The Bodo Movement and Situating Identity Assertions in Assam

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Abstract
The Bodo Movement has been the most stringent tribal movement in contemporary Assam. This movement had seeded in the colonial times but intensified into a radical political, cultural and extremist assertion in the 1980s. The Bodo movement draws its sources from the ostensible feeling of discrimination, deprivation and injustice experienced by the Bodo community in Assam. During the campaign in order to attain political, economic and cultural suzerainty, the leaders of the Bodo Movement emphasized that the Bodo people are ethnically different from rest of the people of present-day Assam and hence entitled to political entitlement in the form of a separate state—Bodoland. The paper traces the Bodo movement and examines how the plethora of the contemporary identity assertions in Assam is intertwined.

Inception of the Bodo Movement

The first demand for a separate state for the “plain tribes” of Assam was proposed in 1967 by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). However, scholars date the history of identity consciousness among the tribals of Assam to the colonial times, when a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission was submitted in 1929 by the Bodo community of Goalpara and the “Kachari Juvak Sammiloni” (Kachari Youth Meet) demanding political power. Subsequently, the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL) was formed in 1933 as a political party under the leadership of Rupnath Brahma. The main objective of this party was to protect the identities and interests of “tribal people” of Assam. It was for the first time that the tribal people of Assam had formally demanded political suzerainty.

The AAPTL demanded provision for separate electorate system for the tribals in Assam Assembly. Consequently, an act was passed by the British government which reserved five seats for the Plain Tribals in Assam. The Tribal League became a major political force to reckon with. The Tribal League formed a coalition government with Muslim League in the new formed Assam state assembly. Later in view of assurance given by the Congress party for protection of the “tribal people and the tribal lands” the Tribal League merged with the Assam Congress.

Following this, another significant step by the Bodos towards asserting its exclusive identity came from its premier literary body the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. In 1952 the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had come to the fore. It raised the issue of language and script in relation to consolidation of the Bodo identity. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha along with the ABSU and PTCA launched a movement in 1968, demanding recognition of Bodo language as a medium of instruction in the Secondary stage of education in the schools of Assam. As a result Bodo language was introduced in the Secondary stage of education. Following this another demand was raised by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the ABSU in 1974-75 for Roman script in lieu of Assamese script for Bodo language. There was a clash between the Assam government and the propounders. At this stage the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi intervened and according to her suggestion Devanagiri script was adopted by Bodo Sahitya Sabha giving up the demand for Roman script.

However, in the due course of time the “tribal people” of Assam found that all the assurances given by the Congress party though codified were not implemented in true sense. They found it necessary to revive their own political identity. As a result Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in 27th February, 1967. Its aim was to demand a Union Territory called “Udayachal” in the Bodo dominated areas. They placed their demand
several times before the state and central government. But when the demands were not fulfilled, a movement of
dissidence was launched. The PTCA and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) boycotted the General Elections of
1968.

The All Bodo Students’ Union” (ABSU) was formed on 15th February, 1967 at a time when the Prime
Minister of India, Indira Gandhi proposed to reorganize the state of Assam on 13th January, 1967. The ABSU
adopted a constitution on 2nd March 1969 with the objectives:

“We, the All Bodo Students unanimously and with our purest hearts have resolved to organize the students of various
Bodo groups into an organization for better and mutual understanding among ourselves, to safeguard and develop the
socio-economy, culture, civilization, tradition, language and literature of the great Bodo nationality and this
organization is known as the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and on the expediency of having written guiding
rules of the organization, do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this constitution on this day of 2nd March,

Amongst other aims and objectives outlined in section 3 the ABSU gives itself rights to struggle even on
political issues.

Chronicles of the Bodo Movement

The ABSU attained prominence in the 1980s and took on the reins from PTCA with its radical demand for separate
statehood- “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty”. ABSU under the leadership of late Upendra Nath Brahma launched vigorous
mass movement on 2nd March, 1987 on three political demands.

