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Research article

Territorialisation of Ethnic Space: Politics of Identity among the Bodo Tribes of Assam

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The relation between region and nation are understood as emerging simultaneously. An understanding of the articulation of the Bodoland movement which demands a separate homeland in terms of a separate state carved out of Assam in India, demonstrates that, although the Bodoland movement challenges the distribution of autonomy over territory, it reflects in it the Bodo question of identity. This is reflected in the imagined boundaries which endow the problem of land alienation and render it in terms of ethnic space. At the same time, these boundaries present the viable part of being a home to many other communities other than the Bodos. In doing so, the Bodos trace their belongings and affiliations to a tribe. This study is a reflection upon how the Bodoland movement of the twentieth century takes up the issue of tribal land alienation in the proposed Bodo homeland. The paper intends to bring out the relation between land alienation and the government policies of land allotment which are being used for various development purposes.

Keywords: The Bodos, Bodoland Movement, Territorialization, Ethnic space, land alienation.

Introduction

Northeast India is homeland to various tribal and non-tribal communities. They speak different languages and have different social edifices and cultural traditions. Their distinct cultural traditions and social edifices differentiate them from one another and make them diversified in nature. The history of these communities shows that they themselves have set foot into this part of the country in different time span and had settled themselves in various geographical terrains of the region. Thus, we can find them residing in the hills, plains and some others near the river beds. In the course of time, they emerged into various disconnected individual groups called the tribes. The Indian Sanskrit literature refers these different Mongoloid tribes as Kiratas (Chatterjee, 1974: 27). According to the Census survey report of India (2011), there are more than one hundred and thirty tribal communities in the northeastern states of India.

The geographical distribution of the northeastern part of India reflects in it a cluster of different communities inhabiting together within a region. The geographical distribution is again submerged by the ethno-space distributed around it. This ethno-space of the region again has evidences of diaspora within it. The resultant of the same leading to emerging fragmentations in search of individual identity, bifurcations and hostility among various ethnic communities inhabiting the region. These attributes have accounted in burgeoning of ethnic turmoil, violence, dispute and also the greed for political autonomy in many parts of northeast India. The eight states of the region - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura is inundated with ethnic discontentment and numerous disputes among different communities for over a long period as seen in the history of the region.

The territorialisation of space, therefore, refers to a process whereby shared memories are attached to particular territories so that they become historic homeland and ethnic spaces (Smith, 1996: 453). This paper deals with the territorialisation of space in relation to the Bodoland movement¹ for a separate state in Assam. The Bodoland movement which the Bodos have created on the ground does not just have the potential ability to conserve their land, but with their wide support base they have the capacity to recast existing debates on multiple social, economic and political fronts. The new state formation leads to creation of smaller states. However, as argued by Tillin, the idea of the formation of the smaller states may not necessarily lead into superior autonomy or increase the rate of the economic development simply. The smaller states should be able to come up with more comprehensive structures and socio-economic development strategies for the region (Tillin, 2011: 24). Against this backdrop, the Bodos are demanding for a separate homeland to not only have better governance but also for the development of the entire Bodo community. The Bodos substantiate this idea of separate state by stating that creation of a separate state can bring about equability in education, employment and economic improvement for the Bodo community at par with the Assamese community, whom the Bodos consider to be in the better position

¹ The Bodoland movement is one of the important movements carried by a tribal community (the Bodos) in the history of Assam. Various scholars argue about the inception of the Bodoland movement in different phases. Some scholars say it to be of pre-colonial origin and some argue it to be after effect of the Assam movement of 1987. However, Bodoland movement was said to be very active during the late 1980s and is still continuing in Assam. The Bodoland movement is basically a movement demanding the creation of a separate stakeout of Assam.

in a society². Territorialisation of a particular space as an ethnic homeland justifies the demands of Bodos for a separate homeland. To understand ethnic conflict, attention is required to focus upon the factors that had formed the basis of the Bodoland movement (e.g., land alienation) and the demand for a separate Bodo homeland even after the creation of BTC. Research on ethnicity and conflict has become increasingly engaged with the question of political autonomy, inter-ethnic identities and conflict and also the federal system of demands. A serious intuition of exploring the political influence, the structure of social institutions, government agendas upon the ethnic groups tend to become the central core of researches at the socio-political level.

