) has pointed out that the reason for a very slow rate of success of women's organisations and movement has been the lack of the conviction on part of the leaders to accept women's issues as political issue. Women's organisation has kept women's sphere as non-political and there lies the serious problem and limitation of the women's organisations. Women's issues are not only political, but needs political solution. Therefore, it is utmost important that women's organisations give equal importance to the issue of political representation for women. The following section on comparative analysis has been conducted to enquire into the approach of women's organisations to the question of women's representation and also to understand the causes behind their minimal success while dealing with issue of women's political rights. The comparison has been undertaken in relation to the responses received from the women leaders involved in various movements and the organisations in relation to those movements.

Table 4.3: Women’s issues as political issue

| Do you think women’s issues are political issues? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|----|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can’t say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 0 | 0 | 12 | 80 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 2 | 13 | 10 | 67 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 4 | 27 | 9 | 60 | 2 | 13 | 15 | 100 |
| Table Count | 6 | 13 | 31 | 69 | 8 | 18 | 45 | 100 |

One of the major limitations in the approach of the women’s organisations has been the inability to relate women related issues to the political sphere which has been clearly indicated in the above table showing a clear scepticism of women leaders and organisations to identify women’s issues as political issues. The activism and the rigour of the organisations during the movement period have been withdrawn in the aftermath of the movements and they have concentrated in appealing, petitioning, demanding to the government for making welfare policies for women. Majority of the respondent which is 69% has regarded women’s issues as non-political, where as 13% thought it to be political and 18% were indecisive. Women’s organisations in northeast India have engaged themselves more into issues of peace making, social-economic and familial issues without engaging into the political one. This delinking of other issues from politics and power has actually led to non-pursuance of representation of women in the bodies of decision making. Under the pretext of ‘women are not interested in politics’ the issue of political representation does not occupy a prime concern in the agenda of women’s organisation. One of the explanations of such approach is also related to the perception that families and communities are not the sites of power-relations, and gender relations within them is considered to be part of natural arrangements.

Table 4.4: Politics as male dominated sphere

| Is politics a male dominated sphere? | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|----|----|---|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can't say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 12 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 11 | 73 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 27 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 10 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 33 | 15 | 100 |
| Table Count | 33 | 76 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 27 | 45 | 100 |

The historical exclusion of women from political institution in Assam, with only few women making it to the institutions of decision making, not only have made the political space exclusive domain for men, but also has created apprehension amongst women to enter into the political sphere. Though women's movement and organisations have challenged this male dominated space, the entry into the space has not become easier. Chandraprabha Saikiani, the founder of women's movement and organisations in Assam, when contested in the elections, failed to win, which reflects the non-acceptability of women in the political realm despite their participation and activism in different movements. The women's organisations under the study have also been in agreement with politics being a male dominated sphere, entry to which is immensely difficult for women. 73% of the respondents have replied that politics has been and is a male dominated sphere. The identity movements in which women played very important role did not offer them substantial representation in the new governments, political structures formed aftermath of the movements, which has been the case with both Assam movement and the Bodo movement. In fact, persistent effort by the ABWWF to demand women's representation in Bodoland Terrotorial Council has not generated fruitful result.

Table 4.5: Women’s representation in decision making bodies

| Do you think women should get equal representation in the legislative/decision making bodies? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|---|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can’t say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 11 | 73 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 27 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 12 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 13 | 87 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 15 | 100 |
| Table count | 36 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 20 | 45 | 100 |

One of the interesting findings of the interviews conducted amongst the women leaders and office bearers of the movement is, despite their claims that women’s organisations and issues are non-political, majority of the respondents believed that women should get equal representation in the decision making bodies. All the three organisations have claimed themselves to be non political one, whereas the third organisation has kept its demand for political representation as part of their agenda, but majority of respondent have opined in favour of women having equal representation. 80% of the total respondents have said that women should be given equal representation in the decision making bodies. After the Assam movement, though there were not so strong demands from the women’s organisations for representation in the new government, they felt that women should have been given their political due, because of their sacrifices in the movement. In fact, demand of equal representation has been raised by women leaders after the Bodo Movement, though it was not conceded. The acceptance on the part of the women’s organisations in principle that women should be given equal representation has been contradictory to the position they take on the interest of women in politics. Thus any attempt of women’s organisations’ demand of equal

representation has not been received with ease and women organisations too have not able to alter such power equations.

Table 4.6: Women’s interest in Politics

| Are women interested in politics? | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----|----|----|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can’t say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 0 | 0 | 12 | 80 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 4 | 27 | 8 | 53 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 5 | 33 | 7 | 47 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| Table Count | 9 | 20 | 27 | 60 | 9 | 20 | 45 | 100 |

Having majority of women advocating for equal representation of women in the bodies of decision making, 60% of the respondents have said women are not interested in politics. While APMS holds the view that women are not interested in politics because of the family constraints, AJMP and ABWWF believe that apart from family constraints, male leaders create conditions for not allowing the entry of women in active politics, as they do not want to share power with women. Lack of encouragement within the family has been considered as one of the reasons for disinterest of women in politics. Even if women enjoy some sort of socio-economic mobility they are not likely to pursue politics, and at the same time they are not regarded to be fit for it. The contradictory position of women’s organisations re-establishes itself when they support equality of representation for women, and believe that women themselves are not interested in politics. A special mention may be made to ABWWF, which has maintained its stand for equal representation for women, but at the same, they would relieve those members who want to enter active politics, from organisational responsibilities. During the time of elections

the organisation puts women candidates, with the support of the organisation, which is not the case with other two organisations. APMS does not claim to have a concrete political agenda and has reduced itself to be a welfare organisation. AJMP did not press for equal representation during its active period during the Assam movement and now has been struggling for its existence since 1996.

Table 4.7: Representation of women’s interest by men

| Do you think men can represent the interest of women adequately in decision making bodies/ Government? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|----|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can’t say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 3 | 20 | 9 | 60 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 2 | 13 | 10 | 67 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 2 | 13 | 11 | 73 | 2 | 13 | 15 | 100 |
| Table count | 7 | 15 | 30 | 67 | 8 | 18 | 45 | 100 |

In modern democracies amongst all forms of representation, the one which advocates representation in the government or bodies of decision is considered to be a dominant one as such representation is seen as a mechanism to pursue various interests. Therefore, the ethnic groups in question have either demanded for political rights to be part of those bodies or separate political structures for them to have self government rights. It also leads one to argue that those who do not have representation in the form of presence, their interest will not be represented or they will not be the beneficiaries of the policy outcomes. Women is such a category who have not been represented adequately and their interests have been represented by others, males per se, who are considered to be insensitive towards their issues because of specific gender relations at work in the

larger society. When women organisations were asked about how successfully men can reflect the interests of women, as shown in the above mentioned table, more than half of the respondents, which is 67%, believe men cannot represent the interests of women whereas 18% of the respondents were of the view that men can represent the interest of women if policies are for their benefit. The majority opinion has been shaped by the fact that very few women could enter into politics and largely fell prey to the power relations and thus became unable to deliver on women's issues. This has led to enquiry of whether women can represent women's interest adequately where one can witness some interesting findings.

Table 4.8: Representation of women's interest by women

| Can women represent the interest of women better than men? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|----|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| Organisations | Yes | | No | | Can't say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| APMS | 8 | 53 | 3 | 20 | 4 | 27 | 15 | 100 |
| AM/AJMP | 9 | 60 | 3 | 20 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |
| ABWWF | 10 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 33 | 15 | 100 |
| Table total | 27 | 60 | 6 | 13 | 12 | 27 | 45 | 100 |

An analysis of the above mentioned table shows that 60% of the respondents believe that, given a chance women can better represent the interest of women in the government and in the process of policy making. But the irony of the situation is that women cannot make it to that position, despite their public visibility, especially in the time of protests and agitations. In this regard the idea of 'presence' has been emphasised by the women's organisations, specifically the third organisation which believes that representation as presence will lead to substantive representation. Whereas a substantial

number of respondents, which is 31%, remained indecisive in their response. This is a very crucial point where women leaders and members of organisations are sceptical about women representing women's interest. This has also been the product of the experience they have gone through during their active participation and functioning of the political structures formed aftermath of these movements. For example AJMP leadership was utterly disgusted with the way two of women Member of Legislative Assemblies performed after they were elected to the Assembly. These women were very active during the movement period but while coming to the policy making they were totally sidelined. One view holds that they became victim of the patriarchal space of politics, the other however mentions about their lack of commitment towards women's issues, rather they were more loyal to the party instruction. On the other hand ABWWF leadership holds that although some women have been elected as representatives, but they have not succeeded in raising women's questions adequately because of variety of reasons. One of the reasons is their minority status within those bodies. Therefore, there is increasing demands for having more women representatives. One can also argue that these organisations are by-products of the movements and they have worked under patronage of male leaders with the acceptance of the power hierarchy, without seriously challenging it, which has definite impact on how women representatives are treated once they make it to the assemblies or decision making bodies.

4.5 Case Study Analysis: Section II: Organisation specific analysis

The second section has emphasized on analysis of specific questions addressed to the women's organisations in order to understand the points of agreement and difference in their approach and how the space of movements in each case has been utilized to articulate women's issues. In this section an attempt has been made to understand the issue of women's representation in the context of Assam Movement and the Bodo Movement by placing the specific questions to women's organisations formed within both these movements namely AJMP and ABWWF. The rationale behind not analysing the first organisations is because of its stand on women's representation and political issues have not been very significant in the present context and it has totally reduced

itself to a welfare organisation, although its origin can be traced back to the nationalist movement. At the same time its position on women's political rights have been analysed in the first section of comparative analysis. As far as the two other organisations are concerned their stake on political representation becomes more crucial as they were formed within the space of identity movements and actively engaged with the issues of community rights, and at the same time new governments and political structures were created aftermath of those movements in 1985 and 2003. The analysis of this part will specifically deal with how women were located within those political structures and why they were denied their political due through critically engaging with the role of women's organisation in this regard.

4.5.1 Assam Movement/Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP)

Having utilising the space where community rights are raised and negotiated the women's organisations' claims to have raised women's issues and therefore particular questions were directed in the form of *Did women's organisations/leaders raise the demand for equal representation for women in the newly formed government after the movement?* in order to understand their stake on this issue.

Women's organisations did not have a clear stand on the question of equal representation for women during the Assam Movement, firstly because unlike the Bodo movement, here women were organised through multiple women's organisations and the movement was a space for activities of all such actors and therefore could not develop a unanimous stand on this question. Secondly, women who were willing to be part of the government took it to be imperative on part of the male leaders to provide them equal representation as part of their contribution for the success of the movement. But when the new government came up in 1985, it did not bring any substantial gain for women in terms of their representation in it. Mitali Kayastha (Pseudonym) said *"it is not that we did not demand representation. Even we wanted to be part of the government. We were capable leaders of the movement and there was no question that we could not have run political offices, but we were thought to be not qualified for it"* (interview taken on 29th July 2016). One of the AJMP leaders said *"it was not the motive of the organisations to*

demand power sharing. They were guided by the motive of the movement and at the same time wanted to do something for welfare of women, not necessarily put them in politics. We are not guided by political motives.”