1. Creation of a separate State of Bodoland on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra.
2. Creation of two Autonomous districts, i.e. Nilachal and Lalong on the southern bank of river Brahmaputra.
3. Inclusion of Bodo Kacharis living in Karbi Anglong into the Schedule Tribe (Hills) lists along with the
demand for immediate fulfillment of other genuine grievances. (Choudhury 1993: 60)

The Bodos claimed that the attitude of the state government of Assam, dominated by the Assamese has been step-
motherly towards them. The constitution provided for the making of laws related to residence, restriction
movement etc. in the interest of the tribals, reservation of seats in Central and State Legislatures, recognition of
special claims for government jobs and appointment by the President of special officers and commissions to report
on the conditions of the tribes from time to time. The state government has been directed to promote education and
economic interests of the tribals and protect them from social injustice. The leaders of the Bodo movement none of
the provision and directives had been implemented by the Assam state government.

Several organizations like “Bodo People’s Action Committee”, “All Bodo Employees Federation”,
“Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation” etc actively co-operated with the ABSU in its demand. The ABSU
also received strong support from the “Bodo Sahitya Sabha”.

During the Assam movement4 many of the Bodo youth worked along with the AASU. But when the
post Assam Accord enthusiasm waned, the tribals began to perceive that the new government’s stance towards them
is not much different from the previous government (George 1994:880). As disenchantment spread among the
Bodo youth, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) took over the leadership; it launched the Bodo Movement in the
late 1980s, for the creation of separate Bodo state- “Bodoland”. Together with it, there has been the rise of a
number of Bodo militant outfits like the “National Democratic front of Bodoland” (NDFB), “Bodo Liberation Tiger Force” (BLTF), “Bodo Army” etc.

In February 1993, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was reached constituting a 40– member Bodoland
Autonomous Council (BAC). Tripartite talks were arranged at Delhi between the leaders of the movement, Assam
government and the Union Government. After eight rounds of talks, Union minister, Ram Vilash Paswan,
representing the Government of India, put forward a proposal to set up a three member expert committee on the
issues. The content of the proposal was:

“The Government of India is deeply concerned about the problems of Bodos and other Tribals of Assam and is
committed to their economic development and other rights. On serious consideration of the Bodo problem, the
Government of India proposes that a three member Committee of Experts may be set up to determine the area of Bodos
and other Plain Tribals of the north of river Brahmaputra and make recommendations as to the autonomy, legislative,
administrative and financial powers that may be given to them. This Committee will consult all groups concerned and submit a report within a period of forty five days to the Government of India”. (Choudhury 1993:60)

The Three Member Expert Committee submitted its report to the Union Government in the last part of March, 1992. The ABSU rejected the report on the ground that it was not based on facts and failed to realize the ground realities of the aims and aspirations of the struggling masses. The period between rejection of the report and the Accord is marked by phases of movements and series of discussions with the governments. Demarcation of the boundary for BAC continued to pose serious challenge to its functioning. As boundary issues between the BAC and Government of Assam remained unresolved, election to the BAC was not held. There was large disagreement between the member of the BAC and the Assam government regarding sharing of power, with the members insisting that the autonomy granted to them could not be executed because of the high handedness of the state government. Terrorist activities heightened as the BAC was thought to have no constitutional validity. In period that followed, the Bodo region became an arena of violence. The government enforced a number of laws to subdue the movement, like the “Disturbed Areas Act, 1955”, “Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958”, “The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Preventive) Act, 1987” also by promulgating 144 the Cr. P. C. (Criminal Procedure Code). Mass movement gave way to armed struggle. The modus operandi of the movement got shifted from bandhs, fasts, road blockades etc. to extortion, loot, kidnapping, murder and ambushes.

Finally, the Union government appealed for talks by July 1999. BLT declared unilateral ceasefire in response to it. On October 2, 2001, BLT gave up its demand for a separate Bodoland state and reconciled itself to politico-administrative arrangements for autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. This led to the signing of a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) for the creation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) on February 10, 2003 between the representatives of Union Government, Assam Government and a BLT delegation.