The Bodos are demanding a separate homeland on the line of possessing a distinct ethnic identity. The concept of 'ethnicity' has appeared as a recent phenomenon in the contemporary time. But there are shreds of evidence in the historical records where the term 'ethnicity' has always had its significance. The terms like group solidarity, common culture and sense of kinship were very much related to 'ethnicity' even before the concept of 'ethnicity' started getting problematised. An ethnic identity deal with the same de-factors which they (group solidarity, common culture and sense of kinship) dealt with in the past. However, in contemporary time, the major focus of the common ethnicity mainly deals with the individual identification. Therefore, the question of how one can explain the resurgence of ethnicity and nationalism among the other non-ethnic groups and other ethnic groups of people becomes a treat to the society as a whole, calls for insightful explanation. The focus of this study, therefore, starts with understanding the issue of ethnic identity put forward by the Bodo people and later the analysis of the same is done by understanding land alienation and other concerns of the Bodos that forms the basis of their movement.

Objectives of the study

1. This study is an attempt to understand how the Bodos use their territorial space to maintain their distinct identity.
2. The study as also tries to understand the Bodo peoples' demand for a separate state and the politics of identity associated with it.

Introducing the Bodos

Anthropologists categorise the tribes in northeast India on the basis of their distinct features, which includes their affinity of language, similar culture and sharing of common territories. Accordingly, the tribes in Northeast India can be categorised as Arunachal tribes, Bodos/ Kacharis, Khasis, Lushai Kukis, Nagas and others (Kundu, 2010: 29). Kundu again states that linguistically, northeastern tribes are divided into two broad branches such as, Siamese- Chinese and Tibeto-Burman. Most of the tribes living in northeastern part of India speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch except the Khasis and Hmar tribes. The Khasis and the Hmar tribes speak a dialect of the Mon-Khmer linguistic group which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family (Kar, 1974: 6). These ethnic complexities of peopling have created a medley of issues influencing the social and political framework of northeast India. People came to northeast India in consecutive swings in different time and situations.

² For, e.g., creation of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland out of Assam have benefitted the tribals in the state very immensely at least to some extent. The Bodos point out the literacy rate of the state of Mizoram, the tourism factor of Meghalaya is some seen development seen among the tribals after being given a separate state.

Large scale immigration of Tibet Mongoloid people took place from China, Tibet, Mongolia and adjoining region around the time period of 5000 B.C (Gait, 1926: 7). Endle (1911) and Gait (1926) state that the Kachari people immigrated to northeastern India in two phases, one entry was made through western Assam through the valley of Tista and Sankosh and there they had founded the Kamrupa kingdom. Gait (1926) mentioned that the other phase of entry took place through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys of present-day Arunachal Pradesh and then into Assam, eventually bringing the Chutiyas (a community of Assam) along with them. At present, the larger Kachari group is dispersed in various parts of Assam and the adjoining states and countries. The Kacharis are known by different names in different parts of the region. In the most western parts of Assam and eastern parts of the adjoining state of West Bengal, the Kacharis are known as the Mech community. In the central part of Assam, they are again known as the Bodos and in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley of the Assam, they are known as Sonowals and Thengals. The Kacharis are known as the Dimasa and Hojai in the North Cachar hills of Assam (Pullopillil and Aucklal, 1997: 2). Some Kachari groups are also traced in many parts of the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Endle, 1911: 15). Bodos are one of the many tribal communities of Assam, an offshoot of the larger Kachari group. They are the largest tribal community in Assam constituting about 41.15 % of the total tribal population according to the 2011 census. The census report of India 2011, states that the total Scheduled tribe population in Assam is around 3,308,570 and the Bodo number is 1,361,771. They speak languages of the Tibeto-Burman branch. Bodo tribes are considered to be the first Tibeto-Burman speakers entering the northeast region (Pullopillil and Aluckal, 1997 and Kundu, 2010). The Bodos, erstwhile Kacharis, are also considered as the aboriginal and the indigenous settlers of modern Assam, North-Bengal and parts of Bangladesh (Gait, 1926; Baruah, 1972; Sharma and Devi, 1993; Kundu, 2010). Pullopillil and Aluckal (1997) argue that the Bodos ruled the whole of Assam unto the 20th century A.D and moved to western part of the Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar Hills and the plains of Cachar in the sixteenth century A.D. to evade the Ahom onslaught.