Table 4.9: Representation of women in the new government after Assam Movement

| Were women given adequate representation in the newly formed government aftermath of the movement? | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|------|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Women leaders/AJMP | 0 | 0% | 15 | 100% | 15 | 100% |

Assam Movement was followed by the formation of a new government in the year 1885, which was led by the movement leaders, with overwhelming support of the masses. However, women were not adequately represented in the government and only two women made it to the assembly and one of them was made a minister. When asked about the demand of equal representation one of the women leaders said “*we did not sacrifice for political gain.*” The new political party Axom Gana Parishad (AGP), which was the ruling party, formed a women wing of the party, for articulation of women related issues. Manika Bordoloi (Pseudonym) was of the opinion that “*there was a conspiracy to sideline women who were very active during the movement. Women such as Bijoya Chakravart who was kept captive in the jungles of Bhalukpung in Arunachal Pradesh for her active participation in the movement could not get a ticket in the elections. In the second term as well widows of some male leaders were given tickets. There was serious resentment on part of some male leaders in regard to giving women adequate representation. The spirit and emotion with which women fought for the identity of the community was deeply hurt when there was so much struggle over power.*”

Table 4.10: Women’s interest in elections

| Were women willing to contest in elections? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|----|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can’t Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| AM/AJMP | 4 | 27 | 6 | 40 | 5 | 33 | 15 | 100 |

Women participated in the movement for the cause of the community and they were motivated and drawn by the leaders of the movement to contribute in the collective action. However, some women wanted to utilise the space created by the movement and rise up to the level of political leadership. 27% of the respondent said some women active in the movement were willing to contest in the elections, whereas 40% of the respondents replied in the negative. Women who were part of women’s organisations were mostly not in favour of being in active politics, as they were more concerned with issues of welfare for women and children during and aftermath of the movement. The contradictory co-existence of women’s views within the space of the movement has been seen in their pursuance of the issues of women’s representation. Women who were part of the organisations were more interested in women’s welfare than representation, though in principle they agree to women’s representation in the government. The other section of women who were interested in joining politics believed that they will be given equal representation because of their contribution towards the movement, without even demanding for it, which in reality did not happen. And there is another section of women who blames it to the power equations and resentment of the male leaders to give equal representation to women, despite being demanded. The lack of consensus on the issue of women’s representation has impacted on the effort of the women’s leaders to challenge the power relations in a significant way both within and outside the government. Thus particular question such as *why do you think that women’s organisations failed to*

challenge the patriarchal composition of the movement and the new government? was asked to have further explanations on the question of women's representation.

Organisations which came up during the movement were product of a domain which was reflective of patriarchal power relations. The space which was allowed to women was not necessarily for alteration of the power relations but to forward the cause of the community. Within such construction women initiated their activism to raise women's issues not necessarily to promote individual rights or women's rights over that of group rights. It has been said that women's participation in the Assam Movement was a sudden withdrawal of them from domestic activities and once the movement was over they fell back into the private space. APMS and other women leaders were more in favour of securing the rights of the community than promoting their political interest and therefore engaging into question of patriarchal relations within the movement was not the agenda of the time. But when the movement leadership formed political party and also became the ruling party, the question of political representation for women started gaining grounds. Before that such issue was not part of the agenda of the women's organisations in a prominent way. At the same time the similar kind of power relations operative within the movement, was carried forward in the new government where women were largely sidelined and much of the disenchantment of women leaders came with the movement leadership after the formation of the new government. Rather than challenging the power relations within the government women leaders became more sceptical about the kind of the power struggle one needs to go through to be part of the movement. Therefore, apart from making periodical demands for giving women their due representation, there was no serious challenge to the patriarchal composition of the government. Women leader Nibha Bora (Pseudonym) viewed that "*after thirty five years of the movement they feel the government has failed to achieve any of the goals of the movement nor could it give any due to its women activists. All it did is to generate political gain for one section of leaders*".

4.5.2 All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF)

The specific questions were targeted to ABWWF on the issue of women’s representation in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), after their active participation in the ethnic assertion of the Bodos or the Bodoland movement. Question of women’s representation has been analyzed in the context of ABWWF’s approach and the demand for the same. BTC was created in 2003 as part of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (Amendment) Act of 2003. It came out as a result of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between Central Government, Assam Government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). The four districts coming under the administration of BTC have been named as Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). BTC is a 40 member council and 6 members are nominated by the state government. The first elections to the Bodoland Terrotorial Council Legislative Assembly were held in 2005, then subsequently in the 2010 and 2015. Till now only one woman has been elected to the Assembly, and three (3) women were nominated by the government. No women have been made the member of the executive council of the Assembly and at the same time no women from the ruling party has been elected to the Assembly.

Table 4.11: Demand of equal representation in BTC

| Was their demand of equal representation for women in BTC? | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------|----|----|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 15 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 15 | 100% |

Traditionally Bodo society does not assign political role to women, though their engagement in economic activities are very much part of the community way of life. After the creation of BTC, ABWWF leadership demanded for equal representation for women in the council. Mithinga Basumatary, the advisor of the organisation said “we

committed a historical mistake in the beginning of the Council. While demanding equal representation, and thinking it will not be fulfilled, we settled for a six members claim in the 40 members council. This was further reduced to two. Taking advantage of the situation we were not given our due. We in fact tried to convince the leadership for 33% reservation along with the line of Panchayati Raj system. Had we not settled down on our claims, the things would have been different today. We thought let the new council begin its activities for the development of the community and women will be given power eventually. We regret the mistake and women still are awaiting for political rights.”

Thirteen years have passed ever since this council is operating in the BTAD area, only one woman has been elected to the Assembly in 2015. Therefore, it can be said that despite their active participation in the movement, women’s demand for representation was not paid attention to and the organisation which seems to be more radical in its activities have also fallen to the prey of community rights over political rights for women.

Table 4.12: Grant of equal representation in BTC

| Was it Granted? | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----|------|----|----|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 15 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 15 | 100% |

It is quite apparent from the above explanation that women were not granted representation to the council aftermath of the Bodoland movement. Bodoland People’s Front (BPF), the ruling party created a women’s wing of the party and gave nomination to one woman to the council as a nominated member. Kanan Basumatary said *“we have been rejected on the grounds of quality, qualification and experience to be part of politics. But how are we supposed to gain experience in politics when we are not made part of the new political structure.”* it was perceived that women not only lack the quality

and qualification but most importantly experience to run political offices. Women were thought to be very essential for the nationalist aspiration of the community and demand of group rights including self governing rights, but while coming to the question of their political representation they were thought to be unfit. Mithinga Basumatary shares *“it is very difficult to convince men to share power.”* Thus neither women were given equal representation nor was their demand granted. In the 40 member BTC, there is a provision for including six government nominees. ABWWF members were promised that women will be included amongst those nominees. But that promise was also not fulfilled as expected. In 2005, no women got tickets so two women were nominated by the State Government. On the other hand in 2010 some women got tickets, but none won. It has forced the government to nominate one woman for namesake. President of BPF women’s wing said *“even in matter of selecting government nominees, there is lot of politics. Things are decided at different level and women are deprived of their place. Only three women have been elected as Government nominees in the BTC till now. Promises are made, but never fulfilled.”*

Table 4.13: Need of separate political structure

| Do you think having separate political structure for different ethnic groups help in development of the community? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|---|-----------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can’t Say | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 12 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 15 | 100 |

If the existing political structures cannot meet with the aspiration of certain communities, ethnic communities per se, there is need of separate political structure for them. Bodos have demanded separate political structure because of the lack of sincerity of the existing one to meet with their demands of socio-economic development and cultural preservation. They were not willing to accept forced assimilation and imposition.

In the above table 80% of the respondents have said separate political structure for ethnic groups help in the development of the community which may not be beneficial for women.

Table 4.14: Affiliation to political party

| Are you affiliated to any political party? | | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|----|---|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 15 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 100 |

ABWWF has for all practical purpose remained a non-political organisation. It does not officially endorse the affiliation to the ruling party in BTAD, but being the product of the Bodo movement, they are ideologically close to the ruling party. Women members willing to join active politics are relieved from the duties of the organisation and allowed to contest elections. In fact women members of the organisation provide all possible help to such members. At the same time ABWWF keeps up its demand of giving tickets to women in the elections of BTC. In fact, before every election to the council, women delegates meet the leaders of political parties, to put the case for women candidates. ABWWF notwithstanding its demand for political rights wants to act more in a manner of welfare organisation not relating it to any political party.

Table 4.15: Political parties and women's representation

| How interested are political parties to give representation to women? | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|----|---------------------|-----|----------------|-----|--------------|-----|-------|------|
| | Very Interested | | Somewhat Interested | | Not Interested | | Can't Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 0 | 0% | 3 | 20% | 8 | 53% | 4 | 27% | 15 | 100% |

The reservations of many political parties to put women candidates in the elections for a variety of reasons can also be witnessed in the case of political parties in BTAD area. On creation of BTC, leadership got split into two political parties namely the Bodo People's Front (BPF) and Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF). On the question of putting women candidates Supriya Rani Brahma said "*they were so busy in the struggle for power that giving women their share in power was out of question.*" Even if some leaders were willing to give ticket to women, the competition and greed amongst the male leadership for power curtailed the chances for women. Thus 53% of the respondents said that political parties are not interested to put women candidates. One Narayani Basumatary contested in the council elections as an independent candidate, but could not win as male electorate did not support her candidature. At the same time the party had put a strong candidate against her and after much of the effort of the women's organisation, she could not win the seat and it was felt that she became victim of political conspiracy.

BPF has been the ruling power for last 13 years and it draws many women as its members who would campaign for the party during elections. On the other hand it has also formed a women's wing after persistent effort of ABWWF, which is headed by the first secretary of ABWWF. But in terms of giving candidature to women and electing them as decision makers nothing substantial has been achieved till now. At the same time ABWWF has developed a sense of betrayal in the question of women's representation, after much contribution in the movement. One of the reasons for inadequate representation of women is also non-existence of Panchayat Raj institutions in the areas having autonomous councils, where 33% reservation for women is mandatory. Pramila Rani Brahma, the first president of ABWWF has taken up active politics and is the only women who could leave a mark in politics, having elected MLA from BPF and now a minister in the State Government where BPF is an alliance. But no woman from the ruling BPF has ever made it to the BTC legislative Assembly. Though much success has not been achieved in the field of political representation ABWWF has not stop pursuing the demand. However, it has directed itself more to welfare activities.

Table 4.16: Women’s interest in elections

| Are women willing to contest in the elections? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|----|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can’t Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| ABWWF | 5 | 33 | 4 | 27 | 6 | 40 | 15 | 100 |

From the discussion of previous tables it has been seen that neither women’s demand for political representation was fulfilled, nor political parties are willing to put them as candidates in the elections. However, it does not mean that women are not willing to contest in the elections. Though women’s stake in politics apart from casting votes has been restricted under the pretext that they are not interested in politics, there are women who are not only active in party politics, but are also willing to contest in the elections. 33% of the respondents said women are willing to contest in the elections, if they are given a chance. 40% of the respondents were indecisive regarding their willingness to contest elections as they have always been deprived of it. Phulani Brahma said *“women were always kept away from politics, so it is nothing but natural that they will not be interested in it. But given a chance I think they will be motivated to contest in the elections”*.

