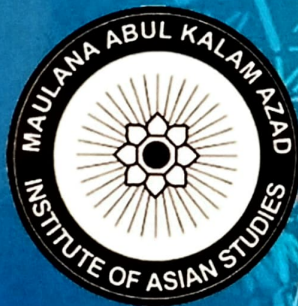


Identity Assertions and The Context of Conflicts in Southeast Asia

Organised by
Department of English
Madhab Choudhury College, Barpeta, Assam



In collaboration with
Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies
(MAKAIAS), Kolkata



Editors
Dr. Bhatima Barman
Dr. Bhaskarjyoti Gogoi

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An Analysis on the Bodo Identity Politics and the Demand for Bodoland Statehood

Roman Borgohain

Asstt. Professor

Dept. of Pol. Science

Madhab Choudhury College, Barpeta

E-mail: bgroman28@gmail.com

Abstract

The Bodos are part of the larger Bodo-Kachari umbrella and one of the largest Scheduled Tribes in Assam. Organised Bodo movement dates back to 1960's and the Bodo identity politics is characterised by both democratic and extremist aspects. Bodo movement is largely associated with the fear of multi-dimensional identity crisis caused by migration, influence of hegemonic culture, lack of economic, cultural and social security and so on. Under the umbrella of ABSU as well as other Bodo organisations, greater autonomy for the Bodos was raised in a organised manner resulting in large scale protest movements subsequently. Parallely, emergence of Bodo militant outfits like NDFB and BLT gave a new direction to such efforts by demanding sovereign and separate Bodoland. Bodo identity politics is characterised by both democratic peaceful protests as well as brutal form of violence. Emergence of political parties representing Bodos and signing of the Bodo-Accords by the government pacified the heat and hostilities of the movement. As of now three Bodo Accords have been signed to accommodate the demands of both the democratic and extremist stakeholders but the demand for Bodoland statehood is not over yet.

Key-words: Bodo movement; identity politics; militant outfits; statehood demand; Bodo-Accords

Introduction

Bodos (also known as 'Kacharis') are the largest group of Assam's plains tribes. As per the All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), Bodos are as those who speak or are supposed to have one spoken language belonging to the Bodo group. Bodos are the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India and they migrated from South-West China to North-East India through Tibet and Bhutan centuries ago. Historically, under colonial rule and also after independence, major sections of Bodos merged into the Assamese population. Bodos are one of the largest scheduled tribes in Assam mostly centered in the Kokrajhar, Chirang,

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Baksa and Udalguri districts of Assam. They constitute about 5-6% of Assam's population.

Many historians claim that the identity consciousness among the tribals of Assam dates back to the colonial times. The formation of the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL) in 1933 under the leadership of Rupnath Brahma reflects the identity assertion among the tribal communities. The main objective of AAPTL was to protect the identities and interests of tribal people of Assam. The emergence Tribal League as a major political force also consolidated the demand for protection and fulfillment of plain tribals' interest in Assam. But on the basis of assurance from Congress party regarding tribals' interests, Tribal League merged with the former later on. The rise of Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952 and other Bodo organisations namely All Bodo Students' Union" (ABSU), Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) etc brought hope for Bodo identity movement. The initial demand for Udayachal later on resulted in the demand for separate Bodoland for the Bodo people. Moreover, the rise of Bodo militant outfits like Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) etc. brought the serious issue of sovereignty on the course of Bodo identity movement.

Objective

The very objective of this study is to understand the identity politics by Bodos in Assam and it's very nature. It will also trace the development of Bodo movement in Assam, it's demand for separate and sovereign Bodoland statehood as well as the subsequent negotiations regarding the same. This study will help to have an overall understanding of the identity movement by the Bodo people, popularly known as Bodo movement related to separate and sovereign Bodoland statehood demand.

Methodology

The historical as well as analytical cum descriptive methods are followed while going through this study. This study is purely based on secondary sources like books, journals, articles, e-sources and so on.