Hodgson applied the term 'Bodo' for the first time in his work upon the *Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes* in 1880 and referred the meaning of the term Bodo as 'man'. According to him, "A Kachari or Mech will call himself Bara f'se to distinguish himself from Sim-Sa (Bhutia) or Chin-fsa (Hodgson, 1880: 23). Even though Kachari is considered to be the original word to describe the Bodos, the constitution of India has recognised this Kachari group of tribal people living in the western parts of Assam as the Bodos. Kos-ari is derived from *Kos-arui*, meaning, the sons of the *Kos*. *Ari* or *arui* is the patronymic commonly used by the Bodo people in naming their clans. The word Kachari, thus, is a generic term, which is used to denote a number of tribal groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language and claiming a common mythical ancestry (Pullopillil and Aluckal, 1997: 1).

As stated earlier, the Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group. However, due to lack of written records regarding the origin and migration of the Bodos, it appears that the Bodos are indubitably of trans-Himalayan origin through the passages. Moreover, the phases of how the Bodos reached the Brahmaputra valley are quite undetermined. There exists a rich amount of legends and mythologies among the Bodo tribes that describe and talk of their origination. However, historians and scholars agree upon the fact that the home of the Tibeto-Burman speakers was northwest China located somewhere in the plains between Yangtes-Kiang and Hwang Ho rivers (Endle, 1911; Greison, 1927; Chatterjee, 1974; Pullopillil and Aluckal, 1997 and Kundu, 2010). It is assumed that these Tibeto-Burman speakers have moved southwards and entered the northeastern part of India and the hills and valleys of southeast Asia in time unknown.

According to 2011 census, Assam accommodates more than three million plain tribals who are Bodo Kachari and still speak their ancient Bodo language. There are other communities like the Dimasa, Lalung, Deori, Chutiya, Burman of Cachar who are also offshoot of the same Kachari branch but do not share the same dialect though their languages seem quite similar to the listeners. While studying the history of Assam, Grierson (1927) has underlined the language affinity among the different Kachari groups of people. In contemporary Assam, we can find the Kachari groups of people other than the Bodo scattered mostly around the districts of Nagaon, Goalpara, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Cachar, and Dima Hasao.

As stated earlier, the Bodos are confined to the central Assam and highly concentrated in the four districts of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)³ - Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri commonly known as Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD).

Scholars often confuse themselves between who are the Bodos and who are the Kacharis because earlier the Bodo and the Kachari were meant to denote the same community. However, as mentioned earlier, in contemporary times, Kachari is the umbrella group for different groups of ethnic communities, some of these communities are tribal groups and some non-tribals.

The Bodos are one of the tribal groups of the larger Kachari branch residing in majority in the plains of Assam. Bodos are also found in the hills of Karbi Anglong district and are given the Bodo hill tribes status (otherwise Bodos are scheduled plain tribes of Assam) by a special convention under sixth schedule in 2016⁴.

Imagining Bodoland: Drawing Boundaries of Separation

India moved towards the path of national reconstruction after it gained independence (Xaxa, 2012: 229). Tribal situation then was one of the many agendas of the national reconstruction project. At the dawn of independence, tribal situation was characterised by low economic conditions, underdeveloped social and educational conditions and many more. These conditions of tribal population were, however, related to the isolation and distant geographical position of the tribals. With the initiation of the national reconstruction process, the problems of social isolation and distant geographical location were to be addressed by building roads, railways, motorways and many more infrastructures, among others, for developing the tribes in India.