ABWWF comparatively has a stronger agenda of demanding women’s political rights although engagement into political activities is not an explicit part of their larger agenda. However, its political activism has become evident from the fact that they have gone to the extent of supporting an independent women candidate against the party candidate. At the same time these challenges have not been so strong to pursue the leadership to give equal due to women and also the ideological support to the government for the cause of its formation, have restrained them from challenging the power equation, therefore they were asked questions such as *Why did ABWWF not succeed in*

challenging the patriarchal structure of both the Bodo Movement and the State institutions in a major way?

The emergence of Bodoland autonomy movement and creation of political structures such as BTC aimed at meeting with the aspiration of an ethnic community for demand of self-determination. Ethnic assertion of the Bodos and their demand of separate statehood have been accommodated within constitutional framework in terms of creation of structures of autonomy such as BTC. Women were very much part of demand of community rights and new political arrangements have been welcomed by them, and rather than viewing it as a male dominated one, they saw it as the hope for the betterment of the community. One of the leaders narrated “*we saw BTC as a hope. But the struggle for power has pushed women out of the purview of representation. We do demand political rights, right to be elected and represented, but it is a big challenge. When women contest without party support, they lose the elections and parties are not willing to give tickets to them. So, there is a lot to be done in this regard.*” Therefore, one can argue that women’s organisations are also caught up in a situation where there is acceptance of a power structure within the movement as it aspired for the community rights and on the other hand the discrimination of women in the political structures of which are outcome of the movement. Therefore the alteration of power relations becomes utterly difficult.

4.6 Case study analysis: Section III: Understanding the Alternative Perspective

The third section will give emphasize on the perspective of common women members or the members who have received support, help and benefits from the organisations. This section has specifically taken up two organisations the first one that is APMS and the third one ABWWF. The rationale behind non-inclusion of the second organisation is the discontinuation of its function in the aftermath of the Assam Movement. This section tries to understand the alternative perspective of women’s organisations because the study so far has concentrated on the perspective of leaders and active members of the organisations. In this section a total number of 25 respondents from APMS and ABWWF have been interviewed with an intention to understand how

they perceive the activism of women’s organisations. The questions were so designed to understand the changes the women’s organisations have brought in impacting on the socio-economic and political lives of the common women. Based on the activities of the organisations, specifically the welfare activities in the socio-economic sphere and legal aid, this section will attempt at understanding its impact on the lives of common women in terms of creation of some kind of agency which attempts at bringing some alteration of gender relations, not necessarily changing it. The 25 respondents have been divided into 12 from APMS and 13 from the ABBWF depending on the particular methodology followed in the work as explained in the section on methodology.

4.6.1 Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS)

Table 4.17: Changes brought by APMS

| Do you think APMS has brought changes/ differences in women’s life? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|---|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can’t Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Common members/beneficiaries | 8 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 33 | 12 | 100 |

APMS is an All-Assam based organisation functioning through different organisational structure from district to village level. It has a much wider reach to women than that of the other organisations. The respondents, who form the beneficiaries of the organisation, were taken from the central committee and one district committee. 67% of the respondents believe that APMS has brought certain changes in the lives of women through various welfare activities.

Table 4.18: Sphere of change: APMS

| If yes, in which of the following sphere changes have been witnessed? | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|----|----------|----|-------|----|-----------|---|-------|-----|
| | Social | | Economic | | legal | | Political | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Members/beneficiaries | 3 | 25 | 4 | 33 | 4 | 33 | 1 | 9 | 12 | 100 |

The above mentioned table presents an analysis of the areas where APMS could bring some changes and 33% of the respondents have witnessed those changes in the economic and legal sphere. It is also necessary to mention that the beneficiaries who are from Guwahati city, where the headquarter of the organisation is also located, mostly take help from the legal cell of the organisation. This has been primarily related to the family disputes, cases of domestic violence, divorce etc and they cannot access the formal legal system. Most cases are of domestic violence where women are not able to file cases against the husband. However, within this whole exercise the class factor is essentially related as most of the women approaching the organisation are from very humble economic background. At the same time the legal aid of the organisation also has certain limitations. On the other hand respondents at village level have seen economic changes as APMS has given importance in making women economically independent, in terms of engaging them in economic activities such as weaving and also creating a network of linking the self help groups. At the level of political activities there is hardly any significant change which can be witnessed in the activities of the organisation.

Table 4.19: Changes in gender relations: APMS

| Do you think activities of APMS have brought changes in men-women relationship? | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|----|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can't Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Common members/beneficiaries | 3 | 25 | 3 | 25 | 6 | 50 | 12 | 100 |

The moot point of the analysis of this part is to understand how the activities of the women's organisations impact on the gender relations through the perspective of the common members and beneficiaries of the organisation. Only 25% of the respondents expressed that minimal changes have been witnessed in the gender relations as an outcome of education and economic activities of women, but 50% of the respondents are not in a position to witness the visible changes in men and women relations as family relations and women's domestic roles have not undergone radical changes. It has also been seen that when women acquire some amount of economic independence the men of the family seek a claim on it. At the same time property relations and decision making power has hardly undergone any changes.

4.6.2 All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF)

While trying to analyse the responses of the common members/beneficiaries, the same questions were put in relation to the functioning of the ABWWF. The analysis is conducted not only to understand the impact of the activities of the organisation, but also the overall impact of the ethnic movement of the Bodos on the different spheres of women's life.

Table 4.20: Changes brought by ABWWF

| Do you think ABWWF has brought changes/ differences in women's life? | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----|----|---|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can't Say/DK | | Total | |
| | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % | N. | % |
| Common members/beneficiaries | 8 | 62 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 38 | 13 | 100 |

The above mentioned table is an indication of the fact that majority of the respondents believe in changes brought in by the activities of ABWWF. These changes were not only measured in terms of benefits women achieved at individual level, but also

in terms of community rights, supported by the ABWWF, during the course of the Bodo Movement. The concession of special rights to Bodo community has also been seen by the common women as an end to the atrocities women face in the hands of the outsiders.

Table 4.21: Sphere of change: ABWWF

| If yes, in which of the following sphere changes have been witnessed? | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|----|---------|----|---------|----|----------|----|-------|-----|
| | Family | | Economy | | Society | | Politics | | Total | |
| | No | % | No | % | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| Common members/beneficiaries | 3 | 23 | 4 | 31 | 4 | 31 | 2 | 15 | 13 | 100 |

The ABWWF for all purpose has given utmost importance to changes in women's socio-economic life both within and outside the movement. It concentrated its activities on the eradication of social evils impacting on women's life, and therefore 31% of the respondents indicated the social changes brought about by ABWWF. At the same time the effort at making women economically independent and emphasis on establishment of weaving centre, women's market and connection with the self help group has impacted on the lives of women and 31% respondents mentioned about the economic changes. As regard to the political difference, there is less agreement on the political role of the organisation and only 15% of the respondents expressed change in this sphere.

Table 4.22: Changes in gender relations: ABWWF

| Do you think activities of ABWWF have brought changes in men-women relationship | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----|----|----|--------------|----|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | Can't Say/DK | | Total | |
| | No | % | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| Common members/beneficiaries | 2 | 15 | 4 | 31 | 7 | 54 | 13 | 100 |

The study has not only located the women's organisations in terms of the activities it undertakes, but its impact on the alteration of existing gender relations. The analysis shows only 15% respondents were of the opinion that there were certain changes in the men women relationship, where 54% respondents cannot determine such changes. In this context it is essentially important to understand the changes the organisations have brought in and as received by the beneficiaries are not conditioned by the aims of changing exiting relations, though some sporadic attempts have been made by ABWWF to do so. Thus the changes are seen in terms of making space for women not radicalising the existing gender relations.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter basically attempted at understanding the question of women's representation in the context of their participation in identity movements. The question of women's representation has been approached through the positions held by women's organisations formed within those movements. The idea of political representation has been understood in this regard as women's representation in the governments, Legislative Assemblies, district councils, candidature in the elections locating representation in the bodies of political decision making. The analysis of this chapter can be regarded as the continuation of the analysis on women's organisations in the previous chapter with a deliberate attempt to analyse the question of representation in a detailed manner so that the link between participation and representation may be established.

The comparative analysis of the three organisations leads one to arrive at certain general observations. The women's organisations cannot be regarded as having similar approach to the question of women's representation or women's stake in politics, however they do share similar stand in certain questions related to the issue of women's representation. For example on the question of equal number of representative in the assemblies, there is unanimity in principle by all the organisations as they feel the interest of women cannot be represented by men. The organisations perceive politics to be male dominated domain and in fact in certain instance they also seem to have gone by the argument of men being naturally endowed with political skills. While APMS perceives

political domain as a men's domain by citing reasons of women's natural lack of interest and family structures for it, whereas AJMP and women leaders of Assam Movement view lack of women in politics is due to lack of opportunity as they are restricted by men and also inability of women to get into the power game. However, ABWWF has a more active stand in the question of political representation as it believes that women are capable of entering into politics and they challenge the lack of representation of women in the Council, though they also mention about women falling prey to party politics. The comparative analysis also shows a trend of withdrawal of women's organisations' activism from political front aftermath of the movement and directing its effort towards socio-economic development of women. Therefore, the attempt to understand politics separated from other issues in case of women has worked as a limitation for these organisations barring the periodic effort of ABWWF for women's political rights. The identification of women's issues as distinct from political issues has impacted on their approach to political equality for women.

The first organisation APMS has directed itself totally towards welfare activities with minimal importance to issues of women's political rights. The historical context of its existence has been focused in this study to relate its original space of activism within the nationalist movement. The approach to political issues or women's representation in the present activities of the organisations has merely reduced to understanding of political equality in principle, whereas the other views are self contradictory to its understanding of political equality. Hence, the separate analysis on question of representation has not been conducted for APMS. The understanding of the other two organisations AJMP and ABWWF has been more relevant in order to show the contestations and convergence of group rights and individual rights in relation to women's representation. The identity issue involved within the movements of their formation has largely shaped the approach toward issue of women's representation. AJMP has been struggling to maintain its existence since 1996 after its very active period of existence during the Assam Movement. It directed itself towards welfare activities and finally losing its ground because of variety of reasons and one of it has been seen as the loss of the cause of its existence that is the identity struggle of the community. The need for putting forward

women's representation came up only when new political parties and government came up and women were betrayed in the process. The issue of group rights were so intensely pursued by women and the construction of womanhood around preservation of culture of the community was strongly infused and internalised by women that political equality was regarded as secondary. This also prevented the women's organisation to have an independent political agenda. Much of the dissatisfaction of the women's organisation and the leaders came up when they were totally neglected in the process of decision making and their interest were not reflected in the level of policy making. However, they have expressed more dissatisfaction in the way their contributions have gone in vain because they feel many of the goals of the movement could not be achieved.

ABWWF has also been caught up in the contradiction between ethnicity and women's representation. The whole idea of studying ABWWF is to understand the location of gender within the ethnic identity of a group or when ethnicity becomes a tool for pursuance of group rights how does it intersect with the question of gender equality. The space of ethnicity has not only been seen as a space for women's activism but also a space for pursuance of women's representation. The negotiation between women's role as cultural and biological reproducer of ethnic identity and political equality is such a contradictory space for reconciliation that women's organisations find themselves to be caught into a very difficult situation. ABWWF has utilised the space of the Bodo Movement to raise women's issues and at the same time negotiated with the question of political representation. It has engaged seriously with the issues of crime against women, alcoholism, economic development and the issue of political representation of women has also been persuaded. However, not much success has been achieved in this regard as the space of identity assertion though concentrated in demand of political rights for the community, did not come with the promise of equal representation for women. ABWWF has maintained its existence till now and seems to be more progressive in its approach to women's issues. It has also tried to broaden its base by engaging itself with other organisations. The leadership has largely remained in the hands of educated middle class women and its support base has been amongst common Bodo women of the villages. Much of the effort of the organisation has not translated in bringing women in political

space and thus could not pose a serious challenge to the existing power relations in the institutional level.

