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CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS AND THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF BODOLAND: A STUDY FROM POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Women's involvement in the Bodoland autonomy movement, part of the larger demand for an autonomous region within Assam, highlights significant challenges, achievements, and the resilience of women activists who contributed immensely to the cause. Viewed through a political lens, their journey reflects both systemic struggles and moments of empowerment as they sought to bring greater representation to marginalized communities in the Bodoland region. The resilience of women activists in the Bodoland autonomy movement stands as a powerful testament to their determination and adaptability amidst difficult socio-political challenges. Women in Bodoland have long played crucial roles in grassroots activism, contributing to the movement for regional autonomy while facing a spectrum of challenges, from societal expectations and restrictions to direct threats to their safety. Many women activists in the Bodoland autonomy movement have been instrumental in organizing, mobilizing, and participating in protests, negotiations, and dialogues. Their involvement is not limited to support roles; they actively shape agendas, engage in political discourse, and lead organizations that represent Bodoland's quest for autonomy. Often, they bring a unique perspective to the struggle, advocating for peace, community welfare, and justice. This inclusive approach adds a significant social dimension to the political aims of the movement. Despite facing potential backlash and sometimes severe consequences, women activists have shown remarkable resilience. They navigate their activism alongside cultural expectations of gender roles, balancing family responsibilities with their dedication to the autonomy cause. For instance, the resilience demonstrated by these women activists often includes organizing clandestine meetings, enduring hardship during long protests, and, in some cases, overcoming physical and psychological intimidation. Their capacity to adapt and remain committed to their cause even when met with violence or oppression exemplifies a profound resilience that has helped sustain the Bodoland movement. Furthermore, the resilience of women activists has extended beyond political gains to achieving broader social objectives. They have advocated for gender equality, education, and the protection of cultural heritage, highlighting the interconnectedness of these issues with the autonomy struggle. Their activism challenges and redefines traditional roles for women, creating space for future generations of women to engage more fully in public and political life. In this

way, the resilience of women in the Bodoland autonomy movement continues to contribute not only to the pursuit of regional autonomy but also to broader social transformation within Bodoland society.

KEYWORDS: AUTONOMY, MOVEMENT, WOMEN, POLITICS, CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION:

The autonomy movement in Bodoland, nestled within the northeastern Indian state of Assam, is a long-standing and complex political and social endeavor seeking self-determination for the Bodo people. This movement, mostly led by the Bodo community, an indigenous ethno linguistic group of Assam, emerged as a response to decades of socio-economic, political, and cultural marginalization. It has its roots in the early 20th century but intensified significantly in the post-independence era, marking it as one of India's most persistent regional autonomy movements. The struggle for Bodoland's autonomy spans demands for political representation, linguistic and cultural rights, and the equitable distribution of resources. While initially non-violent, the movement has also seen phases of armed struggle, followed by multiple rounds of negotiations with the government, leading to various accords and constitutional amendments. However, each step toward autonomy has been marked by challenges, both internal and external, highlighting the layered complexities within India's diverse federal structure.ⁱ

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The origins of the Bodoland autonomy movement can be traced back to the broader socio-political landscape of Assam and northeastern India. The Bodo people have historically inhabited the Brahmaputra Valley and are one of the largest ethnic groups in the region. However, their population faced systemic exclusion and marginalization over time, especially as migration patterns altered Assam's demographics, intensifying economic competition and straining communal harmony. This led to a collective consciousness among the Bodo people and a demand for the protection of their unique identity, language, and culture. The movement's initial phase began in the 1920s when Bodo leaders voiced their concerns for socio-political inclusion within the larger Assam landscape. However, the real turning point came post-independence. By the 1960s, Bodo leaders started organizing under various political and cultural platforms, advocating for land rights, education, and preservation of their language, Bodo, in an era when Assamese and Bengali identities dominated the regional political discourse. They sought safeguards against perceived economic exploitation, fearing displacement and loss of control over their ancestral lands due to increased migration and development projects that seemed to benefit other communities.ⁱⁱ