This process of national reconstruction, however, worsened the tribal situation. The process facilitated the entry of non-tribals to tribal areas, leading to tribal land alienation through the means of force, fraud, forgery and, most importantly, by usury (Xaxa, 2012: 230). The case of the Bodos of Assam can be cited as an example, who have undergone through such experiences. The side effect of reconstruction programme led to the emergence of debates over the very idea of integration and/or assimilation of tribes into

³ BTC is the territorial council and is administered by the BTC government. The areas which come under the administration of BTC is called the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD). BTC was formed after the signatory of MoS by the ABSU leaders and BLT cadres with the state and the central government on the 10th February, 2003. By this signatory the Govt. agreed to create the Bodoland Territorial Council within the amended framework of the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution of India. The Government of Assam also accepted and approved the aforesaid MoS on the 31st October, 2003 by vide notification number TAD/BTC/161/2003/6.

² The Bodos were given the status of ST (Hills) under Clause 8 of Accord of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) signed with the Central Government.

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the mainstream society in the post-colonial period. Verrier Elwin (1943), a missionary who went to live with the tribals, and G.S Ghurye, a sociologist, were at the forefront of such debates. Elwin (1943) focused upon the integration of tribes in the Indian society for the development of the tribals themselves. However, in the Northeast India, tribal population had to be first integrated politically to the Indian union. The articles 244 and 244a of the Indian Constitution provides special administration of tribal areas in the 5th and 6th schedules of the constitution⁵. At the backdrop of these articles there were also land reforms made in Assam for the protection of the tribal lands before and after India's independence.

In 1938, thirty-three tribal belts based upon the Line System⁶ were created in Assam by amending the Assam Land and Regulation Act of 1886 to prevent the tribal land alienation (Deka, 2014: 108). However, due to the failure of the Line System, the Assam government added Chapter X to the Assam Land Revenue Act of 1986. This chapter was added to protect the land of the tribal communities from mass encroachment by the non-tribals in tribal areas. This system too did not succeed in protecting tribal interests and provided the essential ground for the political mobilisation of tribal communities in relation to their rights, and the Bodos were at the forefront of such mobilisation. In a way of critically analysing the policies for safeguarding the tribal lands, Baruah (2005: 193) had opined that even the idea of protecting the aboriginals of excluded or partially excluded areas was a problematic proposition. Baruah further states that the process of economic and social transformation as being significantly propelled by the post-colonial state's development initiatives has brought about far-reaching changes in tribal communities, having largely adverse consequences.

The Bodos are demanding for a separate ethnic homeland- the Bodoland, due to many incompatible experiences with the state. There were many aspects even after the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), governing the Bodoland demand. Some instances are- the very fact that according to the census of 2011 the Bodos turning into a minority in the BTAD itself, split in the political front of the Bodoland movement, the agitation of the non-Bodos against the Bodoland movement and so on. Urkhawgwra Brahma⁷ thinks that the Bodo problem has to be addressed very soon. If not, the Bodo problem will be worsened because the Bodos are becoming minority in the Bodoland Territorial Area itself as per the census report of 2011. In this regard Guha (2016), argues that Urkhawgwra Brahma compares the condition of the Bodos with the Tibetans in Lhasa who are submerged by the Han Chinese (Guha, 2016: 8). The Bodoland movement thus, along with addressing other issues also addresses to prevent themselves from becoming a

⁵ The Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the constitution is the protection of cultural distinctiveness of the tribals on account of their economic disadvantages so that they can maintain their tribal identity without any coercion or exploitation. However, the sixth schedule deals with the administration of the northeastern states- Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in the North-east. The sixth schedule has the provisions for the formation of autonomous districts and autonomous regions within the districts as there are different schedule tribes within the district.

⁶ Line system was a system of separation introduced in Kamrup and Nagaon District of Assam for the first time in 1920. Under this system the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal, now Republic of Bangladesh, more particularly from Mymensingh District, were required to settle in certain areas of the Bramaputra Valley of Assam. It was a mechanism to segregate the immigrant Bengali speaking Muslim population from the indigenous communities of the state. Introduced in the wake of large-scale immigration of the Muslims from East Bengal since the first decade of the 20th century (census 1911), it was designed as a measure to protect the locals against possible disturbance of demographic and social balance and eventually against social conflict. The line system was the result of the personal initiative of a few British district officers, and not a clear-cut policy of the colonial government, which used to encourage immigration for better cultivation and thus to augment agricultural revenue. For more detail refer to Hiramani Deka, (2014) *Politics of Identity and Bodoland Movement in Assam*. Delhi: Scholars World.