This study while approaching the question of representation and its application in case of women has followed a broader theoretical framework of representation, which has been explained in the chapter on the theoretical framework. The border framework of representation has been followed in relation to women's stake within the ethnic identity or ethnicity in a given context. The idea of representation which was applied to foreground the study included both descriptive and substantive forms of representation. However, the analysis of the chapter shows that in the context of ethnic movement and through the activism of women's organisations neither descriptive nor substantive representation for women seems to have been realised. The state of women's representation has been such that, neither women could stand on behalf of the identity they belong to, identity based on sex, nor could they reflect on the interest of women in a substantive way in the bodies of decision making. This is specific to the question of political representation, without negating the contribution of women's organisations in other spheres. Hence, the hypotheses laid down in the beginning of the chapter seem to have got proven to a larger extent, though there has been sporadic effort of the organisations to challenge the political arrangements that denies representation to women.

CHAPTER V

Contradiction between Group Identity and Women's Question in Assam

5.1 Introduction

When individual identity is linked to the affiliations and belongingness to certain group based identity stemming from categories such as caste, ethnicity, religion etc and becomes an important factor for determining individual's life chance and choices, it is unlikely that these group identities will have equal positioning in a hierarchical society, such as India. Therefore inequalities stemming from these divisions and group identities are nothing but a reality and thus also have definite impact on shaping individual identity. Such a situation has been dealt with within a liberal democracy and equality is ensured by creating a common identity of individuals by conferring citizenship rights. The citizenship identity as the primary identity not only offers equality but also a promise of justice within the democratic framework. However, such principles of justice and equality have been compromised on various context of its application and one such example of compromise of citizenship rights is based on gender discrimination where in women citizens do not enjoy the fruit of such equality because they belong to a particular sex. The undermining of the promise of equality has also been the product of perceiving citizenship as part of the masculine nationalist ideology and functioning of the nation as an extension of family, community and other such structures. Therefore, women's belonging to the nation is mediated by their belonging to those communities and such other structures. "Instead of offering an alternative space, the nation often simply functions as an extension of family, caste, and community structures and defines women as belonging in the same way as their structures. This definition of belonging is contradictory, implying both 'affiliated with' and 'owned by'. The first interpretation connotes voluntary, participatory membership; the second a secondary, functionalist, and symbolic status" (Rajan 1999).

While understanding women in relation to communities and as defined by the nationalist project these kinds of distinctions are not looked into because "social and

political order is defined through women's ownership by and place in structures of family and community" (Sen, 2000:3). If the state functions as an extension of families and communities, the formal equality provided by the constitution will remain only at the formal level, as these structures are already rooted in gender inequality. Moreover, when groups/communities already based on gender inequality are conferred with special group rights, there is possibility of deepening of such inequalities. Such special rights are crucially dependent on maintaining certain special characteristics of the groups and onus to maintain the same would be given to women which will lead to such groups having stricter codes for women for the preservation of cultural and religious practices. Having pointed out the inequalities rooted into the composition of groups and communities and the conferring special rights as antithetical to gender equality, one cannot lose the sight of the fact that there are certain justifiable grounds for demanding such group based rights.

The unequal position of groups has also been rooted in the question of justice as some groups are pushed to a marginalized position and their identities are not recognized and members of such groups feel discriminated because of non-recognition of their group identity in the public sphere. Therefore, the space of the contestations is defined on the one hand by the idea of individual rights and equality, women's rights per se, which are affected by the mediation gendered communities and on the other, there is demand of group rights. However, the context of this study has presented a picture where women's activism has been directed towards demand of group specific rights rather than urging for gender equality which differs from position of women's movement in India, which urges upon the state to legislate on the cultural, religious and other practices of the communities that leads to curtailment of women's rights. This study has been based on understanding women's activism within the context of demand of group rights and how have women negotiated a space of their own rights within such structure.

The unfolding of contestations between individual vs group rights, pertaining to the rights of women, has largely been concentrated in the debate of uniform civil code and personal laws with religious sanctions in India. However, such kind of contradiction has also been rooted in other areas as well, for example customary laws and ethnicity and

the later has been the focus of the study. The debate of uniform civil code and personal laws has undergone various stages and developments within it which has left many questions unresolved. The attempt to bring about uniform civil code needs to be seen in the backdrop of constitutional provisions and the idea of gender equality. The question of gender equality and constitutional provisions has been pointed out by Samita Sen in the following manner:

First, the right to religion, especially of minorities, was protected as a fundamental right against state intervention, but it was not clear whether personal laws were included in “religion”. Second, protection against sexual discrimination was included as a fundamental right, but it was not clear how gender equality could be squared against discrimination in personal laws. Third, an anomalous relationship among women’s status, personal laws, minority rights, and citizenship rights was set up (Sen, 2000:28).

Therefore, it is essentially important to understand that debates of individual and group rights is a complex and multilayered one and reflective of how different hierarchies interact with each other to assign different positions to men and women. “The disparities in our hierarchical society are endemic, and they become more complex as hierarchies of gender intersect with hierarchies of class, caste and ethnicity, in addition to regional variations. Personal Laws based on religion, and at present continuing under the cover of freedom of religion hold women’s lives in their octopus like grip, controlling issues of marriage, divorce, guardianship, adoption, maintenance and property” (Desai & Thakkar, 2001:122-123).

5.2 Exploring the Contradiction

This study has located such a debate, not within religious practices of communities, rather on ethnic formations emphasizing on the cultural distinctiveness and demands of group specific rights including self governing rights. The multiethnic societies, such as Assam is caught into a situation where ethnic hierarchies put ethnic groups in varied positions and those who feel discriminated in various spheres demand for recognition and group specific rights. Thus, ethnicity no longer remains confined to preservation of group distinctness but an important mechanism to pursue interests, especially political interest.

At the same time, such ethnic compositions and hierarchies interact with gender hierarchies in the society. Therefore, this study has focused on analyzing the contradiction between ethnic identity and women's question in the context of Assam and the focal point of reference has remained the articulation of women's issues, negotiation of gender relations within the space of ethnic identity or demand and concession of group rights. The emphasis on ethnicity as a tool to pursue interest also creates two significant situations, firstly, it puts the ethnic group, who are also numerically in a minority position into a conflicting relation with the majority group, and secondly, it also puts them in conflict with other ethnic minorities in the similar context. The concession of group rights to one group is received with much unease by other demanding groups and intensification of demands on their part is also witnessed. This makes the ethnic situation volatile and foregrounding of women's issues in such a conflict of group rights has been focused in this study.

In Assam, rights demanding ethnic groups have largely organized themselves in some form of identity movements and aimed at political gain or self governing rights apart from preservation and recognition of ethnic identity. Therefore, this study has focused on the women's issues within such identity movements not only to understand women's activism within the same but also to enquire into approach to women's question within the understanding of political representation. The gender perspective of identity movements, which is otherwise a neglected and understudied area, has been taken for investigation, as women are also stake holders of preservation of such identities which do not address the inequalities of existing gender relation within such identity constructions. At the same time the contradiction between ethnic identity and women's questions has been studied through women's stake in political structures as the outcome of the part of the identity movements. Such contradiction has been reflected through the activism of women's organisations formed within identity movements.

Ethnic contradictions and women's questions become essentially important to understand because of the way ethnic resources such as language, culture, religion etc, are utilized to define ethnic identity and at the same time create appropriate ways of

behavior in order to maintain ethnic boundaries which have been more sharply visible in case of women. However, to what extent women are able to utilize those ethnic resources for their interest promotion has remained a crucial issue. “Ethnic groups involve the positing of boundaries in relation to who can and cannot belong according to certain parameters which are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from the credentials of birth to being born in the right place, conforming to cultural or other symbolic practices, language, and very centrally behaving in sexually appropriate ways” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989, 1992: 3). These boundaries are important to be maintained as they involve not only ideological but also material practices. On the basis of the boundaries the space for bargaining and negotiation is created, and from within that space demands are made to get their identity recognised in the public sphere. These boundaries are also important in order to exhibit the distinctness of the members of the group, which is more or less exclusive. Within these boundaries certain worldviews are created which are expected to be endorsed by the group members. This kind of cohesion is necessary in order to gain support for movement of identity within the members of the group.

Despite the presence of certain amount of fluidity in terms of flow of people beyond boundaries there is maintenance of ethnic boundaries to a larger extent as these boundaries are marked by the uniqueness of the practices of ethnic groups, especially cultural practices. In Assam major ethnic groups have maintained their boundaries which have worked as defining factors in the identity movements, even if certain fluidities existed in the ethnic boundaries. Cultural practices are unique to ethnic groups and thus maintenance of boundaries largely depends on maintenance of those cultural practices. Therefore, Fredrik Barth argues that “ethnic boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. Cultural differences can persist despite inter ethnic contact” (Barth, 1967:9-10). However, ethnic identities or group identities are arranged in such a way that the onus of maintaining ethnic boundaries and cultural practices is assigned to women.

The belongingness to an ethnic group, not only means the membership of the group, but also the right to use the ethnic resources of the same. These resources can be

used by the members of the group to pursue their interests on individual level or in relation to some other groups. It involves a political dimension, meaning those resources may be used for separate political structure, increases in representation or territorial autonomy, and hence ethnicity also involves the process of state creation. However, the kind of ethnic resources utilized for achievement of the interest of the ethnic group depends on the context of its application and its effectiveness in that particular context. In the particular case of Assam, there has been use of language and culture in an effective way to pursue political goal. Historically the idea of Assamese nationalism and the supposed hegemony of the middle and the ruling class have also been re-established through utmost importance to language in the post independence period which is in continuation with the pre-independence era where language nationalism occupied a substantial portion in politics of Assam.

The study has focused on the aspect of understanding how the role of women has been shaped within such ethnic identity or group identity and whether they have access to the ethnic resources to be utilized for their interest or merely reduced to remaining at the level of constantly reproducing and maintaining boundaries of ethnic identity. “Women are often central in ethnic and national reproduction and transformation, not only as biological reproducers of the members of the group, or central in the transmission of its cultural artefacts, but also as markers of the boundaries of collectivities” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989, 1992: 7). However, this work focuses on the activism of women within the identity movements to understand whether there can be any alteration to the specific role of women in the ethnic design and it has been witnessed that women have utilized the space of movements to raise their issues which does not necessarily mean they could utilize the ethnic resources to make substantial gain for themselves. Through the study of women’s organisation it has also been enquired how women were drawn within the identity movements and creation of a space for their activism, which was much related to giving a mass character to the movement and making women the bearer of ethnic identity to gain acceptability of different demands, including political one pursued by the identity movements. Having constructed in such a manner within the identity of

the group, it is also very essential to understand how women perceive themselves within those identities and this study has focused on that perspective as well.