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Studying the challenges, triumphs, and resilience of women in the Bodoland autonomy movement is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges and celebrates the substantial yet often overlooked role that women have played in this sociopolitical struggle. In Bodoland, the autonomy movement has been marked by its unique cultural, economic, and political context. Women involved in this movement have faced a spectrum of hardships, including violence, displacement, and socio-cultural constraints, yet they have persistently contributed to the community's pursuit of self-determination. Examining these experiences highlights the vital role women play in grassroots activism and the broader autonomy movement. This study is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of the gendered nature of conflict and resilience. Women in the Bodoland movement have not only acted as supporters or participants but have also taken on leadership roles, organized community events, and even mediated peace efforts. Their resilience in the face of adversity is a testament to their agency and strength,

challenging the stereotype that women are passive victims in conflict situations. By examining their stories, we can observe how women develop coping mechanisms and resilience strategies that can serve as models for other communities experiencing similar struggles.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The autonomy movement in Bodoland has historically aimed to secure political, cultural, and economic self-determination for the Bodo people within Assam, India. While the movement's primary focus has been on asserting Bodo identity and rights, the role of women within it remains an understudied and complex aspect. Women in Bodoland have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of numerous challenges during the autonomy movement, navigating both the struggles of a socio-political struggle and those arising from entrenched gender roles. This statement of the problem seeks to examine the critical challenges faced by Bodo women in the autonomy movement, the significant triumphs they achieved, and their resilience, which has become a defining aspect of the movement itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Sucheta Sen Chaudhury's *The Bodo Movement and Women Participation* (2004) is a critical text that examines the unique and impactful role of women in the Bodo movement. Chaudhury focuses on the active involvement of Bodo women in various facets of the movement and highlights both the social and political contributions they made. In these sections, Chaudhury delves into the challenges faced by Bodo women, including societal constraints and gender-based discrimination within and outside the movement. Despite these obstacles, Bodo women demonstrated resilience, actively organizing and participating in protests, mobilizing communities, and taking on leadership roles. Chaudhury argues that their involvement was not just supportive but essential to the movement's progress, bringing attention to women's agency in advancing the Bodo cause. She also discusses how participation in the autonomy movement empowered women and helped to change traditional gender roles within the Bodo community.ⁱⁱⁱ

In "The Status of Bodo Women in Society: A Study on Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Assam, India", Dr. Mayuri Sarma and Ms. Phuloma Daimari explore the complex social, economic, and political roles of Bodo women in the BTR region. Their study seeks to understand the challenges faced by Bodo women, including traditional societal expectations, economic marginalization, and restricted access to political participation. The authors likely examine traditional gender roles within Bodo society and investigate the extent to which these roles have evolved in response to recent social and political changes. The study also looks at how Bodo women navigate their identity in a region marked by a history of autonomy movements, evaluating both the barriers they face and the resilience they demonstrate in advocating for themselves and their communities. Dr. Sarma and Ms. Daimari also delve into the intersectionality of issues Bodo women encounter, acknowledging how factors like educational access, economic opportunity, and political representation influence their societal status.^{iv}

OBJETIVE OF THE STUDY:

Here are two potential objectives for a study titled Challenges and Triumphs and the Resilience of Women Activists in the Autonomy Movement of Bodoland: A Political Perspective:

1. To examine the socio-political challenges faced by women activists in the Bodoland autonomy movement and understand how these challenges shaped their involvement and advocacy strategies within the movement.
2. To analyze the resilience strategies employed by women activists in overcoming both internal and external obstacles within the autonomy movement, highlighting how resilience influenced the movement's progress and public perception.

METHODOLOGY:

STUDY AREA:

The Bodoland Autonomous is located in the state of Assam, India. Established to address the aspirations of the many ethnic community of the region, BTR plays a significant role in the socio-political landscape of the region. This area is characterized by its rich cultural heritage, diverse communities, and complex socio-political dynamics. The BTR comprises the districts of Baksa, Udalguri, Chirang, Kokrajhar and Tamulpur, encompassing a variety of landscapes, including hills, forests, and rivers. The region is endowed with natural resources, including fertile land suitable for agriculture and rich biodiversity, contributing to its economic potential.

DATA COLLECTION:

The data collection for “challenges and triumphs and the resilience of women activist in autonomy movement of Bodoland: A study from political perspective” through qualitative secondary and primary data analysis has been done. Secondary data sources movement records, news reports, and academic literature will be analyzed to gain background knowledge. The primary data sources interviews, survey and Focus Group Discussions has been organized with small groups of women who have shared experiences within the movement, such as women leaders, family members, or supporters. These discussions will encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and offer comparative insights, highlighting collective resilience and shared challenges.

SAMPLE:

Purposive sampling method has been used to select participants who have been actively involved or impacted by the autonomy movement. These participants include women leaders, activists, and community organizers, family members of movement leaders, and general community members who have contributed to or have been affected by the movement. For the study a sample of 50 respondents has been selected from five district of Bodoland Territorial Region Namely:- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Tamulpur and Udalguri and out of 50 respondents 25 respondents is from Bodo Community and 25 respondents from Non-Bodo Community were taken as sample.

CHALLENGES, TRIUMPHS AND CONTRIBUTION BY WOMEN IN THE AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF BODOLAND:

Women in Bodoland's autonomy movement have contended with substantial challenges, particularly regarding societal expectations and limited recognition in leadership roles. Despite their active participation, traditional patriarchal norms often relegated women to secondary roles, limiting their decision-making power and visibility. Additionally, these women faced heightened vulnerabilities due to conflict-related violence and displacement, which disrupted family and community structures. The emotional and physical toll of these challenges was compounded by limited access to resources such as healthcare, legal assistance, and education—factors that further marginalized women within the movement. Despite these challenges, Bodo women have achieved notable triumphs, bringing visibility to their struggles and contributions. Women's involvement in the autonomy movement has taken diverse forms, including participating in protests, acting as negotiators, and advocating for social reforms within their communities. Organizations like the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation have enabled women to mobilize and advocate for their rights, contributing significantly to social cohesion within the movement. By advocating for peace and social justice, these women have brought a unique perspective that emphasizes both the social welfare of the Bodo community and the need for political recognition. Their efforts have been crucial in shaping the movement's peaceful turn toward negotiation and dialogue.

The participation of women in the autonomy movement of Bodoland has been marked by significant challenges, notable triumphs, and a display of remarkable resilience, all of which have had profound political consequences. Such as:-

1. **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Traditional gender roles in Bodoland's largely patriarchal society initially limited women's roles in the movement. They often faced societal restrictions that discouraged political involvement.
2. **Threats and Violence:** Women participating in the movement were vulnerable to threats, harassment, and violence, both from opposing groups and within the pressures of the movement itself.
3. **Limited Political Representation:** Women encountered limited political representation and struggled to secure leadership positions within the autonomy movement's hierarchical structures.
4. **Balancing Domestic Responsibilities:** The dual burden of activism and domestic responsibilities often strained women, limiting their ability to fully commit to the movement.
5. **Influence on Policy:** Women activists influenced the movement's policies, focusing on issues such as healthcare, education, and social rights, which garnered wider public support.
6. **Community Mobilization:** Women played key roles in grassroots mobilization, fostering unity within communities and raising awareness about autonomy goals, thus strengthening the movement..^v

RESILIENCE AND OUTCOME OF WOMEN ACTIVIST IN THE AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF BODOLAND:

The resilience displayed by Bodo women in the face of these adversities has been a powerful force within the autonomy movement. Many women have become symbols of hope and endurance, often balancing their roles as activists, caregivers, and community leaders. The solidarity among women has strengthened their ability to confront both external and internal barriers, underscoring the importance of gender inclusivity within the autonomy movement. Their resilience has fostered a supportive network that transcends generational and social divides, inspiring younger generations to advocate for their rights actively. Many women activists balanced their traditional roles with their commitment to the movement, enduring significant hardships to bring attention to Bodoland's cause. Their continued participation

underscored a shift in gender dynamics, with women's resilience challenging and slowly transforming societal norms regarding gender and politics. Women's contribution to the autonomy movement has not only fortified the socio-political foundation of Bodoland but has set a precedent for women's roles in regional political movements. Their active engagement has led to notable shifts toward gender equality and inclusivity within Bodoland's political sphere.

1. **Enhanced Political Participation:** Women's activism in the Bodoland autonomy movement led to increased female participation in politics, with more women taking on leadership roles within political organizations and community groups. This established a foundation for ongoing gender inclusivity in Bodoland's political arena.
2. **Advancement of Gender Equality:** Women activists successfully advocated for gender equality as an essential element of the autonomy movement. This resulted in the gradual dismantling of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, creating more equitable opportunities for women in both social and political spheres.
3. **Strengthening of Social and Economic Rights:** Through collective activism, women in the Bodoland movement were able to highlight issues around social and economic disparities. This fostered improvements in social policies, better access to resources, and more robust economic rights for women in Bodoland, including access to education and healthcare.
4. **Creation of Women's Support Networks:** Women's activism in Bodoland led to the establishment of support networks and community groups, where women could come together, share their experiences, and work collaboratively. These networks have continued to serve as platforms for women's empowerment and advocacy in the region.
5. **Institutional Changes and Representation:** The autonomy movement's emphasis on inclusivity led to policy reforms and institutional changes aimed at ensuring that women had representation within Bodoland's governing structures. This representation allowed for sustained advocacy for women's rights and gender-sensitive policies post-autonomy.
6. **Cultural Shift Toward Recognizing Women's Resilience:** The resilience, sacrifices, and contributions of women activists in the autonomy movement helped shift cultural perceptions, recognizing women as key figures in Bodoland's history. This cultural shift remains significant, inspiring younger generations and affirming the critical role of women in political activism.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES:

The Indian government attempted to address the Bodoland demand through a series of accords, each aiming to provide a level of autonomy and curb the cycle of violence.

1. **The First Bodo Accord (1993)** - In 1993, the first accord was signed, creating the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), an administrative entity with limited autonomy. However, the BAC faced challenges in implementation, and its inability to meet the aspirations of the Bodo people led to continued unrest.
2. **The Second Bodo Accord (2003)** - In 2003, another accord was signed with the BLT, leading to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The BTC provided greater administrative powers over a designated area known as the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). This accord marked a significant milestone, offering the Bodo people partial self-governance within Assam. However, the BTC, while an improvement, still faced criticism over issues like resource allocation, representation of non-Bodo groups, and jurisdictional limitations.
3. **The Third Bodo Accord (2020)**- The most recent accord, signed in January 2020, aimed to bring various factions of the NDFB into mainstream politics, promising greater developmental aid and administrative authority for the BTC. This accord was seen as a landmark agreement, promising infrastructural investment and setting up a Commission to address boundary demarcation issues.

within BTAD. Additionally, it sought to rename the BTAD to Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and improve its functioning.

The active participation of women brought significant shifts in the political landscape. Their involvement helped in shifting perceptions of the movement from one of militant activism to one that included peaceful dialogue and social welfare concerns. Additionally, post-autonomy, women's advocacy led to greater emphasis on gender-inclusive policies within the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), including the push for women's political representation in governance and policymaking.

1. **Enhanced Political Voice for Women:** Women's involvement in the autonomy movement laid the groundwork for their increased political engagement in Bodoland, contributing to greater representation in local governance structures.
2. **Policy Focus:** The inclusion of women's perspectives brought attention to social issues that had been overlooked, such as women's rights, education, and healthcare, influencing policy agendas.
3. **Empowerment and Social Change:** The movement has empowered women, leading to a slow but steady cultural shift that recognizes their political and social contributions.
4. **Strengthened Movement and Regional Identity:** Women's participation added depth to the movement, building a more inclusive and united front that strengthened the movement's identity and resilience in its pursuit of autonomy.^{vi}

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The autonomy movement in Bodoland has been a complex journey marked by deep-rooted socio-political challenges, significant triumphs, and a remarkable spirit of resilience. Key findings in this area often focus on the following aspects:

1. **Historical Context and Origins:** The autonomy movement emerged from long-standing grievances of the Bodo people, who sought recognition, preservation of cultural identity, and political representation. Historical marginalization in terms of resources, land rights, and political voice played a substantial role in fueling the demand for autonomy.
2. **Political and Structural Challenges:** The movement has faced hurdles including political repression, lack of adequate resources, and structural challenges within governance. Resistance from other communities, as well as clashes with state authorities, also created prolonged periods of tension and violence. Internal factionalism among Bodo groups has at times weakened the movement's cohesion, presenting additional hurdles in negotiating with the state and achieving unified goals.
3. **Triumphs and Achievements:** Major milestones include the signing of various accords, notably the Bodo Accord of 2003 and the third Bodo Accord of 2020, which led to the formation and later enhancement of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). These accords granted greater administrative autonomy, establishing the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), which has become a significant platform for political representation and self-governance for the Bodo people.
4. **Role of Women and Activism:** Women have been active participants, often driving grassroots efforts, contributing to peace building, and advocating for community welfare. Their involvement is crucial for social reform within Bodo society, though they face challenges related to gender norms and representation in decision-making bodies.
5. **Resilience and Endurance:** The Bodo people's resilience has been evident in their continued push for rights despite setbacks, internal conflicts, and opposition. The community's emphasis on education, economic development, and cultural revival is instrumental in their ongoing resilience.

6. Current Discourse and Future Prospects: Current discussions emphasize sustainable development, integration of diverse ethnic groups within BTR, and further devolution of powers to BTC. Ongoing challenges include bridging ethnic divides and ensuring economic progress that benefits all communities.

Despite these accords, the autonomy movement has faced ongoing challenges. A primary issue has been the complex demographic composition within BTAD/BTR. The region is home to various communities, including Bengali Muslims, Assamese, Nepali, Koch Rajbongshis, and Adivasis and many ethnic groups, leading to tensions over resource allocation, representation, and identity. Non-Bodo groups have often felt marginalized within the Bodo-dominated BTC, raising concerns about ethnic exclusivity and communal rights. Additionally, there have been criticisms of the BTC's governance structure and accusations of corruption. While the BTC was envisioned as a body to bring development and self-governance, it has faced allegations of mismanagement and inefficiency. Furthermore, the aspirations of Bodo youth, who seek employment and economic growth, have not been fully met, leading to disillusionment among the younger generation.

CONCLUSION:

The autonomy movement in Bodoland has been a testament to the resilience, unity, and cultural identity of the Bodo people. Emerging as a response to historical marginalization, the movement sought to assert control over local governance, resources, and cultural preservation. Key challenges included internal political fragmentation, social and economic disparities, and clashes with both governmental and regional entities. Despite these, the movement saw significant triumphs, including the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) under the Bodo Accord, which brought a degree of self-governance and the formal recognition of Bodo rights. Resilience has been a cornerstone of the movement, with the Bodo people demonstrating perseverance through setbacks, negotiations, and changing political landscapes. The involvement of women and youth, often in challenging and leadership roles, further strengthened the movement, underscoring an inclusive approach that aimed for long-term stability and unity.

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