⁷ Urkhawgwra Brahma is currently the president of a new regional political party called the United People's Party (UPP) which was formed in 2015. Prior to that Mr. Urkhawgwra Brahma was a Member of Parliament of India representing Assam in the upper house of the Indian Parliament- the Rajya Sabha.

minority in their own demarcated lands.

Generally, the idea of homeland is mostly understood to provide social justice to one particular community. Though the idea of an exclusively homeland is extremely popular in northeast India, northeast India is again highly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic (Nagaraju, 2007: 120). Every idea of homeland is overlapped by many homelands. Even in the case of Assam, the proposed Bodoland is actually a shared homeland of many communities like the Santhals, Koch-Rajbangshis, Rabhas and the ethnic Assamese communities. It is, however, assumed that the Bodos are the majority in the proposed homeland. The demographic profile of the Bodos in the 2011 census proliferates the context of the Bodos turning into minority in their own region⁸. If we compare the census data of 1991, 2001 and 2011, in the four Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD), the Bodos were 52.5% of the total population according to the 2001 census. But in the 2011 census the Bodo population has gone down to 50% in the same districts. Another issue which can be noticed according to the 2011 census is the record of the 1% of the Bodo people as muslims. So, there arises a grave concern among the Bodos whether they being converted to muslims pose as a challenge to their ethnic identity. The other way of understanding this aspect is by looking at the assimilating attribute of the migrant communities- is it the way of settling down strategy, because the issue of illegal migrant has attracted a critical attention in Assam. Owing to such changes in the demography, the Bodos faced a disadvantageous situation. It is often argued upon that the influx of immigrants for vote bank purposes started turning the Bodos into a minority in their own land (Deka, 2014: 156).

The demarcated area under the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) are predominantly agricultural area and around 90% of the population are agriculturalist (Basumatary, 2012: 30). However, much of the cultivable lands have been used by the government for bringing up government infrastructures or are being sold by the government bodies themselves to other people. For instance, the BTC government has decided to allot 132.5 acres of land in the Chirang and Baksa districts of BTAD to the Baba Radev's Patanjali Yogpeeth (Trust). This move by the BTC government in the time when the issue of land alienation and land crisis are very sensitive in the tribal areas viewed by many Bodos especially the Bodoland movement activities as an activity against the land rights of the Bodos.

This clearly substantiates Baruah's (2005: 12) statement upon the change in the demography of the tribal lands. Such activities have led the Bodos, to be left with less land or give up agriculture. In addition, the production of the agricultural land is decreasing over the period, leading to deterioration of social condition of the Bodos.

Contextualising the idea of new state formation, Danda (n.d: 47) argues that whatever be the nature of the creation of a new state, the inception of it is mostly based upon issues relating to land or in other words is a post agricultural phenomenon. Assam is a agricultural state and the in the history of Assam hardly there has been any instances where the region went out of food or other resources. There was always surplus of land resources as well the products of the region were enough for the people. This phenomenon

⁸ www.bodoland.in

of the surplus has attracted many communities from places that did not enjoy resources as much as Assam had before heavy migration to the region took place. As a result, the surplus phenomenon has played a very important role in promoting radical changes. These radical changes later emerged as expressions of dissatisfaction and started off as agitations for a separate homeland. The socio-economic and the agricultural disputes are the root causes of initial discontentment among the Bodos of Assam (Basumatary, 2012: 15). To maintain their occupation as agriculturist, the Bodos feel that it is high time to protect their land interest and they believe that formation of a separate homeland will facilitate the process.

The Bodos have been engaged in demand for creation of a separate state sporadically in the past, but quite continuously in the early 1980s. In the mid-1980s, Assam saw the uprising of the ABSU and the formation of Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) with a goal to form a separate state through vigorous mass mobilisation (Deka, 2014: 15). The Bodo community has been using every available means to fight for a separate statehood. However, it has been witnessed clearly to the Bodos that the legislative means are unlikely to be delivered by themselves. In the recent time, there has been an increasing number of social and political movements among the Bodos. These movements are seen particularly in the Bodo dominated areas for the fulfilment of the creation of a separate homeland. In the districts of Baksa, Kokrajhar, Chirang and Udalguri of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD), there are overwhelming shreds of evidence of full-scale mobilisation of the Bodos around issues of forced killings, forced land acquisition, destruction of habitats in the name of development and so on. Moreover, there are also different ethnic groups who are persistently involved in demanding separate statehood in relation to their respective social, economic and political contexts. The statehood demand of the Bodo tribe today is intertextual with the discourse of ethnic conflicts in the political sphere of Assam. The local newspapers, Bodo works of literature, Bodo music videos often reflect out this intertextuality. But there is still very little articulation regarding the intertextuality among the Bodo social discourse and the policy discourse in the state center or among state intellectuals.

Issues and Concerns of the Bodos

Many of the world's indigenous/tribal people face serious discrimination in terms of access to basic social services and representation. The relationships among the tribals, mainstream groups and national governments vary from country to country, but overall, there are marked instances of violation of rights of tribal communities. The history of the Bodo communities is also often marked by dramatic events such as land encroachments, forceful relocation and other abuses. Political exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation had hampered many Bodos groups' ability to secure a livelihood for themselves and their children. According to one informant because of their under-representation in national and local politics, the Bodos feel that they are frequently left out of mainstream development efforts and policy-making processes⁹. These have changed a bit after the formation of the BTC though. Not only are their interests often ignored during the planning and implementation of development programmes and policies, but dominant

⁹ Mr. D. Basumatary is one of my informants who has talked about this unfair feeling. According to him, the government sometimes entrusts them with ideas and schemes that are not beneficial for them but make them lazier. For instance, he talks about the government's scheme of providing rice grains for one rupee per kilogram. He feels that inspire go helping the people, such scheme is making the people lazier. Moreover, the states in Assam are very rich in production so making the people lazier is exploiting the natural resources.

groups often consider indigenous groups as impediments to the progress of the overall society.

Misperceptions about the Bodos again may create situations in which they suffer negative effects from development interventions that aim to be of assistance. It is also seen that the Bodo people also frequently face transboundary challenges and confusion. Owing to the historical longevity and continuity of their societies, some of the Bodos have found it difficult to assimilate the nation-state paradigm, or have even been rejected by the national governments in their geographical locations. For instance, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) of 2003 failed mainly because of the Assam government's failure to demarcate a specific geographical landscape for the autonomous council. Ambiguous definitions of the Bodo identity also cause serious problems, as the Bodos feel that they are frequently partly inside and partly outside the political, legal and cultural boundaries of the demarcated areas for a separate homeland in which they live. Many educated Bodo youths have left community life (where physical labour is hard) in search for more 'modern' lifestyles. Their desires to become part of wider society has generated many identity struggles and feelings of disconnect between older and younger generations, leading to increased communal tensions. As a matter of fact, the indigenous agricultural systems are increasingly facing shortage of agricultural labour within their own community owing to which the people often discard their traditional livelihood and try for better and easier options. Disowning of traditional livelihood means is leading to increasing rate of poverty, unemployment and other factors of livelihood insecurity, and thereby creating new avenues for violence and conflicts among community members, particularly against women and children.

These points demonstrate how the Bodos face challenges from both environmental and human-related dimensions, as well as forces from within and outside their own societies. Development programmes often fail to consider these multiple sources of discrimination and deprivations in a holistic way. Along with redressing issues at the national and state levels, in fact, the issues of structural discrimination that are internal to many other communities are left out. It was felt that greater consciousness of local dynamics is important to ensure that the Bodo peoples' issues need to be approached with appropriate information and caution. One instance of such is the road blockade by Bodo women. On August 28, 2017, the National Highways that pass through the BTAD wore a deserted look. The highways were blocked by the Bodo women in an agitation against the Centre's negligence towards the Bodos' demand for a separate homeland. This blockade was put up at two different junctures of the national highways - one at the Chirang district headquarter Kajalgaon on NH31C and the other at Udalguri district NH15 Orang. This was the first time in the history of the Bodoland movement that witnessed the Bodo women facilitating an activity to push forward the demand for a separate homeland.