5.3 Findings and Suggestions

Within the contestations and convergence of individual and group rights, this study has been conducted to understand the gender perspective of identity movements through the study of women's organisations located/formed within the identity movements in the particular context of Assam. Although the women's organisations are caught up in its own paradoxes, this study has attempted to situate them in the larger context of claims of group rights and women's questions in relation to such claims. From the understanding of women's organisations and their space of activism, the nature of women's movement or how the idea of 'women's movement' is constructed and have developed in the context of Assam has also constituted important part of the study. Therefore, the contextualization of the three organisations under the study within the movements for nationalist aspirations or for group identity and ethnic aspirations is precisely an understanding of women's movement in a particular way of its development in terms of their attachments with other larger movements.

The historical context of the first organisation, which has also been traced as the history of women's movement in Assam, was the nationalist movement, thus establishes a relation with the pan Indian phenomenon which reflects the historical linkage of India's women's movement to the social reform and the nationalist movement. The study shows that there is a constant attachment of women's movements with the larger entity of new social movements, specifically identity movements, or ethnic based identity movements in Assam and the separation of women's movement from such other movements for community rights has not been a reality and that becomes the context for articulating women's questions and also the reason for they being pushed to the periphery. The understanding of such peculiar nature of women's movement becomes essentially important as the shared space for activism of group rights and women's question has not been utilized in the direction of development of autonomous women's movement. The detachment of women's organisations from other movements has in fact pushed them

into a vulnerable position. Therefore, the attachment of women's movement has not decreased over the years, if not increased, with certain exceptions of existence of women's organisations outside such movements. The exploration of the history of feminist movements in the initial period of its development also reflects the association with other movements for democratic rights. However, if such spaces become non conducive for negotiation of women's rights, it is essentially important to create the space of one's own activism, which has not been a strong phenomenon in case of Assam. The study also shows that the creation of women's organisations within the space of the movements for the promotion of the cause of the movement, which has explicitly been seen in case of AJMP and ABWWF pose as a constraint for their independent entity. AJMP became defunct few years after Assam Movement whereas the ABWWF has continued with its welfare activities but not being able to strongly challenge and realize the power relations embedded in the idea of group rights.

While contextualizing women's organisations for undertaking the study, the understanding of societal context is deemed to be important. The investigation of organizing principles of societies/ communities and practices provided the ground for understanding the engagement of women in the public sphere through the organisations. The study shows that one of the important reasons for women not occupying a vital place in studies of ethnicity is certain myths created about women's position in the societies under the study. This has also remained the reason behind ignoring the patriarchal practices within communities and ethnic movements. The myths that have been created around the lives of women present a picture of gender equality by putting a veil on the deep rooted patriarchal practices. The different nature of patriarchy in a particular context has been brought out through the study. The spheres in which gender equality have been presented are conditioned by various other factors. The ways in which the socio-economic lives are arranged in these societies demanded the women to be part of activities beyond the domestic sphere. The activities performed in the public sphere were extension of the domestic activities and power of decision making to a larger extent lay with men. Therefore, mobility in the socio-economic sphere can be taken as a condition

of achieving gender equality, but the constraints related to such mobility has to be taken into consideration for any claims of gender equality.

One of the major findings of the study has been that the activism of women's organisations to articulate women's issues is mediated through the concern of group identity. Women's socio-economic issues were raised in relation to the awareness and cohesion needed for the movement. At the same time the problems faced by the women were placed in a comparative perspective of the dominant group. This has been particularly reflected in case of ABWWF. Women's issues regarding violence and atrocities were related to the dominance of the 'outsiders' and owning self governing rights was seen as recourse to such violence against women. At the same time the alteration of the egalitarian principle of societal life of Bodo society and hence creating gender discrimination has also been devoted to the minority and marginalized position of the Bodo community and influence of the outside culture. However, what it fails to capture in a substantive way is the gender relations within the community. ABWWF has taken the social evils of Bodo society as the major area of their activism without seriously engaging with the question of alteration of power relations. At the same time it has been established that due to their rootedness in the issue of group identity, their struggle for equal political rights and property rights for women could not become a serious threat to political institutions and leadership. The study brings out the various contradictions women's organisations' encounter in their sphere of activism.

In the context of the study it has come out that the space of women's activism is a part of the shared space where many other actors are also involved. Women's organisations' that have been studied in the particular context function within that shared space, which is also space for demand of community rights (including self governing rights), of bargaining with the state, and also the one leading to the creation of new governments, political structures and political parties. Therefore, women's questions are raised with contestations and negotiation with the other actors and the power relations that operate within that space is such that it constrains women's activism and allows only that part which is for pursuance of larger political demands of the group.

The space within which women's organisations were rooted cannot be only seen as a restricted space, but also a space of mobilization providing women the agency to articulate their interest. The first organisation APMS despite having attachment with the nationalist movement came up initially to oppose the confinements that the Assamese women faced due to the prevalence of various customs and traditions, which prevented women to be visible in the public spheres. Its formation also was influenced by rise of various other organisations in Assam which had an agenda of promoting Assamese nationalism. The drawing of women to the public sphere was channelized through this first all Assam women's organisation. However, its association with the nationalist movement diverted the course of women's mobilization to the direction of nationalist consciousness and the process of drawing more women to the public sphere intensified. However, after the nationalist movement there is visible withdrawal of women from public sphere and rather than pursuing any political aspiration and radical goal there was a shift by this organisation towards purely welfare programmes for women. Non pursuance of political goal, indifference to women's political role and unwilling to be branded as having 'political' inclination, have been part of the activism of women's organisations, with the exception of ABWWF to a certain extent. Convinced of a different nature and goal of women's movement, the role of women's organisations itself is rooted in the public private distinction, specifically in case of politics. Therefore, the study has come out with the understanding that women's activism in the political sphere is sporadic, but not continuous.

The identity movements, which are the sites of women's activism, have created a ground for women's mobilization and public visibility. However, the study also understands this space as a site of withdrawal of women's activism and falling back to the private sphere. The unfolding of the activism of the second organisation, AJMP in the context of Assam movement bears testimony to the fact that women's activism saw the path of withdrawal aftermath of the movement and as a large number of women's groups and organisations operating within the movement struggled to sustain its independent existence. In this context the study also reveals that women's mobilization and women's question could not transcend the group identity for promotion of women's question.

Therefore, the phase of mobilization has been followed by the phase of withdrawal from the public space. However, in case of the Bodo women, the public visibility has remained a constant phenomenon, not because of the exclusive activities of the ABWWF is, but women in tribal societies enjoy certain socio-economic visibility which is specially linked to the agricultural activities they undertake, which may not be so visible in case of the caste societies.

The women's organisations, except the first one, study of which was much concerned with the displaying of the historical continuation of attachment of women's organisations with other movements, are poised in a very particular relationship with the understanding and demands of group rights. The whole debate of individual vs group rights and the concession of group rights as opposed to gender equality, which is one of major concerns of the feminist standpoint as opposed to multicultural position, have been reflected in a very different way in case of the women's organisations, particularly AJMP and ABWWF. Group rights were demanded within the existing gender inequalities that were part of the functioning in the intra group dealings. However, women became party to such demands and were convinced of the fact that it is through attainment of group rights the issues of gender inequality can also be dealt with. This position was sharply reflected in the activism of ABWWF. The whole distinction of 'external protections' and 'internal restrictions' (Kymlicka, 1995: 33) has been framed in such a way that the later was conveniently ignored to promote the first. Therefore, women's questions succumbed to the pressure of group rights and whatever little spaces were conceded for mobilization of women were far from having any substantial impact on existing gender inequalities.

This study has attempted to establish a relationship between the issues of women's participation and political representation to analyze whether such participation has contributed in generation of equal representation of women in the bodies of decision making. The concept of participation has been understood within the idea of group identity, wherein ethnic based identities have shaped the participation of women for promotion of such identities. At the same time activities of women's organisations' have contributed towards further intensification of such participation, but not to the

achievement of substantial representation of women. Women's participatory role and public visibility does not seem to have impacted on the question of political equality or women's political rights. In the analysis of the chapter four which specifically dealt with the question of representation, it has been seen that there exist contradictory positions in women's organisations' approach to the question of women's representation. For example the first organisation APMS has a very different and self contradictory position in the question of women's representation. Although in principle it believes in equal representation of women, but hardly visualizes any serious political role for women. The distinction of women's issues from political issues has been very distinct and sharp in this case where they also seem to have accepted 'natural disinterest' of women in politics and has also established a relationship between women's disinterest in politics and reproduction and family system.

On the other hand the question of representation is thought to be very crucial in regard to the other two organisations namely AJMP and ABWWF because of the fact that the movements these organisations were rooted in were followed by creation of new political structures. Therefore, the study considered it essentially important to relate the women's organisations to the issue of women's representation. AJMP made a necessary link between participation and representation by focusing on the aspect women be awarded representation as part of their contribution towards the cause of the community and the movement, without even making any specific demand for it. However AJMP to a larger extent could not visualize and challenge the power relations unfolding within the movement which finally culminated at the level of representation in the aftermath of the movement, denying women their due in the political space. It is only in the aftermath of the movement when the new government was formed by the movement leaders it came out in the wide open the kind of denial women were meted with in terms of their representation in the government. The foundation of the disenchantment with the movement was laid down when women were denied representation in the new government, which has been reflected through the narratives of the women leaders of the movement.

The approach of ABWWF appears to be more progressive while dealing with the question of women's representation. Despite taking recourse in welfare activities and not aggressively pursuing political goals, it has shown a consistent engagement with the question of women's political equality and in fact gone to the extent of posing a counter to the existing political arrangement by supporting an independent candidate as a counter to the ruling party candidate. Although such efforts have very much been conditioned by concern for group identity and have succumbed to the power relations within the community and the state power, ABWWF has shown much optimism in realizing and demanding women's political equality. The ABWWF while claiming and maintaining a non-political status has not kept itself alienated from political issues. Therefore, one can establish a link between women's issues and political issues in the third women's organisations although much of its activities are directed in the socio-economic sphere.

The contradiction between ethnic identity and women's question is a multifaceted one. The centrality of women's position in the ethnic discourse has been largely understood as having instrumentalist utility as bringing cohesion within ethnic group to pursue various interests needs the visibility of women not only as the custodian of distinct culture, but also as those who becomes conscious about the threat to identity, sense of discrimination and marginalization in the larger societal context and contribute towards the effort to preserve and protect identity vis-à-vis other groups. This awakening of consciousness has largely been a male articulated one and the agenda for ethnic assertion has also been set by the male leadership in terms of the use of various ethnic resources and women become the agents to carry forward such project. The context of Assam Movement presents a picture of threat of illegal immigrants to Assamese identity and ethnic resources such as culture and language has been invoked to challenge such threat and women were drawn and made part of the public space to carry forward the cause of the community. The narratives and experiences of the women involved in the Assam movement bears the testimony of the leadership provided by the males and women responded to their calls and agendas. The similar analogy has also been drawn in case of the Bodo community which felt cultural domination and socio-economic discrimination and thus again invoked ethnic resources not only to protect identity but

also to demand group rights. The way the role of women being shaped in the public sphere as an extension of the role of the private as the custodian of the cultural reproduction of group identity is indicative of the instrumentalist aspect of women's participation.