Locating the Bodo Movement

The Bodos are the largest group of Plain tribes in Assam. However there is no clear definition of the meaning of “tribe” in India. The Indian Constitution also does not provide any description of “tribe” or “tribal”. The Constitution has however empowered the President to appoint a commission after every ten years to review the situation of the scheduled tribes and declare by public notification the scheduled tribes or tribal communities (The Constitution of India 1950: Article 342). The underlying idea behind this idea was that the tribal condition would not be perpetual and with the improvement of economic standard and political consciousness, the tribes will gradually be eliminated. In a sharp contrast to this idea was the definition of tribe that members of tribal communities of India gave to themselves in a meeting in Shillong in 1962. They defined tribe as an indigenous, homogeneous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular area, backward in the technology, preliterate, loyally observing social and political customs based on kinship (Consultation Findings 1962: 80). The self definition of the tribe is a static body unaffected by the waves of modernity and change.

In Assam the administration of the tribal areas are governed by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. This is a provision in the Constitution of India as to the administration of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram which allows constituting autonomous district and autonomous regions for the tribal groups. The then Chief Minister of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi highly recommended the protective Sixth Schedule when the Constitution was being framed. Scholars believe beyond the apparent appearance of the state Congress to adorning a liberal attitude towards the tribal of the state, Bordoloi and other Assamese leaders were motivated by the hope that in the long run these tribal communities, while maintain their cultural identity would eventually become a part of the brihatar Axomiya Jati or the greater Assamese nationality. Being part of one political unit Assam’s geographical entity would remain unaltered. In such a situation Assam would have a greater voice in the affairs of Independent India (Misra 2001: 40). This envision of the Assamese leaders did not see light of the day as four tribal states were carved out of Assam after the Independence. Even in the present day Assam many assertions are around the question of the Sixth Schedule.

One of the essential factors, which scholars have often pointed out, that contributed in the surfacing of the Bodo Movement is the emergence of the Bodo middle class (Mittal and Sharma 1998; Sharma 2000) in the first quarter of the twentieth century, mainly in western Assam. The emergence and consolidation of the middle class is assigned to the upshot of two basic features: first, the advent of cash economy into the Bodo society and its proliferation under the colonial administration and second is the spread of Brahma movement propounded by Kalicharan Brahma. Cash economy played a significant part in withering the traditional tribalistic social structure
among the Bodos and opening them to broader vistas. Brahma movement was a reformist movement that touched not only the religious aspect of the Bodos but its scope was extended to larger realm of their society and brought about a holistic change in the economic and cultural sphere. Besides bringing about social changes in marriage customs, restricting liquor consumption and pig rearing, it made profound impact on the spread of education amongst the Bodo masses. As a result the converted Bodos became more equipped to compete in the modern milieu than the unconverted brethrens and took over the leadership of the socio-political life of the Bodos. This facilitated in the swelling of the ranks of the Bodo middle class. It was also through the consciousness of the college going Brahman Bodos, that the first Bodo students organization was formed in the 1930s—Bodo Chatra Sanmelen. The aim and objective of the organization were to unite the scattered Bodos through conferences and to take up programmes of social service and social reforms. Education enabled the Bodo youth to enter into the colonial job market. Like the Assamese counterpart, the development of the Bodo middle class became job centric. The Bodo Movement is significant in the socio-political context of contemporary Assam not only because it was successful in mobilizing the masses around the tribal question but also because it provided a diametrical instance to the Assamese narrative of assertion. The Assamese who had framed themselves as the victim in the Assam Movement were constituted as the delinquent in the Bodo Movement. The Bodos in the fad of the Bodo Movement vehemently engrossed themselves to cull out an identity distinct and a plane more organic than the Assamese with respect to Assam. They executed this in intrinsic two ways—reverse assimilation and distancing from the “greater Assamese nationality”. Thus the Bodos re-framed their identity as independent from the Assamese identity in the course of the movement. They put forward their idea of the self by challenging the claim of the Assamese of being the “soils of the soil”.