Present leaders of the Bodoland movement like Pramod Boro¹⁰, Gabinda Basumatary and so on express their dissent upon the failure of the BJP government to fulfil the promise of carving out a separate state of Bodoland from Assam made in the 2014 elections. Pramod Boro once stated during a mass agitation about the passing of twenty bills by the BTAD in relation to land and revenue of the Bodoland Territorial Council in its

¹⁰ Pramod Boro is the present president of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). ABSU is a student organisation of the Bodos. Th ABSU is considered as one of the important organisation responsible for the development of the Bodoland demand. ABSU has been consistently associated with the Bodoland movement since its inception and is still continuing with the same. The constitution of ABSU was adopted in 2nd March, 1969 (Sujith Choudhury (1991: 67)).

areas to the state government. He further states that in spite of reviewing the bills and redressing the same, or forwarding it to the Central government for rectification the Government of Assam paid no attention to those bills. The Bodoland movement leaders thus felt left out and unattended. They justify that the creation of a separate state only would meet the aspirations of the Bodos (Acharya, 2017: 2). Hence, in order to renew the mobilisation of the demand for a separate homeland, a huge number of Bodo women led the road blockade of August 28, 2017. However, this is not the first incidence where highways were blocked in order to facilitate the demand for a separate homeland. In the preceding years as well, many times the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in collaboration with other Bodo groups put up blockades of the railways and the highways. Pramod Boro substantiates that this kind of blockades has made the Bodos, as well as the non-Bodo people aware of the Bodoland demand and the mass participation of the people in such blockades, prove it.

Some core principles of the Bodo peoples' identity and their advocacy

A considerable proportion of the world's insecure population, be it in terms of resources or other development factors, comes from indigenous communities, and this number is rising. Over the years, the Bodos have mobilised individually and collectively to affirm their rights nationally and to counteract the problems that threaten their livelihoods and identities. This call for recognition has evolved through several decades of engagement in regional and national processes. Although the Bodos are culturally distinct, they share a number of common principles and they have to some extent made concrete advances in demanding nationally recognised rights and autonomy (as evidenced by declarations and formation of the BTC government). The creation of BTC, thus, gives them one platform to show their uniformity and increase their political importance. A number of core principles to which the Bodos adhere can thus be identified. They are reported in the following subsections to provide a better understanding of the Bodos' broader claims and points of view.

The Bodos have unique cultures and world views, which make their needs and aspirations for the future. They have a different concept of development and it differs from the mainstream concept of the same. Apart from the broader idea of what development in a society denotes, the Bodos perceive that development should also enable the Bodo tribes to capture the various cultures associated to them. In a way it should allow them to maintain their distinct character and not only set actions about a particular community's progress. The Bodos seek the adoption of a culturally sensitive approach to development, which listens to their appeals and includes them as legitimate and respected contributor or associate. For the Bodos, the right to development is understood as their right to decide the kind of development that takes place on their lands and territories, in accordance with their own priorities and conceptions of well-being. The development goals of them are therefore closely linked to their ability to exercise decision-making in their communities, maintain rights over their lands and resources, protect the rights of groups within their communities, and live according to their cultures and traditions. This institutional reworking is now commonly referred to as "development with identity or alternative development", these concepts of development emphasizes the need to introduce a more holistic approach that does not ignore cultural meaning and impose a predetermined developmental path.

The Bodos have underlined their desire to determine their own future in accordance with their ways of life. However, even the creation of a separate council by the

governments do not allow complete autonomy to the Bodos. This very aspect has led the Bodo peoples' representatives and national leaders to be continuously involved in discussions about the extent and implications of a separate state (Basumatary, 2012: 35). The Bodos try to maintain a balance between the council autonomy and their integration into the national system by participating in the elections of the state and the country as well. But the Bodos also seek other ways of maintaining their distinct identity in the form of a separate state.

In spite of the allotted territorial council, the Bodos are still demanding that they be given a separate state. As discussed earlier there are many factors governing the movement of the Bodos for a separate state, there are also some that are related to the state and central government policies. Sometimes the policy measures taken by the government directly affects the overall progress of the Bodos. For instance, the order of the government to stop vernacular medium in schools in 2016 was one such act of the government. The present government of Assam has reinforced the language discourse and proposed to introduce legislation in the Assembly in order to make Assamese language as a compulsory subject in all the schools of Assam irrespective of the affiliated boards (Central Board of Secondary Education, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan and Secondary Board of Education in Assam). The government has to some extent given liabilities to the students of Barak Valley and the Bodo dominated areas to opt for Bengali and Bodo language respectively (Singh, 2017). However, this move by the government can be seen as a way of minimizing the potential resistance to language domination and to sabotage the demands of the Bodos for a separate state. Moreover, the proposed provision of opting for the Bodo language as an optional subject can also be seen as the government's strategy to not re-instantiate the Bodo Sahitya Sabha's (BSS)¹¹ demand for a separate board of education for the Bodo medium schools. This aspect emphasizes that indigenous peoples must be included in consultation processes, that the time requirements for this be respected, and that information on the likely impact of activities be provided. Consultation and participation process by the government can ensure that the tribal communities' concerns and interests match the objectives of the planned activity or action.

The Bodo peoples' claims for greater sovereignty and recognition are grounded in a basic human rights framework. Beyond this, however, indigenous peoples view their rights differently from traditional human rights law, and demand the acknowledgment of specific collective rights for full articulation of their appeals. The collective rights of the Bodo peoples include recognition of their distinct histories, distinct languages, distinct identity and distinct culture. The Bodos also claim their rights over their lands, territories and natural resources in a collectively manner. These they do by signifying the space which they have traditionally occupied and used since they set foot in the region.

Conclusion: The Regional Production of Bodo Identity

The paper began with addressing the tribal question of identity in the regional and national context. Departing from the questions that ask about the historical eminence of migration, this paper focused upon the issues and concerns of the Bodos in their original habitats. In a way the paper focused upon how regional movements mobilises the people for a political autonomy. The analysis of the Bodoland movement refers directly to the 'pan-Indian

¹¹ Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) is a literary organisation of the Bodos. BSS was formed in 1952 under the presidency of Joy Bhadra Haggler. Haggler was a Dimasa leader of that time. BSS has been engaged in raising the issue of language, and script for the Bodos since its inception (Deka, 2014: 174).

concept' (Baruah, 1999: 91)¹². The leaders who lead the Bodo movement tactically construct their demands in the ideological language of the people by reflecting their basic principles and ideas and by putting it in the context of the Indian nation state.

The ideas and principles of the same can be summarized in the context of the territorialisation of the Bodo's ethno-space, their trust in the federal structure of India, principles of democracy and the demand for Bodoland as an imagined solution to the Bodo problems. The imagined ethnic space reflects in it the unity of ethnicity and their belonging to a homeland of their own. Looking at the context of the allocated territorial council, the region often has been highlighted for many wrong reasons intermittently in the past. These wrong reasons, however, still gets highlighted and it often become a hinderance in maintaining peace and harmony in the region. There is also however the question of accommodating the other aboriginal people residing in the region. The paper as whole was limited to understand the need and the aspiration of the Bodo tribe and their demand for a separate homeland. As a matter of fact, the demanded homeland is not just a piece of land but it is the reflection of the cry of the Bodos who feel that their identity has been lost with the mass. This homeland as aspired by the tribal Bodos is a symbolic dimension of their ethnic space and a means of acquiring the Bodo tribe's distinct identity.

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¹² Baruah gives a very daring and comprehensible explanation of the political and economic history of Assam. He argues that Assam from the time had become a part of British India and a leading tea-producing region of the nineteenth century. Baruah traces the history of cohesion between pan-Indianism and Assamese sub-nationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism. As argued by him, the region's insurgencies, human rights abuses by government security forces and insurgents, ethnic violence are largely due to India's federal structure. On the other hand, however, this federal structure is but actually centralised governmental structure. Baruah further argues that in multiethnic polities, loose federations not only make better democracies, in the era of globalisation they make more economic sense as well.

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