It has also been witnessed that how a very crucial historical moment got succumbed to the gendered power relations operative at the level of communities, movements and political institutions. The massive mobilization of women in the Assam movement can be seen as an important historical moment of unprecedented visibility of women in the public sphere. Although that sphere was tied with domestic sphere and group identity, the visibility itself was a defining moment for women. But the majority of women succumbed to the power relations within and outside the movement and rolled back to their domestic sphere. But the pivotal role they were capable of playing in politics fell prey to the power relations and gender discrimination.

Ethnicity with its dependence on the idea of distinctness leads to the constructions of categories such as 'self' and 'other' and the women's issues were also linked to the process of the othering. Therefore, the maintenance of 'self' becomes crucial as the perceived threat to the self has also been seen as threat to women and to address women's issues the distinctness of the self, that is the ethnic group has been considered as primary. Women's issues were seen as part of the group relations which are based on hierarchy and domination. The women's organisations have also endorsed to the notion that group rights may be a viable solution to women's issues, without addressing the question of 'internal minorities'. Issues such as sexual harassment have also been largely located within the understanding of the position of their group within the existing social hierarchy. The position of ABWWF in this study has been reflective of the fact that not only they preferred group rights over women's rights, but also considered themselves to be the agents of maintaining the distinct culture of the group. Thus the space of ethnic assertion has been used by the male leadership in order to reinforce the existing gender relations and women's organisations consciously or unconsciously became part of these

reinforcement. However, the organisation's attempts at working for the welfare of women could not challenge these gendered provisions of the society.

While undertaking the research and investigating the activism of women's organisations, the researcher has identified certain limitations of the organisations which need to be addressed. Hence, the researcher proposes certain suggestions which may be considered for incorporation in the activities of the women's organisations. Though this study has identified the limitations of the organisations, it does not negate the fact that these organisations have achieved some degree of success in addressing the women's issues. As regard to the first organisation, there is need to inculcate a more radical approach while dealing with question of women's rights. Women's issues need to be related with the larger issues of the society, including political. By remaining away from larger political issues and not pursuing decision making power women's prospects in other spheres may be adversely impacted. Therefore, women's organisations in its dealings with the State should be more aggressive to make demands on the State for expansion of economic advantages and representation.

The second organisation suffers from question of existence. This has happened due to its inability of completely detaching itself from the Assam Movement in the post movement period. Thus, the revival of organisation will depend on having an autonomous stand to pursue women's question. The next generation of leadership will not look for living in the moment of the movement, but to have a larger agenda for women's rights. Therefore, to acquire autonomous character would be one of the major boosts up for the revival of this organisation. The study has found the approach of the third organisation to be more radical in comparison to the first two because of the approach it has adopted for addressing women's question. But there is need of further activism in the political field and the bargaining with the State needs to be more rigorous than sporadic. It is also needed on part of the women's organisations to address the sustainability of the programmes and activities it has undertaken in the socio-economic sphere. In the visit to one of weaving centers established by APMS, it has been witnessed that due to the lack of fund, the centre was not functioning. The motive of providing

women with economic empowerment or skill based training would not generate fruitful results if the financial conditions remain deplorable. The organisations may make strong demand on the state for financial aid to run the programs for women's welfare, rather than depending on the welfare schemes of the Government.

The women's organisations are marked by stronger ties with their group identities, question of women's rights needs to be segregated from group rights in certain context. Having accepted the importance of group rights the women's organisations must also understand the individual rights are not compromised. Therefore, beyond the ties of group identity, a larger networking of women's organisations may help in addressing the women's issues in a better way. Though women's movement cannot claim homogeneity in its nature and women placed in varied societies will have issues peculiar to those societies, there are certain common grounds where women's organisations may have a collective stand.

5.4 Limitations and Scope for further Research

The objectives laid down in the beginning of the research are indicative of the fact that, this research has dealt with a variety of issues. Hence it cannot claim to have touched every aspect of the larger issues it is trying to address. This leaves a lot of scope for further research in this area. Similar research in this area has not been undertaken on a large scale and therefore, this study may claim to have opened up certain questions and debates to be addressed in future research. The opening of a variety of issues and debates related to women in this region may be considered one of the contributions the study has attempted to make in the larger body of knowledge. For instance contextualization of the larger debate of individual and group rights in relation to women's organisations has opened up the scope for further theorization of such issues.

Each woman's organisation and movement may be studied separately to understand the dynamics in a much detailed way. Each of the study has the potentiality of constituting a major research work. The location of women within societies/ communities also presents a scope of future research. Women may be studied within the dynamics and

practices within the society, without concentrating on a comparison with another society. The comparative analysis brings on certain limitations on the understanding the dynamics within. For example, women in tribal societies needs to be understood within the ethos governing the same and not by the one set by a caste society. Therefore, to understand the interplay of various factors within communities to determine the question of gender equality constitutes another scope of further research in this area. The reinventing of history of women's movement and organisations may be another way of engaging into this are of study. During the course of this research work, many vital historical accounts were collected with extensive library work and from individual collections of some people. This may be considered one of the contributions of the research work conducted. However, there is a lot of scope in reinventing the history of women's movement in this part of the country.

Conclusion

This work has undertaken the task of understanding the gender perspective of ethnic/identity movements and politics from the standpoint of the women's organisations formed within the movements. In the backdrop of the larger framework of the tussle between Individual and group rights within liberal democracies, the ethnic based identity movements and women's organisations have been studied by investigating the issues of women's participation in the movements and their political representation within the structures created aftermath of the movements. More than having a general understanding of the issue of political representation, it has been understood through the approach of the women's organisations. The engagement with the women's organisations aimed at understanding women's identity through the larger identity of the community or groups of their location and the controlled patriarchal environment they operate. This work claims to have offered, to a certain extent, an alternative understanding of the ethnic based identity movements and politics not from the dominant perspective, but from the perspective of the women, which otherwise has been a neglected area of research. The context of the study has been the identity movements in Assam and the women's organisations formed within these movements. All the major chapters of the study have been largely concentrated around these issues.

The first chapter titled "*Exploring the Theoretical Framework*" attempted at developing a larger theoretical framework within which the issues that have been taken up for investigation were fore grounded. Due to the multiple issues addressed by the work in relation to a particular context, the engagement with a particular theory would not have been a very fruitful approach to undertake the same. The chapter has opened up the debate between individual and group rights which has been regarded as one of the prime challenges confronting the liberal democratic states of the west. The same kind of challenge confronting the Indian state despite the attempt to strike a balance between individual and group rights through the Indian Constitution has also been highlighted in the chapter. The essentiality of understanding women's position in any society through their relation to the multiple group identities and use of such identities to pursue other

interests has been focused in developing the theoretical framework of the study. The chapter therefore engages itself in understanding the ethnic based group identities with a conceptual understanding of 'ethnicity' and its application in the particular context of the study. At the same time as the issue of political representation has been evoked, this chapter also undertakes the theoretical concerns relating to the concept of representation. Therefore, the broader theoretical framework that has been taken up includes the debates of individual and group rights, ethnicity as a marker of group identity and a tool to pursue group rights and the concept of political representation for women located within the construction of such group identity.

The second chapter "*Myth and Reality of Gender Equality in the Societies of Northeastern Region of India*" introduces the context of the study in a detailed manner by emphasizing on the women and community relationship in the societies of Northeastern region of India. This chapter has explored how women's identity is constructed and deconstructed through the communities they are located in and therefore status and position of women vary according to the organizing principles of the communities and societies. The chapter has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the myths and realities of gender equality in the societies of Northeastern region to display the discrepancy in the representation of women in these societies. The eulogization of gender equality in these societies is a myth veiled under the deep rooted patriarchal practices, which may differ from the standard norms of defining patriarchal practices in relation to other parts of the country. The chapter further explores the role of women in the defense of their communities and such act of defense has been focused through the active role played by women in various movements. Starting with the nationalist movement the role of women has been located in the identity movement of the region, especially in Assam. It reflects how women have been allocated a specific role within the movements that is not sharply different from the already existing gender roles. The drawing and participation of women are clubbed with the purpose of creating a mass base for the movements, which may or may not create a space for mobilization of women's question.

The third chapter “*Movements, Organisations and Locations of Women: The case of Assam*” concerns itself with the case study analysis of the work. It has been mentioned earlier that the multiple issues the study is addressing is channelized through certain women’s organisations located within the space of ethnic based identity movements in Assam. The chapter in its first section explores the history of women’s organisations in India and then proceeded for presenting such history in the context of Assam. This particular chapter introduces the case studies of the work by putting the three women’s organisation namely Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS), Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP) and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in their historical contexts. The revisiting of the historical context has been undertaken in order to situate the women’s organisations in relation to a particular movement. Along with the contextualization of women’s organisations within the space of ethnic movements, the study has explored the women’s questions through the activities of the women’s organisations to create a space for itself in the larger movements for community rights. The space of the women’s organisations has been identified as the one where women’s activities are concentrated in socio-economic and political advancement of women, despite having a larger agenda of the ethnic movement they are attached with. The second part of the chapter was mainly concentrated in analyzing the collected data through interview schedule from the women leaders and members of the organisations in order to investigate the areas where these organisations are making impact in raising women’s question. Through the individual and comparative analysis of the women’s organisations it has been noticed that women’s organisations have been successful to certain extent to create a space for articulation of women’s issues within the lager space of the identity movements. But the maintenance of such space aftermath of the movement has become an issue of concern where a major variation has been witnessed in the individual cases.

The fourth chapter “*Understanding Participation and Political Representation: the Women’s Question in Assam*” takes forward the analysis of the third chapter with specific concentration on the question of political representation for women. The activities of the women’s organisations in the socio-economic sphere which have been

analyzed in the third chapter have now been enlarged to the political sphere to undertake the investigation about the approach of the women's organisations towards the question of political equality for women. The rationale behind putting the women's organisations within the larger question of women's political equality lies in the fact that these organisations have created a certain space for their activities within the space of identity movements, which has been consolidated through their socio-economic activities to provide larger visibility to women in the public sphere, but while dealing with the question of women's representation, the restricted space of their activity is clearly visible. Apart from the ABWWF, the other two organisations suffer from a serious sense of withdrawal from the political question, though ABWWF also is not in a position to claim their substantial success in addressing the question of women's representation despite their engagement with the same. What explains such kind of situation has largely been taken up by this particular chapter in its analysis. The analysis of each organisation separately and the comparative analysis has opened up certain areas of great concern where women's entry into politics has been largely related to the traditional gender role of women and there are various instances of women's organisations preferring community rights over women's equality. The larger question is not only the visibility or presence of women in the decision making bodies but also how the existing gender relations are deeply rooted and at times endorsed by the women's organisations. The question of political equality has been conveniently ignored within the movement and also in the structures of political power created aftermath of the movement as a response to the demands of enlarging the ambit of group rights. Therefore, whatever efforts have gone into addressing the issue of women's political representation has hardly any impact on the existing gender relations. The chapter also concerns itself with understanding the viewpoints of the beneficiaries of the organisations or the common members of the organisations. The emphasis of the work has been understanding the narratives and experiences of the leaders of the women's organisations related to their two fold participation in the movements, firstly as member of the community involved in the question of group rights and secondly as the leaders of the women's organisations with an agenda of articulating women's question. These organisations were put both in the

historical context of their formation and also their activities in the present context. The section on the responses of the beneficiaries and common members of the organisation has been focused on to understand the areas that women's organisations have successfully intervened and left impact on as part of their effort to articulate women's questions.