Inception of the Bodo Movement

Formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 was a major boost for the identity assertion of the Bodos. It raised the issue of language and script in relation to consolidation of the Bodo identity. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed on 15th February, 1967 at a time when the then PM Indira Gandhi proposed to reorganize the state of Assam on 13th January, 1967. The Bodo leadership also formed a political party called the Plains Tribals' Council of Assam (PTCA). The same year PTCA launched a popular movement with the demand for a new state for all the plains tribes of Assam. PTCA, under the leadership of Samar Brahma Chowdhury and Charan Narzary, President and General Secretary respectively, proposed the demand for a separate state called 'Udayachal' on the north bank of Brahmaputra for the "plain tribes" of Assam. In continuation of the agitation, both PTCA and ABSU boycotted the state Assembly Election in 1968 on demand of re delimitation of the Tribal

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Reserved constituencies. Both the president and general secretary was arrested and jailed to curb the agitation and suppress the demand. The Central Government agreed to provide autonomous council against the demand of Udayachal statehood of PTCA. But PTCA rejected the offer of autonomous council and sustained to their demand for Udayachal. But the ideological difference and conflict within PTCA was weakening the movement for statehood. Subsequently a section of members of PTCA separated themselves from PTCA and split in 1984, with one of its militant leaders, Binai Khunger Basumatary, forming a new party named the United Tribal Nationalists' Liberation Front, Assam (UTNLF). The Government remained indifferent and passive to the PTCA demand for separate state. Finally PTCA gave up agitation for a separate homeland after it joined the Janata government in 1978-79.

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha along with ABSU and PTCA agitated 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 Bodo representatives. At this stage the then PM Indira Gandhi intervened and according to her suggestion, Devanagiri script was adopted by Bodo Sahitya Sabha giving up the demand for Roman script.

In the mean time under the leadership of All-Assam Students Union (AASU) an anti-foreigners movement in Assam, also known as Assam Movement, began in 1979. This movement lasted for six years and came to an end after the signing of 'Assam Accord' in 1985. A new political party formed by ex-AASU leaders, The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) grabbed power in Assam. During this period, Bodo movement was not in action at all as the entire focus was on the Assam Movement. During the Assam movement and Bodo youths worked along with the AASU. The ABSU also received strong support from the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. But soon after the AGP coming into power, 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 accused that none of the provision and directives had been implemented by the Assam state government.

ABSU and the renewed effort

Looking at the spiritless state and failure of other organisations, ABSU took the charge

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of Bodo movement and gave a new direction under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma. When ABSU failed to bring in the other plains tribes for a new movement, it decided to move ahead on its own and they gave up the earlier vague demand for a 'tribal homeland' in favour of a full-fledged state of 'Bodoland' for the plains tribals. It ushered a new era in the history of Bodo movement with the beginning of 'democratic and non-violent' movement. Under the visionary leader UN Brahma, the movement intensified from 1987. On January 1, 1987 ABSU submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta mainly demanding for separate State highlighting socio-economic, cultural and educational issues of the Bodos in their 92 points charter of demands. Likewise, ABSU organised a massive rally at Judges' Field in Guwahati on 12th June 1987. With thousands of Bodos participation the rally echoed entire Guwahati with the sloganeering "Divide Assam 50-50" and "Do or Die".

In subsequent years ABSU took drastic steps to intensify their movement. In their agitation it took series of bold steps like *bandh*, *rail roko*, national highway blockade, hunger strike etc. ABSU, in its 1988 conference held in Bashbari, took a major decision to suspend 89 non-political demands and retained only three major political demands – 1. Separate state of "Bodoland" curving out of Assam, 2. Creation of Nilachal and Lalung Autonomous Councils, and 3. Inclusion of Boro-Kocharis living in the Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills in the ST (Hills) list. In this conference, another ally organisation of ABSU called Bodo Peoples' Action Committee (BPAC) was formed with a view to muster the greater support and participation of Bodos irrespective of their political affiliations. Along with BPAC, several organizations like All Bodo Employees Federation, Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation etc actively co-operated with the ABSU in its demand. However, the Bodoland movement turned violent under various circumstances and compulsions. Further, the violence escalated when the state machinery and the police tried to suppress the agitators with iron fist.

The First Bodo Accord, 1993

On February 20, 1993, the All-Bodo Students Union and the Bodo Peoples' Action Committee (BPAC) signed Bodo Accord with the central and the state governments to end the violent Bodoland movement. As a result of this accord, an elected Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) comprising contiguous geographical areas was constituted. The Accord left the question of its precise territorial jurisdiction open and provided that the government will scrutinise the list of villages submitted by Bodo activists having 50 percent and more population and even villages having less than 50 per cent tribal population shall be included.

Though an interim BAC was formed, elections could not be held because of the disagreement and confusion over the territorial jurisdiction of the new body. The BAC could never exercise whatsoever limited autonomy was provided by the act mainly because of insufficient financial powers and overwhelming domination of the state government over most of the transferred subjects. The Government of Assam unilaterally demarcated and declared

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the boundary of the BAC in the later part of 1993, which was rejected by the ABSU and BPAC and this resulted in large-scale violence in different parts of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar and the gruesome massacre in Barpeta in 1994. Subsequently in July 1994, ABSU launched an agitation against the non-implementation of the Accord and in 1996, it revived its demand for a separate state.

Militancy and the Second Bodo Accord, 2003

The period of Bodo movement was well known for the emergence of militant outfit called Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) also known as Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), formed on 18 June 1996 by Prem Singh Brahma and Hagrama Mohilary. This armed militant group mainly operated in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam and demanded for a separate state of Bodoland for the Bodo people. Due to its organisational strength and armed struggle, the BLT gradually became the *de facto* guardian organisation of the Bodo movement. In July 1999, it declared unilateral ceasefire in response to the central government's appeal for talks. The BLT cadres led by Hagrama Mohilary surrendered before the government with arms and ammunitions at Kokrajhar on 6th December, 2003. On 10 February 2003, the central government, the BLT and the state government signed the Second Bodo Accord for creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under modified provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The BTC was comprised of four districts, viz., Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri and legislative, executive, administrative and financial powers were given with respect to the subjects transferred to it. Out of the total 46 members in the BTC, 30 will be from Scheduled Tribes, five will be non-tribals, five from the general category and six would be nominated by the government from among unrepresented sections. Under the Sixth Schedule, the BTC had control over land, any forests other than reserved forests, any canal or water course for purposes of agriculture, any form of shifting cultivation, establishment of village and town committees, all matters relating to village and town administration, appointment of headmen for villages and towns, inheritance of property, conducting marriages and divorces and other social customs. However, laws made by the Council in all the areas under its control must have the assent of the Governor of Assam. And again, the Governor can dissolve a council on the recommendation of a committee appointed by him for the purpose of reporting on its functioning.

Different non-Bodo organisations opposed the formation of the BTC and 18 non-Bodo organisations together formed the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) to oppose the proposed Accord. They launched a series of agitations and have been organising strong agitational programmes with the support of non-Bodos within the BTC area even after the Accord was signed. The main argument of these non-Bodo organisations against the BTC is that Bodos constitute only 25 per cent of total population in the BTC area and this quarter of population should not be given the right to rule over the other three fourths of the total population.

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Demands of NDFB

The Bodo Security Force (BdSF) formed in 1986 was renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in 1996. Demands of NDFB included various political as well as non-political demands. The outfit was never ready to compromise on the question of sovereignty since its formation. NDFB since its inception, as per their constitution, aimed at liberating Bodoland from the Indian expansionism and occupation and to uphold the Integrity and Sovereignty of Bodoland. It also raised voice for the Bodo language and cultural identity and demanded for the preservation of Tribal Belt Block. They also raised voice against the illegal migrant issues as they regarded as the threatening factors towards the indigenous population of Assam.

Meanwhile, the phase 1996-2003 was the phase of ideological clashes and a phase of intra group clashes rather than the Bodoland movement. Because, the ideological differences had made NDFB and BLTF two rivals groups and decided to annihilate each other due to mutual distrust and rivalry and they declared war against each other. The BSS President Bineswar Brahma was assassinated in the year 2000 by NDFB due to the approval of Devanagari script instead of Roman Script. After a meeting held on 10 January 2001 in Bhutan, on 16 January, 2001, NDFB release press statement that the NDFB would be involved in 'selective killings' targeting rival Bodo groups such as the BLT, ABSU, BSS, BPAC and the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation. Meanwhile, on 1st January, 2010, The Interpol issues a red corner notice against chairman of the anti-talks faction of the NDFB, Ranjan Daimary, who is wanted as Doimari Ranjan alias Ronsaigra Nabla Doimari alias D.R. Nabla. Sources said the serial bomb blasts in Assam on October 30, 2008 led to the red corner notice against Daimary.

On December 28, 2008, a day after Ranjan Daimary issued a statement claiming to be the chairman of the NDFB, the outfit's Publicity And Information Secretary S. Sanjarang said in a press release that B. Sungthagra alias Dhiren Boro was its president, confirming the rift within the outfit. On 1st January, 2009, NDFB expelled its founder president, Ranjan Daimary *alias* D.R. Nabla, after replacing him with B. Sungthagra *alias* Dhiren Boro as its new chief. Ultimately NDFB suffered split into three factions- NDFB (R), NDFB (P) and NDFB (S) due to internal conflict.

However, following certain positive indications and messages from the Government of India, NDFB entered into a formal ceasefire on November 29, 2013 and since then, they have been holding talks with the government interlocutors. But sudden Fast Tract trial of the leaders and cadres of the NDFB (R) faction Chairman Ranjan Daimari and several other accused in the serial blast on 30th October 2008. The honourable CBI Special Court pronounced its judgement and quantum of punishment on 28th and 30th of January, 2019 awarding life sentences to Chairman Ranjan Daimary and nine others in the said case. The Bodo people, its

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apolitical, political and intelligentsias expressed their apprehensions that this might derail and jeopardise the hard earned peace process.

Recent Development In Bodo Movement

In 2010, ABSU started the third phase of separate state Bodoland movement afresh under the leadership of Pramod Boro, the then president of ABSU when the UPA government announced creation of new state Telengana curving out of Andhra Pradesh state. The creation of Telengana on 2nd June, 2014 rekindled the hope of the Bodos for a separate Bodoland state. In this light ABSU-PJACBM-UDP and BPPF on 4 September 2013 under the leadership of ABSU submitted a memorandum to the Home Minister of India demanding separate state Bodoland along with other issues. The NDFB which was fighting for sovereign Bodoland during its initial years have also retracted to separate state of Bodoland within Indian Union. All these developments ultimately resulted in the signing of Third Bodo Accord on 27 January 2020 between the Government of India and the Government of Assam on one side and all the factions of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and United Bodo Peoples' Organisation (UBPO) on the other. Under the terms of this agreement, a Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) was formed with enhanced executive and legislative powers. The Bodoland Territorial Council will have competency over almost all areas defined by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and its membership will be increased to 60. The boundary of BTR will be redrawn and the contiguous Bodo inhabited areas from neighbouring districts will be included and the non-Bodo inhabited territories which are currently under the jurisdiction of the BTC will be excluded. The agreement also makes the Bodo language with Devnagri script an associate official language of Assam. Currently, BTR is made up of five districts viz. Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri and Tamulpur which are further subdivided into 10 Civil Subdivisions and 40 Development Blocks. Under the terms of a peace agreement signed in January 2020, a few new districts will be created for BTR namely Gossaigaon district from Kokrajhar, Bhergaon district from Udalguri, Mainaosri district from Sonitpur and Hologgi district from Biswanath and Lakhimpur district. Besides the memorandum of the settlement says that the criminal cases registered against members of the NDFB factions for "non-heinous" crimes shall be withdrawn by the Assam government and in cases of heinous crimes it will be reviewed. A Special Development Package of Rs. 1500 Crore would be given by the Centre to undertake specific projects for the development of Bodo areas. Under this accord, the Assam government will set up a Bodo-Kachari Autonomous Council, which will be a satellite council for the focussed development of Bodo villages outside the BTR on the lines of the existing six councils for plains tribes.

Conclusion

On electoral front, the latest Bodoland Territorial Council election was held between 7-10 December 2020 and the ruling BPF was uprooted from power. With the support of

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BJP, the leader of the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), Pramod Boro, became the new Chief Executive Member of the Bodoland Territorial Council on 15 December 2020 with Gobinda Basumatary becoming the Deputy Chief Executive. Subsequently, a new twelve member executive committee was formed with eight members from the United People's Party Liberal, seven members from the Bharatiya Janata Party and one member from the Gana Suraksha Party.

Recently a new students' union called Bodo National Students' Union (BoNSU) has revived the Bodoland statehood demand that is said to have ended with the signing of the Bodo Peace Accord in January 2020. The BoNSU has submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi through the Kokrajhar district head, demanding a separate State for the Bodo people. The president of the BoNSU, Bonjit Manjil Basumatary said they were not satisfied with the BTR accord as it will not fulfill the aspirations of the Bodo people. However, Pramod Boro, the current chief of Bodoland Territorial Council and a signatory to the accord as then ABSU president, had said that the Bodoland statehood demand ended with the Bodo Peace Accord, also known as the BTR Accord, signed on Jan 27, 2020.

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