“Sons of the Soil”- Contesting the Premises

The Bodo movement gave significant shift to the already persisting tussle in Assam. In the preceding Assam movement the tension was between the foreigner and the indigenous people of Assam. This now turned to the imperative of establishing the authenticity of the indigenous. In his classic Sons of the Soil (1978), Myron Weiner had warned against the “potentially explosive” situation stemming from the idea of the “sons of the soil”. According to him, India conceded local autonomy to nativist Assamese. But the victory of the Assamese launched a counter attack by the Bodos, pressing for the creation of a union territory of the Bodo regions outside the ambit of Assam. In the late 1980s, when Upendra Nath Brahma became president of the ABSU (All Bodo Students’ Union), he led the entire movement with diatribes against “Assamese Chauvinism”. Rajiv Gandhi’s government, however, paid little attention to this issue. Next, the aboriginal Koch-Rajbongshi population mostly within the Bodoland staged a protest demanding their right to self-determination. Of the 1.8 million people living in Bodo villages, 1.2 million are Koch-Rajbongshi, and now their fate was, according to one spokesman, “at the mercy of the Bodo leaders in the name of geographical contiguity of the BAC area…” Other Bodo organizations argued about getting as yet excluded villages into the zone of the BAC. State authorities, to the extent that they side with the indigenous, may be in for a never-ending set of autonomy demands. In Assam, it was not only Assamese, Bodos and Koch-Rajbongshis. The Nagas pressed for Nagaland and other tribal groups did similarly, with the result that Assam has been broken up into discrete cultural-political units (Weiner 1978, 120-22).

“Sons of the soil” conflicts in Assam have two core features. First, it involves a competition for political concession against the fear of a dominant other, second, the members of the asserting group think of their group as indigenous, and as rightfully possessing the area as their group’s ancestral (or at least very long-standing) home. The question of land alienation has been a defining feature in the Bodo Movement.

The trail of “sons of the soil” tussle continued as Weiner had predicted. One of the most potent identity centric demands that commenced right after the Bodo movement has been from the Dimasa community. Dimasa Jalairaoni Hosom was formed in 1972 as a non-political cultural organization devoted to protect and promote the cultural identity of the community. The basic demands were to protect Dimasa historical monuments and the adaptation of Dimasa language at the primary school level in North Cachar Hills. In 1978 the District council gave some new settlements to a few non-tribals and its annual general meeting on 24.6.79 Dimasa Jalairaoni Hosom passed a resolution to move the appropriate authority to stop undesirable settlement to outsiders. The annual conference of this organization is organised in various places of the district and besides intellectual deliberation it provides a common platform to the Dimasa youths to voice their hopes, aspiration and apprehension. Branches of this organization are found in almost all the Dimasa villages and they arrange traditional cultural programmes to
revive the traditional folk art and culture of the Dimasas. The first Dimasa news journal, Waimijing, received active patronage from this youth organization.

Dimasa National organization was born in 1979 and the first resolution passed by the general session of the organization on 11 March 1979 demanded “Proper preservation of ancient relics and monuments of the Kachari kings lying in various places of Assam and other parts of India especially at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur”. The executive committee of this organization consists of Dimasas belonging to the plains and the hills. Important Dimasa personalities like Nandamohan Barman (President), Sri Phanidhar Gorlosa (Vice-President), Sri Brojendra Langthasa (General Secretary) were connected with this organisation and this was the first attempt to unite all the Dimasa living in different units under a common umbrella. Dimasa lawyers like Sri Anil Kumar Burman of Cachar, and then Assam Minister Sri Sonaram Thaosen of N.C. Hills and the delegates from Nagaland pledged to work for cultural and social unification of all the Dimasas. The organization, of course, did not pass any political resolution and its activities are even today confined in the social, economic and educational domain.

The Dimasa of Cachar formed Dimasa Sanskriti Parishad in 1974 to promote the cultural life of the Dimasa of Cachar. It has also proposed to build a Dimasa Sanskriti Bhavan at Silchar which will be the centre for the promotion of Dimasa art and culture. It was due to the persistent endeavour of this Parishad that the Archaeological Survey of India took necessary action for the preservation of the Bishnu Mandir of Borkhola Barohali Pukur in Bihara and the two Shibitlas of Hartikar and Sonai in Cachar. Karbi Anglong District Dimasa Association with its headquarter at Diphu was formed in 1975. It has a Dimasa cultural club at Diphu where meetings and cultural programmes are held to promote the cultural identity of the Dimasas.

Nikhil Hirimba Barman Samity, an organization of the Dimasas of Cachar put forward a political demand in 1980 for the reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas of the North-east. This organisation believes in the concept of greater Dimasa nationality and opines that the existence of the Dimasa will be in danger unless all the Dimasa are brought within a single administrative unit. The members of the community claim that their demands are based on government documents, historical and geographical facts. They said that the southern part of Nowgong district including Howraghat, Jamunamukh, Dabaka, Lanka, Hojai, Namti, Jogijan and the area from Dimapur to Dhansiri should be included in the proposed administrative unit. They also threatened prolonged agitation in the event of the non-fulfilment of their demand. The organization, of course, did not take the path of agitation but this demand for reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas has once again revived the urge for political and cultural supremacy among the Dimasa of Assam and in the event of any future reorganization of the north-east the Dimasa may renew their claim. The Dimasa leaders of N.C. Hills who demand the separation of the district from Assam, of course, have not yet raised any demand for the reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas around N.C. Hills.

Fearon and Laitin (2003) have coded a list of 139 civil wars between 1945 and 2008 for and analyzed whether they were “sons of the soil” conflicts. According to them Catholics in Northern Ireland see themselves as sons of the soil versus Protestant settlers, Serbs in Kosovo have the same view regarding Kosovar Albanians, Africans in South Africa vis-a-vis South African whites, or Abkhaz regarding Georgians (who migrated in Abkhazia mainly in the 1920s and 30s).

In India, considerable attention has been paid to the “sons-of-the-soil” pressure groups in states like Karnata, and has impacted the policies of the state government. The principal demand of all ‘sons-of-the-soil’ movements is governmental intervention—in the form of laws, regulations and administrative orders—to provide jobs and admission to educational institutions to the members of indigenous groups. These interventions are often referred to as preferential policies. In India, generally, preferential policies are of two types. First, the policies are intended to impart special benefits and reservations to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and socially and economically backward classes in entry to educational institutions and in recruitment and promotion in government services. They are also given reserved constituencies in State Legislative Assemblies. The second set of policies seeks to provide preferences to indigenous groups in a particular state as against the migrants from other states in employment.

However in Assam the character of the “son of the soil” movement differ in terms of the demand raised for homeland. In an article the general secretary of the PTCA wrote, “The Bodos are prescriptive citizens and the agriculture being the mainstay of their economy, their survival without the land is unthinkable” (Mittal and Sharma 1998: 300). There is also resentment about the intrusion of immigrants (mainly from Bangladesh) who occupied patta lands (Government waste land) which had been the traditional agricultural land for the Bodos as many of them practiced shift cultivation. The Bodos resent to the fact that they have been deprived of the provision provided in the
The various tribal groups, by and large, had expressed spirits of camaraderie with the Assamese nationality. Two evident instances when the various groups of Assam came together to meet common goal were-first, just prior to independence, the Cabinet Mission proposals on grouping brought all the indigenous people of undivided Assam together to resent upon the proposal of being gifted away to Pakistan. “The threat to the region’s identity posed by Jinnah and the Muslim League became a common binding factor, even as the spectre of the autochthones being outnumbered by Muslim immigrants assumed added dimensions”(Misra 1999: 1267). Second instance was during the Assam movement on the issue of foreign nationals when the various groups came together to challenge the illegal immigrants.

The solidarity and unity of the of the various tribal group with the majority Assamese of Assam was tainted as disenchantment spread among the various groups as feeling of alienation and marginalization-politically and economically intensified, the Bodos (like the preceding disgruntled tribal groups) codified their cultural identity more and more.

Notes

1. The tribal population of Assam is constitutionally divided into Plain Tribe (dwellers of the valley) and the Hill Tribes (dwellers of the hills of Assam).

2. The erstwhile British government appointed the Indian Statutory Commission on constitutional reforms on 8 November 1927. The chairman of the commission was Sir John Simon and all other six members were also British and Member of Parliament. Hence, the commission was also called ‘all white commission’. This commission officially called ‘Simon Commission’ arrived in Shillong on 2 January 1929. Twenty-seven organizations of Assam province submitted memoranda to the commission. (Fengkha, Anchalik Committee, All Bodo Students’ Union, Kokrajhar, February 1999). (From http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/tribal_autonomy_assam_arch5.htm)

3. Section 3 (e) Settle the issues relating to political crisis that may arise among the Plain Tribal Bodo people out of selfish and political diplomacy of the so-called politicians threatening the national existence of their future generation though the ABSU is a non-political socio-economic literary and cultural organization.

(f) Struggle to achieve the just and constitutional rights through democratic process.

(g) Fight for all round security and if the above goals are denied and ignored, the Union further shall not refrain even from struggling for political self-determination within the frame of Indian Constitution. (Choudhury 1993:60).

At the active initiative of the ABSU, the political organization named Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) came into being on 27th February, 1967. Through PTCA, ABSU raised the voice for a political demand for the Union Territory of “Udayachal”. But disillusioned by the activities of PTCA, ABSU began to work independently.

4. The six years (1979-1985) long anti illegal-immigrants movement led by the All Assam Students Union which was supported by various sections of the population across the Brahmaputra valley. It ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the leaders of the movement and the Rajiv Gandhi led central government. Subsequently, the student leaders of the movement formed a political party the Assam Gana Parishad and was elected to power in the state assembly.

5. The first commission for the scheduled areas and scheduled tribes (Dhebar Commission) appointed by the President of India in 1961 quoted Arnold Toynbee to define tribal societies as “primitive societies as we know them by direct observation…lying torpid upon a ledge of a mountain-side with a precipice above”. But the commission argued that the static condition of the tribal societies was only temporary, for the “tribal people as children of mother nature are subject to the same laws which govern her other children”. The commission observed that the static condition of the tribal was caused by centuries of their isolation from the people outside their society. It hope that the tribal would be on move again, because nature did not permit eternal static condition. (Chakraborty 2004: 3)
6. Besides Bodoland Territorial Council, administration of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council are under the jurisdiction of the Sixth Schedule in Assam.

7. For example, the first political elites—such as Rupnath Brahma, who became a minister in the Assam Government—were educated Brahmas. It was in 1936 that Sitnaath Brahmachoudhury became the first Bodo graduate and later became the first Bodo M.P. in 1952 on the Congress ticket. His father had as a Hakim (Magistrate) as he could spell his name. The trend of higher education has since grown among the Bodos, mainly through the converted ‘Brahmas’. (Mittal and Sharma 1998: 303)

8. They defined sons of soil conflict as “civil war involves an insurgent band fighting on behalf of an ethnic minority on the periphery of a state dominated by another ethnic group; against the state’s military or paramilitary formations, and/or members of the majority group who have settled as farmers in the minority group’s declared home area; and involves either land conflict with migrants from the dominant group or conflict over profits and control of fuel or mineral resources in the minority’s home area”.

9. This Sixth Schedule provision in the Constitution of India pertains to the administration of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram which allows constituting autonomous district and autonomous regions like the tribal blocks and belts for the tribal groups. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution also made some provisions for the protection of excluded areas of the British period.

References


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