Drawing from the major chapters on historical and quantitative analysis the fifth chapter "*Contradiction between Group Identity and Women's Question in Assam*" includes the larger question of contradictions that have come up while trying to understand the ethnic movement and women's question in the context of Assam. This chapter focuses on the multiple layers involved in understanding such contradictions. There also exists sites of convergence between ethnic identity and women's question, but it has largely been a site, which is entangled within the conflicts of individual and group rights. The attempt to establish a link between women's participation in ethnic based identity movements and the issue of women's political representation through the women's organisation has opened up the multiple issues to be addressed in order to undertake this kind of a study. The study has largely come up with the fact that participation hardly comes with guarantee of ensuring representation to women. Women's participation is also conditioned by a particular framework mediated by the norms of the communities.

Participation has been inflicted in the bodies of women in different ways. The cultural codes become stricter on women as they are used as the marker of the distinctiveness of the community. On the other hands their bodies also become site of violence. At the same time the non-translation of participation into women's representation reveals the uncomfortable relation between ethnic politics and women's representation. Ethnic groups that demands equality with other groups, take a very hostile stand while coming to the question of women's equality, which is indicative of the lack of internal equality within the composition of communities that more or less functions through established gender relations. However, there is no denial of the participatory space gained by the women through women's organisations which not only paved the way for mobilization of

women in the public sphere and articulation of women's question. The constant denial of decision making power to women not only questions the efforts of the women's organisations but also the myth of better status and position of women in this part of the country. The patriarchal set up the societies have very strategically made a space for women to play their public role as mothers, daughters and sisters, for making peace within conflicting communities, and their role has been used by the male leadership for gaining more ground in the ethnic politics.

The alternative understanding of identity politics from a gender perspective underlines the fact that in the evolution of politics/ethnic politics in this region, especially in the state of Assam, gender relations play vital role, though it has been totally unacknowledged. The importance of gender relations in shaping political power of the region has been subdued under the glorification of socio-economic mobility and role of peacemaking of the women of this region. At the same time inadequate attention has been paid to the fact that the civic space of women's visibility is the space which has been taken as an extension of the domestic sphere, and in no way threatens patriarchal power of the community and the state, not to talk about the family. Even for that matter, women's organisations are also regarded as civil society organisations which do not have any political significance. The economic mobility of women and their greater visibility in the public has been used as indicators to define gender equality and egalitarian nature of these societies, which were again accused of being transformed into patriarchal one by the entry of the modern institutions. However, there is lack of substantial evidence to argue that these societies were free from gender discrimination. The traditional institutions, customary laws bear evidences of gender based inequalities in these societies. The women's organisations are located within that space where revision of gender role is a very difficult task, because despite patriarchy is inherent in communities and State institutions the myth of equality has been quite strong. This research work does not claim to have touched every aspect of understanding gender perspective of ethnic movements in Assam and is not free from its own limitations. But it has opened up certain crucial issues and questions which may become subject of further research.

Notes

ⁱ The concept of internal restrictions has been used by Kymlicka in order to respond to the critiques of group rights. Internal restrictions indicate the means of control within a community in the context of group rights.

ⁱⁱ The principle of 'benign neglect' has been used to mean a stronger notion than state neutrality towards various ethno-religious diversity. See Kymlicka, 2002: 343-44 for further explanation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Provisions of group rights in Indian Constitution are enumerated in Articles 25-28 and Article s29 and 30. For further explanation see Basu, 2011: 119-123

^{iv} Liberal notion of individualism has been based on an abstract notion which indicates the liberty, equality and rationality of individuals who are stripped of any ascribed or hierarchical identity.

^v The identity movements in this context have been referred to the movements for demand of various group rights in the Northeastern region of India and Assam primarily on the basis of ethnicity. It has been discussed in the subsequent chapters in details

^{vi} Identity politics has been referred to as utilization of ethnicity as a tool to pursue group interest and gain access to political power.

^{vii} For further explanation see Phillips, 1991

^{viii} The feminist movement developed in the west in the initial period faced criticisms for trying to present women as a homogenous category. The discrimination faced by women depends on the context of the societies. Though certain discriminations are commonly encountered by women of all societies, but experience and practice of patriarchy varies from society to society.

^{ix} There is no unanimity amongst scholars regarding definition of 'Nation'. The different definition of Nation is discussed in the writings of Anthony. D Smith (1987), Benedict Anderson (1983). For further explanation refer to the section on gender and nation in the chapter 1 of this work.

^x In this context the usage of the term has been in relation to how each community has a specific role and space assigned to women. Women are supposed to behave and conduct their lives according to the norms of the society and conform to its notion of "ideal women" often related to women's role in the private sphere and reproduction of cultural identity of the community.

^{xi} The reformer saint who brought liberal brand of Vaishnavism in the Brahmaputra valley

^{xii} The process of formation of identity has been complex. In this context this identity has largely been seen as the part of consolidation of Assamese nationalism through linguistic nationalism led by the educated middle class of the Brahmaputra valley

^{xiii} Bodo women represent the women of the largest plain tribe in Assam

^{xiv} A famous literature of Assam, who has depicted the picture rural Assam and its women in various short stories

^{xv} This Novel is a depiction of the life of a young upper caste widow who has been secluded in the society.

^{xvi} Established by the Ahom rulers in Assam who came crossing the Paktai range to Assam and belonged to the Thai Shan Tribe

^{xvii} The text taken from the newspaper has been translated by the author.

^{xviii} Pushpalata Das, Swadhinata Andolanat Axomor Mohilar Bhumika, published in Satxori Magazine of 1987, 23-27 has explanation of Gandhi's visit to Tezpur, Assam.

^{xix} This work of Sakiani can be regarded as one of the historic document on women's movement in Assam and the portion which has been referred in the study has been translated by the author

^{xx} The objectives of the Constitution of APMS have been translated by the author.

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Interview Schedule

SECTION A

Personal Information

Name:

Age

Occupation

Educational qualification

Organizational Affiliation

Office Bearer/ Movement leader/ Common member/Beneficiary

General Information

- 1 Name of the Organization/ Movement
- 2 History of the organization
- 3 Aims and objective of the Organization
- 4 Structure and Leadership of the organization.

SECTION B: Common Questions

1. In Assam women have been participating in various mass movements from the time of the nationalist movement, do you think their participation changes their role in different spheres of life/gender relations? (explained as socio-economic, political spheres)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

d) Can't say/Don't Know

2. Do you think women's issues are political issues?

a) Yes

b) No

d) Can't Say/Don't Know

3. Is politics a male dominated sphere?

a) Yes

b) No

d) Can't Say/DK

4. Do you think women should get equal representation in the legislative/decision making bodies?

a) Yes

b) No

5. Are women interested in politics?

a) Yes

b) No

d) Can't say/DK

6. Do you think men can represent the interest of women adequately in the decision making bodies/ Government?

a) Yes

b) No

d) Can't Say/DK

7. Can women represent the interest of women better than men?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- d) Can't Say

8. How do you assess the success of women's organization in addressing women's issues?

- a) Successful
- b) Somewhat successful
- c) Not so successful
- d) Can't Say/DK

SECTION C: organization specific questions

Case 1: Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS)

- 9. Being the first all Assam organization and active participant in the nationalist movement, how do you see the role of this organization in the present context?
- 10. Has socio-economic activities of the organization (as the main objectives) brought about a change in the lives of women in terms of their social and family status or led to redefinition of gender relations to some extent?
- 11. How did this organization respond to the other major movements in the post independence period? How does it relate to other women's organizations?
- 12. How does this organization work towards demanding political rights (by maintaining a non political status)?

Assam Movement/ AJMP (Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad)

- 13. How do you see the role of women in the Assam Movement?
 - a) Very important

- b) Important
 - c) Not Important
 - d) Can't Say/ Don't Know
14. Were women's issues raised during the movement?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
15. How often were they raised?
- a) Very often
 - b) Often
 - c) Not so often
16. Has mass participation of women in the Movement been able to seal a good deal for women (in terms of enhancement of socio, economic and political role)?
17. How women were motivated for mass participation and what were the activities that they participated during the movement?
18. How do you see the role of women's organization during the movement? Why have the women's organization become mostly dysfunctional after the movement?
19. What are the activities the organization was engaged in during the movement and after it?
20. Do you think that the movement was a male dominated?
21. How do you relate to other organizations, especially with tribal women's organization?

22. Did women organization/leaders raise the demand for equal representation for women in the newly formed government?
23. Were women given adequate representation in the newly formed government aftermath of the movement?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
24. Why do you think that women's organizations failed to challenge the patriarchal composition of the movement and the new government?
25. Are women willing to contest in elections?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - d) Can't Say/DK

SECTION D: All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF)

26. How do you see the role of women in Bodo movement?
- a) Very Important
 - b) Important
 - c) Not important
 - d) Can't Say/Don't Know
27. Were women's issues raised during the movement?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
28. How often were they raised?

- a) Very often
- b) Often
- c) Not so often

29. Do you agree the conditions of Bodo women has improved after the movement ?

- a) Agree
- b) Somewhat Agree
- c) Do not agree
- d) Can't Say/DK

30. In which of the following sector women's condition has improved?

- a) Family
- b) Economy
- c) Society
- e) Politics

31. What were the activities that women participated in during the movement?

32. What are the changes undergone by the organizations from the time of the movement?

33. Are community rights more important than women's right?

- a) Community Rights
- b) Women's Rights
- c) Both
- d) Can't say/DK

34. Is it the duty of women to carry forward the identity of the community?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- d) Can't Say/DK

35. How do you relate to other women organizations? How do you address the issues of non-Bodo women of the BTC area?

36. Do you think the movement was democratic or male dominated?

37. Was their demand of equal representation for women in BTC?

- a) Yes
- b) No

38. Was it granted?

- a) Yes
- b) No

39. Do they think having separate political structure for different ethnic groups help in development of the community?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- d) Can't Say/DK

40. How interested are political parties to give representation to women?

- a) Very interested
- b) Somewhat Interested
- c) Not Interested

- d) Can't Say/DK
41. Why did ABWWF not succeed in challenging patriarchal structure of both the Bodo Movement and the state institutions in a major way?
42. Are you affiliated to any political party?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
43. Are women willing to contest in the elections?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - d) Can't Say/DK

SECTION D: Questions specifically addressed to the common members/beneficiaries

APMS

44. Do you think APMS has brought changes/ differences in women's life?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) Can't Say/DK
45. If yes, in which of the following sphere changes have been witnessed?
- a) Social
 - b) Economic
 - c) Legal
 - d) Political

46. Do you think activities of APMS have brought changes in men-women relationship (read gender relations)

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Can't say/DK

ABWWF

47. Do you think ABWWF has brought changes/ differences in women's life?

- d) Yes
- e) No
- f) Can't Say/DK

48. If yes, in which of the following sphere changes have been witnessed?

- e) Family
- f) Economy
- g) society
- h) Politics

49. Do you think activities of ABWWF have brought changes in men-women relationship

- d) Yes
- e) No
- f) Can't say/DK

थनाय 31st DEC. 03 अक्ट' मोनाबिलि समाव क'क्राझार जिलानि उल्यापानि गामियाव बर' आइजोफोरनि सायाव दुखु गोनां जाथाय जानानै थाडे। 8 थि कुमाँव रेजिमेन्टनि आर्मि जवाना साबा आइजोखी ऐदिनखालि हराव जिनाहारि खालामानानै थाडे। बिसोरनि मुळ स्वर्न दैमारि (42) औवाबारि, हलासि नाजारि (45) कान्टालगुफि, मंगलति ब्रह्म (42) उल्यापानि, पारबति नाजारि (50) महेंद्रपुर, द्दि मसाहारि (20) उल्या पाचि । दायनि गिरिनि साजा आरो दुखु थियाफोरनि खहा सुफुनो थाखाय 5-1-04 आव क'क्राझारआव एबसु आरो आबोफआ ज'थै Protest Rally खुजे। लोगोआव 2-1-04 खालि आबोफआ क'क्राझार डि.सि.नि गेजेरजों आसामनि गिबि मन्त्रिनो आरो 8-1-04 खालि नेसनेल हिउमेन राइटस कमिसननिस्सिम एबसु-आबोफ ज'थै स्टेट हिउमेन राइटस कमिसननि गेजेरजों मेम'रेन्डाम दैथाय ह'रो। लोगोसे भारत सरकारनि दिफेन्स मिनिस्टर आरो हम मिनिस्टरनिस्सिमबो आलादा आलादा मेम'रेन्डाम दैथाय ह'रनाय जायो।

आनि नेहाथारिनि बिबुंसारखौ आं बेसेखिनियावनो फोजोबनो नाजाबाय। नाथाय आफादिनि हाबा मावनायाव जेब्लाइबो गोसो मोदोम होसारनानै आनि बिबान आरो बिफावखौ रेजें खालामानानै मावसोमग्रा आनि लेडाइ नेहाथारिखौ मख'अब्ला आंहा जोबोत पाप जागोन। बि अनजालि बिनानावनि मुडनो जाबाय थरायना मिथिंगा बसुमतारि आरो जेब्लाइबो सुबुरन थाइ आरो मदत होग्रा बिब', आफादिगिरि मुस्निमा जमुना रानि ब्रह्म आरो एम.एल.ए. मुस्निमा प्रमिला रानि ब्रह्म बिथामोननिस्सिम आनि सिबिनाय आरो गाहाय हामब्लायानाय बावह'रबाय।

गोजोन्थों ।

जै बर' हारिनि जै।

जै बर' बिमानि जै।

जै बर' आइजो अनसाइ आफादिनि जै।

नोंथांमोननि फोथायसुलि,

कानन बसुमतारि,

गाहाय नेहाथारि,

आबोफ

PH: 271271 (O)

OFFICE OF THE

ALL BODO WOMEN'S WELFARE FEDERATION

H.Q.- KOKRAJHAR

P.O. & Dist. Kokrajhar (Assam)

Estd.- 1986



President

Mrs. Jamuna Rani Brahma

Secretary

Mrs. Kanan Basumatary

A Memorandum to,

Sri Tarun Gogoi,

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Assam.

Dispur, Guwahati-6.

Through the Deputy Commissioner,
Kokrajhar District, Kokrajhar.

Dated: Kokrajhar, the 2nd January, 2004.

Subject :

Demand for Judicial Inquiry into the Gang Rape on Five Bodo Women by Army Jowans of 8th Kumaon Regiment at Ultapani, Kokrajhar District on 31-13-03 and Punishment of the Culprits.

Hon'ble Sir,

We, the undersigned, for and on behalf of the all Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF), have the honour to extend our Heartfelt Greetings and Best Wishes for the New Year 2004 and place the following facts for your kind consideration to take a bold action on the gangrape incident on five bold action on the gangrape incident on five Bodo women at Ultapani under Kokrajhar District, Bishmuri outpost of police on 31-12-03 by Army jowans and to punish the culprits rigorously.

That Sir, the Army jowans of the 8th Kumaon Regiment from the nearly Army Camp Gangraped the following five women in the name of nabbing extremists in that area at 9.00 P.M. and 10.00 P.M.

The Victims names are given below :

1. Smti. Parbati Narzary, (50)
W/O. Sri Maoria Narzary
Vill. Mahendrapur, P.O. : Jharbari
Dist. Kokrajhar, BTAD.
2. Smti. Mangaliti Brahma, 42
W/O. Lt. Tapen Brahma
Vill. & P.O. Ultapani
Dist. Kokrajhar, BTAD.
3. Smti. Swarna Daimary, (42)
W/O. Sri Ranjan Daimary
Vill. Owabari, P.O. Bishmuri
Dist. Kokrajhar, BTAD.
4. Smti. Dandi Mushahary, (20)
W/O. Sri Lopul Mushahary
Vill. & P.O. Ultapani
Dist. : Kokrajhar, BTAD.
5. Smti. Holoshi Narzary, (45)
W/O. Lt. Kamla Narzary
Vill. Khanthalguri, P.O. Bishmuri
Dist. Kokrajhar, BTAD.

Sir, the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation condemns the inhuman incident of the gangrape committed by the army jawans of the 8th Kumaon Regiment. The irony is that such crimes of army jawans and police personals are recurring again and again in the various raid programmes in the name of nabbing extremists. And Sir, we do agonise that, the very personnels who are entrusted for saving the nation and the lives and properties of the citizen of our country, are destroying the lives of innocent Bodo women by snatching away their chastity.

Respected Sir, the ABWWF demands for a high level Judicial Enquiry on the inhuman gangrape incident on those five simple poor Bodo Women at

Ultapani. We demand that the culprits be arrested and punished rigorously. We also demand for compensation to the victims.
We, the ABWWF, hope and expect that the victims will get proper justice under your able leadership at the earliest.
Wishing you a Very Happy and Prosperous New Year, 2004.

Yours Sincerely,

- For and on Behalf of ABWWF,
1. Kanan Basumatary, Secretary,
 2. Mithinga Basumatary, Jt. Secretary,
 3. Udangshri Borgoyary, Secy, KDC/ABWWF.

Copy to (for general information and necessary action) :

1. The Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar District.
2. The Superintendent of Police.
3. The Chief of BTC.
4. The Brigadier, Army Camp, Kokrajhar.



OFFICE OF THE
ALL BODO WOMEN'S WELFARE FEDERATION
 H.Q.- KOKRAJHAR
 P.O. & Dist. Kokrajhar (Assam)
 Estd.- 1986

PH: 271271 (0)

President

Mrs. Jamuna Rani Brahma

Secretary

Mrs. Kanan Basumatary

To,

**The Chairman,
 National Human Rights Commission,
 New Delhi.**

Through the Chairman,
 Assam State Human Rights Commission,
 Guwahati.

Subject :

Complaint in respect of multiple inhuman and barbaric rapes with five Bodo Women by Army Jawans of Kurmaon Regiment camped at Ultapani under P.S. & Dist- Kokrajhar (Assam) in the night of 31st December, 2003.

Most Respected Sir,

With reference to the subject, captioned above, we the undersigned, both from the ABSU and ABWWF beg to draw your kind attention to the following for your kind perusal and necessary action.

1. That, in view of Bhutanese Army operation against the extremists of N.D.F.B/ ULFA/KLO militants in the territory of Bhutan, the Indian Army sealed the entire Indo- Bhutan border in the State of Assam to check infiltration of militants in Indian territory and accordingly, like other strategic places, one Army camp was set up at Ultapani area under P.S. & Dist., - Kokrajhar. One wireless tower was also installed near lord Shiva temple of the village by Army.

2. That Sir, on 28th December, 2003, the Army personnels camped at

Ultapani bazar visited the village and gathered detail information regarding male members in the family of the village.

3. That Sir, in the night of 31st December/03, two Army personnels suspected from wireless tower location, entered into the aforesaid Lord Shiva temple under heavy influence of liquor and committed rape with an old lady namely Smti Parbati Narzary aged 3about 60 years like a wild beast in presence of her husband who had been suffering from fever for last few days.

4. That Sir, again within couple of minutes, another group of two Army Jawans belonging to Ultapani camp went to Ultapani village and taking the advantage of the absence of any male persons entered in the house of Mrs, Dandi Mushahay (20) W/o. Sri Lapul Mushahary where one Jawan raped her and another committed rape with her mother, Mrs. Halosi Narzary (42) who had come to her daughters house on 30th Dec. 2003 (Tuesday) to meet her daughter.

5. That Sir, in between 9:30 to 10:00 P.M. two Jawans entered into the house of Smt. Mangalti Brahma where one lady Smt. Swarna Daimary was also present as a guest. Both the Jawans committed rape with the two ladies simultaneously. In this manner, three incidents of rapes by Army Jawans took place within a period of one hour in the same village.

6. That Sir, next day in the morning 1st January 2004 commanding officer come to see the BLT members of Bishmuri camp relayed the message of rape incident of Ultapani interpreting the incident as the Handiwork of NDFB Militant, but that time nobody was aware of the fact and it was the Army who discussed first.

7. That Sir, villagers went to C.R.P.F. camp of Ultapani seeking necessary help and as per his advice an F.I.R was lodged before the In-charge, Bishmuri out post jointly by the victims of rape. Police arranged conveyance for medical examination of victims but Army personnels were insisting for medical examination in their camp and when people did not agree for the same, Army men detained 7.30 A.M. by which victims were scheduled to Kokrajhar for medical examination. Ultimately, they were examined by Medical & Health officer of R.N.B. Civil Hospital, Dr. D.Bhowal.

8. That Sir, the said shameful occurrences were published in all leading news papers of the State of Assam. After reading the same, Army official of 8th Kurmaon Regiment of Kokrajhar issued a press release denying involvement of any Army Jawans in the occurrences without conducting any enquiry

into the matter.

9. That Sir, against such a wild and shameful act of Army Jawans, wide scale protests were observed all over the district including 12 hours Kokrajhar District Band on 2nd January, a big rally and demonstration before the D.C. office etc. were observed. A team of MPs, MLAs, ABSU- BPAC, ABWWF and team of BTC; visited the places of occurrence and met the victims personally and after taking stock of the situation found the charges against Army Jawans hundred percent true. That Sir, the Army high officials have been denying the fact that the Army Jawans committed crime since the beginning of the incident. In spite of repeated complain also the Army officials are unwilling to take necessary step to find out the culprits. At the same time the State Govt. is also conspicuously silent on the matter.

In the light of above facts and circumstances, your honour is prayed to be kind enough to registered a case and conduct a thorough inquiry in-to the matter and make appropriate arrangements for bringing the actual culprits to book and pass an order to the Union Govt. to pay adequate compensation to the victims to ensure their human rights so as to enable them to lead a dignified life as well as to deter recurrence of such unfortunate incidents in the future.

Thanking you

Enclosed herewith :

- 1. Memorandum submitted to -
- 1. Chief Minister, Assam
- Through DC Kokrajhar
- 2. S.P. Kokrajhar.
- 3. Brigadier Army Kokrajhar
- 4. Chief Executive Member, BTC.

For information and necessary action.

Sincerely yours

(Rabiram Narzary)

President,
All Bodo Students' Union.

(Jamuna Rani Brahma)

President,
All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation.

(Rvin Gwra Narzary)

General Secretary,
All Bodo Students' Union.

(Kanan Basumatary)

General Secretary,
All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation

