

UNDERSTANDING THE BODO MOVEMENT: IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The Bodo movement refers to the socio-political mobilization that emerged in the late 20th century in Assam emphasizing the indigenous Bodo community's aspiration and struggle for the recognition of unique identity, cultural heritage and territorial rights. With its desire to attain greater autonomy and self-determination the movement mobilized the Bodo people through various forms of protests including strikes, rallies and civil disobedience. This paper makes an attempt to analyse how a complex interplay of historical, economic and cultural factors have shaped the trajectory of the movement. Focusing on the exclusivist tendencies generated by the movement the paper makes a critical investigation of the serious implications when a particular ethnic group obsessively pursues its identity politics with definite territorial claim in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Territorial claim based on narrow ethnic lines driven by exclusivist tendencies and informed by militant politics renders the other minority communities in the particular living space in a position of grave disadvantage undermining their rights. The paper argues that attempts made by the Bodo leadership to create a homogenous Bodo-inhabited area by carrying out a string of indiscriminate attacks, and process of ethnic cleansing against the non-Bodos in a shared homeland that is characterized by ethnic diversity not only in terms of plurality but of shared geographical and cultural space, essentially problematized the idea of democratic living in a shared homeland.

Keywords: Identity politics, Bodoland, ABSU, political violence, ethnicity, autonomy, ethnic cleansing

Introduction

The Bodos are the largest "plains tribals" of Assam, and they are considered to be first native or indigenous people of Assam. One of the Bodo documents outlines the larger Bodo group on the basis of language which includes BoroKachari, Rabha, Sonowal, Lalung, Deuri, Dimasa,

Barman, Garo, Hajong and Hajo, Kachari, Chutia and Moran Kachari.¹ The Bodos belong to the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mangoloid ethnic group. They exercised sovereignty and ruled over Assam until around 1825 A.D. M.S. Prabhakarapoints out that “once and not so long ago either, they occupied practically the whole of the northeastern region.”² However, now they are mostly settled in the northern areas of the Brahmaputra valley, mainly in Kokrajhar, Darrang, Goalpara and Kamrup districts. In the year 1992 those who identified as Bodo speakers were 1.1 million, or 11.5 percent of the population of the north bank of Brahmaputra.³

The Bodos rely heavily on land as their main occupation is cultivation and in fact earlier they were shifting cultivators. However, with the growing scarcity of land due to the population growth, both natural and migrant, they gradually settled for settled cultivation. During the British period though the “hill tribes” were provided protection in the form of Line System, considering the fact that the Bodos were mostly shifting cultivators the British did not grant them the privilege of Line System and they were rather provided protection in the form of Tribal Belts and Blocks. However, the protection in this format proved quite ineffective in the course with the non-tribal encroaching upon tribal belts. Also, in the course of development, unlike “hill tribals”, the “plains tribals” and importantly the Bodos who are the largest plains tribals did not get any protective facilities like autonomy or any autonomous district council to manage their affairs.

The Bodos are both culturally and racially different from the ethnic Assamese. However, unlike the hill tribes, the Bodos have largely been integrated into Assamese society and culture. Over the centuries, with the process of sanskritisation in Assam, various Bodo tribes gradually became integrated into an Assamese nation.⁴TillottamaMisra and UdayonMisra further points out that generally there has been a lively process of continuous interaction the Assamese Hindu and the original tribal autochthons of the region, resulting in the intermixing languages, religious practices, folk festivals,dresses and food habits. Nonetheless the Bodos tremendously contributed to the growth of Assamese nationality. M.S. Prabhakara points out that the Bodo people in fact, formed the base of the present day Assamese society as they contributed to the growth of composite Assamese society and culture.⁵ On the other and, in the post-colonial Assam the Bodos have remained largely marginalized and poor. Successive governments have been accused of anti-tribal policies. The political awareness among the tribals, particularly in the post-colonial

¹ ABSU, Why Separate State?, Annexure III in ChandanaBhattacharjee, Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement: Case of BodoKacharis of Assam, p. 289

² M.S. Prabhakara, The Politics of a Script: Demand For Acceptance of Roman Script For Bodo Language, EPW, Vol. 9, No. 51 (Dec. 21, 1974), p. 2097

³Sanjib Baruah, India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, p. 175

⁴TillottamaMisra and UdayonMisra, Movements for Autonomy in India’s Northeast, in T.V. Sathyamurthy ed., Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India, vo. 3, p. 123

⁵ M.S. Prabhakara, The Politics of a Script: Demand For Acceptance of Roman Script For Bodo Language, EPW, Vol. 9, No. 51 (Dec. 21, 1974), p. 2099

Assam, resulted in the plains tribals gradually asserting their ethnic identity and culture. BodoSahitya Sabha, the highest literary body of the Bodos and the political organization Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) besides All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) were also formed. However, the ethnic assertions by the Bodos faced stiff competition from the Assamese counterpart who perceived such assertions by a minority community as a threat to the larger project of Assamisation.

In such a context, the emergence of the Bodo movement, after the failure of methods of memorandum highlighting their grievances and joining political establishment, not only challenges the Assamese hegemony but also exposes the vulnerability of a minority community vis-à-vis the dominant Assamese nationality, in a political set up dominated by the high caste Assamese leadership. In the words of HirenGohain, the Bodo movement is "a demand for self-determination from a group of racially and culturally distinct people who no longer want to share a particular territory with other groups and who no longer recognize the government of the state as representing their interests and aspirations."⁶ Thus, the prolonged injustice and exploitation in the present democratic institutional set up made the Bodos believe that in order to retain their cultural identity an adequate share of political power is very much important and could be considered as a necessary condition, more particularly for the all-round development of the Bodos.

Rise of the Bodo movement: Assertion of an ethnic identity

The Bodo movement asserting its ethnic identity did not emerge all of a sudden out of nowhere, but it essentially builds on the long standing grievances of the plains tribals of Assam. Historically, the plains tribals have been claiming greater autonomy and preservation of tribal Belts and Blocks. In the post-colonial Assam, the roots of the present Bodo movement is traced back to 1967 when Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) which was formed in 1979, demanded a political unit for the plains tribals of Assam in the form of Union Territory to be called Udayachal. All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) also provided its support to the PTCA in its demand for Udayachal and the two organizations worked in collaboration. Both PTCA and ABSU were formed and PTCA made the demand for Udayachal immediately after the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's proposal on 13 January, 1967 to reorganize Assam on the basis of a federal structure. However this movement for Udayachal eventually failed to actualize.

The present form of the Bodo movement was launched in 1987 by the ABSU (UB) with a demand for a separate state, Bodoland, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. A coordination committee Bodo Peoples Autonomous Council was also formed. In the wake of the leadership

⁶HirenGohain, Bodo Stir in Perspective, EPW, Vol.24, No. 25 (Jun. 24, 1989), p. 1377

provided by the more enthusiastic youth members of ABSU, the Bodo movement for separate Bodoland received new strength as the younger Bodo leaders started successfully mobilizing and rallying Bodo people behind the demand for a separate state for Bodos. The movement was launched on the basis of 92-point charter of demand which was submitted to the Governor of Assam. The charter of demand highlighted the grievances of the Bodos in relation to the demand for a Bodo homeland. Sanjib Baruah opines that the demands can largely be classified in three categories and they are-(a) cultural and language demands (b) demands related to economic development and the expansion of opportunities, and (c) demands related to residual category. To quote Sanjib Baruah, "Among the cultural and language demands are the implementation of Bodo as associate official language in Bodo areas, introduction of Roman script for Bodo, the teaching of Bodo in schools and universities, government support for cultural projects such as Bodo filmmaking, the establishment of a museum and television stations focused on Bodo programming, expansion of Bodo programmes on existing State-owned radio and television networks, and the abolition of the language requirement of Assamese for state government employment."⁷ These demands clearly highlighted the cultural and language related aspirations of the Bodos.

The ABSU charter of demand claimed that historically the Assamese and the central governments have been biased towards the Bodo demands. Accordingly, then the creation of a separate state- a Bodo homeland, is seen as the only alternative to meet the prevailing grievances of the Bodos. The ABSU leadership claimed that since successive governments in Assam have been largely anti-tribal in its approach, hence the solution of the problem was in sharing Assam and its administration fifty-fifty by the tribals and Assamese. With the spread of education the political consciousness among the Bodos was growing considerably and the educated Bodo youths started articulating the larger grievances of the Bodo community and became more aggressive in approach. The ABSU played crucial role in spreading awareness among the Bodos on the question of asserting their ethnic identity.

The context and the causes of the movement

The Bodo movement for a separate state emerged out of the long standing grievances of the Bodos- the largest plains tribals of Assam. If the non-fulfillment of their ethnic and cultural aspirations was at the heart of the movement, certain immediate factors largely shaped the emergence of the Bodo movement. Sanjib Baruah holds that "the legacy of New Delhi's northeast policy which has privileged separate states is a major factor in creating this impasse over Bodoland."⁸ Pointing to the case of tribal states of neighborhood, he argues, Bodo activists felt

⁷Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 189

⁸Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 197

that the Bodos too will do better in a separate state. In fact the Bodo movement for a separate Bodoland should be seen as being inspired by the historical injustice against the Bodos in matters related to land alienation, economic oppression, unemployment problem and cultural oppression. Importantly, the present form of Bodo movement is directly linked to, and inspired by the AASU led Assam movement as much as it is a result of the simmering of ties between the Bodos and ethnic Assamese during the course of the Assam movement and the larger consequences of the movement and the anti-tribal policies of the first AGP government hurting the tribal interest.

Whereas the colonial administration did not offer the plains tribals the kind of protection it provided to the “hill tribes” with the Line System, the policies restricting land transfer in “tribal blocks” have generally been far too weak to enable the plains tribals to defend their lands. Since the Bodos heavily rely on agriculture, the land is the prime source for them. However, it is argued that whereas 90% Bodos rely on land, 70% of them are landless today due to indebtedness, poverty and above all the entry of outsiders into essentially tribal areas.⁹HirenGohain asserts that many Bodo peasants lost their land in the merciless grip of money lenders and rural exploiters often from the majority community.¹⁰

M.S. Prabhakara holds that the “problem faced by the Bodo people has been in essence the problem faced by all less developed communities, when they are living with comparatively advanced groups of people under a common political system.”¹¹Whereas the unemployment problem among the Bodos is compounded by the act of making Assamese a compulsory language for the government jobs in Assam, on the one hand, the half-hearted implementation of the reservation policy made the matter worse. Therefore, the educated Bodos only developed disillusionment where the Assamese mainly cornered the lucrative job and monopolized administrative power. HirenGohain claims that the handful of educated Bodo youth faced stiff competition from the politically powerful caste-Hindu Assamese for employment opportunities which not only left them frustrated but also with a feeling of discrimination.¹² Data on the backlog of posts reserved for the tribals shows that in 1988, as many as 5534 jobs meant for tribals were lying vacant, which clearly points out that the tribals not only face unemployment under the present political set up but they also experienced unending discrimination in getting their rightful share in society.¹³

⁹Sudir Jacob George, *The Bodo Movement: Unrest to Accord*, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct., 1994), p. 881

¹⁰HirenGohain, *Bodo Stir in Perspective*, EPW, Vol.24, No. 25 (Jun. 24, 1989), p. 1377

¹¹ M.S. Prabhakara, *The Politics of a Script: Demand For Acceptance of Roman Script For Bodo Language*, EPW, Vol. 9, No. 51 (Dec. 21, 1974), p. 2100

¹²HirenGohain, *Bodo Stir in Perspective*, EPW, Vol.24, No. 25 (Jun. 24, 1989), p. 1377

¹³MonirulHussain, *Assam Movement: Class Ideology and Identity*, p. 178

Similarly on the cultural front the Bodos also experienced cultural oppression in the caste-Hindu Assamese society. Jyotirindra Dasgupta holds that the Bodos experienced grave disadvantage in matters of education, employment and importantly, cohesion of community due to the language policy in Assam. The urge to preserve the Bodo identity and culture was strongly reflected through various cultural and linguistic demands by the Bodos. "The policy of complete assimilation rather than integration, which has been pursued by successive governments in Assam including the former AGP administration, made the Bodos and other tribals feel that they had no chance to preserve their heritage and culture in these circumstances."¹⁴

Whereas the demand for Udayachal was made by the PTCA as early as in 1967, highlighting the larger concerns of the plains tribals, even decades after no improvement was made in the plight of the plains tribals and they largely remained marginalized and discriminated. The Bodos lent their support to the demand to stop influx of outsiders as in their own areas they had become minorities. However, in the course of the movement the tribals, and importantly the Bodos became apprehensive about the design of the ethnic Assamese. In the course of the Assam movement the demand made by the AASU to abolish the policy of reservation for SC/ST candidates and scholarship for SC/ST students aroused the strong anti-Assamese feeling among the tribals. Thus, during the course of the movement the ties between the Bodos and ethnic Assamese got significantly ruptured, and the Bodos gradually developed a strong suspicion about the real motives of the ethnic Assamese. On the other hand, during the signing of the Assam accord, the leaders of the movement did not take the tribals into confidence. Significantly, Clause 10 of the Assam Accord clearly stated that, "it will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws."¹⁵ However, when the AGP government promulgated a law to evict the unauthorized occupants of forest reserves and lands, it unfolded altogether a new dimension hurting the Bodo interests. This was then interpreted by the Bodos as yet another assault on them by the ethnic Assamese government which made them more apprehensive about the design of the ethnic Assamese.

The Bodo student leaders assumed the ethnic Assamese leaders of anti-"tribal" prejudices and the AGP government was consequently seen as an "Assamese government."¹⁶ A realization that the protection of their ethno-cultural identity was not possible within the present framework under the given circumstances urged them to intensify the Bodo movement. The underlying theme was that the Bodos in Assam were experiencing a process of alienation and the ethnic

¹⁴Sudir Jacob George, *The Bodo Movement: Unrest to Accord*, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct., 1994), p. 882

¹⁵ Assam Accord, Memorandum of Settlement, page- 3, also cited by Sudhir Jacob George in *The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord*, EPW, p. 881

¹⁶Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 175

Assamese insensitivity and cultural chauvinism was responsible for such a state of affair. Hence the Assamese exclusivist and insensitive approach towards the serious concerns of the Bodos, largely shaped the Bodo political discourse finally resulting in the form of an organized movement.

Thus, whereas the historical injustice done against the Bodos in matters related to land alienation, economic exploitation, unemployment problem and linguistic and cultural oppression laid the grounds for emergence of the Bodo movement, the rupturing of ties between the two communities- the Bodos and Assamese during the course of the Assam movement and the larger consequences of the Assam movement played the crucial role in shaping the course of the Bodo movement. The Bodo movement is largely inspired by the Assam movement. In fact, the Assam movement provided the model for the Bodos to assert their identity and culture by launching a movement on the pattern of the Assam movement. In the words of MonirulHussain, "Assam movement became their reference group/movement."¹⁷

Methods and Mobilisation: The Growth of the Bodo Movement

Observing the demand for a separate Bodoland, Sanjib Baruah points out three significant hurdles in this regard:

- a) While the demand is animated by the memory of ancient and of a distant past when Bodo culture may have flourished uncontaminated by Assamese culture, the population that today can be identified as Bodo speakers are only 1.1 million or 11.5 percent of the population of the north bank of the Brahmaputra, where the Bodos want their homeland to be.
- b) Even though there are Bodo majority villages and areas where the Bodo population is more concentrated, together they do not constitute a contiguous area that could be easily turned into a territory called Bodoland.
- c) The Bodo demand has occurred in a context of resurgent Assamese sub-nationalism that resents Assam's past divisions at the behest of New Delhi and opposes any further territorial division of Assam.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the Bodo movement under the leadership of ABSU (UB) soon started taking the momentum with the ABSU (UB) setting the goal to achieve a separate state by the year 1990 on the northern bank of Brahmaputra. Initial phase of the movement emphasized on mass

¹⁷MonirulHussain, State, Identity Movement and Internal Displacement in the North-East, Economic and Political Weekly, Vo. 35, No.51 (Dec. 16-22, 2000), p. 4521

¹⁸Sanjib Baruah, India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, pp. 175-76

mobilization through various programmes and initiatives taken by ABSU highlighting the marginalization of the Bodos within the given socio-political set up, and the danger to their ethnic culture and identity in the prevailing atmosphere. PahiSaikia holds that the mobilization potential of the Bodo movement was largely determined by the strong commitment and communication skills of the young ABSU leaders. The organization (ABSU) also involved the propaganda techniques for generating widespread support for the movement and undertook and organized various cultural programmes, mass rallies and seminars around the Bodo question to create awareness among the Bodo people. There were extensive mobilization campaigns such as protest demonstration, blockades, hunger strikes, workshops, cultural rallies and public sessions organized by ABSU at different places in Bodo areas.¹⁹ Such initiatives not only helped articulating the larger concerns of the Bodos by generating mass awareness but significantly such an extensive campaign also helped bring supporters from different social groups within the fold of the movement.

The young ABSU leaders provided leadership to the movement and made it more forceful, organized and radical in its expression. Importantly, ABSU combined the cultural concerns with demand for a separate state as it believed the creation of separate state would not only help them preserve the cultural and linguistic concerns but importantly with greater political power the long standing socio-economic grievances of the Bodos could also be resolved more effectively. In the words of PahiSaikia, “this essentially meant that by creating their own state, the group would have more independence and power in the process of political decision making, increased access, and the right to retain finances and other economic benefits generated within their territory.”²⁰ ABSU was also successful in channelizing the support of the BodoSahitya Sabha, the highest literary body of the Bodos, which also provided the sense of legitimacy to the movement, at least among the Bodos.

The initial phase of the movement was organized more or less peacefully with the democratic methods of protest and dissent. Therefore, the initial phase was characterized by ‘bandhs’, ‘dharnas’ road and rail blockades, mass rallies and processions. However, just like the Assam movement, it did not take too long for the movement to deviate from the peaceful and democratic form of protests. Since, 1989 onwards the movement largely acquired the shades of violence. Whereas the militant wing of the ABSU (UB) formed the Bodo Volunteer Force with Prem Singh Brahma leading the organization another militant group formed the more militant organization Bodo Security Force (Bd. SF) to achieve the goal of Bodoland. The presence of different militant organizations with differing tactics and strategy made the course of the Bodo

¹⁹PahiSaikia (2011): Political Opportunities, Constraints, and Mobilizing Structures: An Integrated Approach to Different Levels of Ethno-Political Contention in Northeast India, *India Review*, 10:1, p. 20

²⁰ Ibid., p. 21

movement turn out to be more violent. The Bodo movement is essentially characterized by the failure of the leadership to develop a consensus amongst themselves and provide a unified leadership to lead the movement in a democratic manner. On the contrary, there has been internal fighting and conflicts. ABSU (UB) and PTCA became arch-rival in the course of the movement and used violence against each other. Besides being opposed to the violent tactics adopted by the ABSU (UB) and its militant wing, the PTCA members did not adhere to the separatist ideas advocated by the ABSU (UB) and rather they sought political settlement within Assam. Such inter-organizational conflicts only added to intensify the killings and violent tendencies generated by the movement. Whereas on the one hand, violence was primarily directed against the state and its administration, the infighting between rival organizations resulted in the killing of many Bodo leaders, particularly belonging to the PTCA. By claiming that Bodo militants also served 'quit notices' to other non-Bodos living in Kokrajhar district besides killing several non-Bodo civilians, Tilottama Misra and Udayon Misra observe that "the primary purpose of this violent mode of protest was probably to draw attention of the entire nation to the Bodo problem."²¹ By the middle of April, 1989, more than 150 people were killed by the militants and almost a same number of people were killed in police firing and 'encounters'. Udayon Misra further points out that there were attacks on school buildings, bazaars, and public buildings, and by the same period militants had also burnt down 73 school and college buildings and 53 government buildings and destroyed approximately 15 bridges.²²

Since the movement with the demand for a separate state led by the young Bodo leaders started generating mass support among the Bodos during the first AGP government- the leaders of which had themselves led a similar movement earlier as the AASU members, on the lines of preserving distinct Asamiya identity. Therefore, it is interesting and important to observe the response of the government towards the assertion of ethnic identity and culture by the Bodos. To begin with the AGP government more or less viewed the Bodo agitation as a law and order problem. In the words of Tilottama Misra and Udayon Misra, "instead of viewing the entire crisis as a political and economic one the AGP leaders adopted an unsympathetic and belligerent attitude."²³ Accordingly the AGP government tried to bring the situation under control through the use of repressive measures. Kokrajhar, which along with Udalguri sub-division of Darrang district remained as the nerve centre of the Bodo movement, was declared the 'Disturbed Area' under the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955 and as many as 200 ABSU activists were put behind

²¹Tilottama Misra and Udayon Misra, *Movements for Autonomy in India's Northeast*, in T.V. Sathyamurthy ed., *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, vo. 3, p. 127

²²Udayon Misra, *Bodo Stir: Complex Issues, Unattainable Demands*, EPW, Vol. 24, No. 21 (May 27, 1989), p. 1147

²³Tilottama Misra and Udayon Misra, *Movements for Autonomy in India's Northeast*, in T.V. Sathyamurthy ed., *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, vo. 3, p. 129

the bar. To say the least, such repressive measures failed measurably and rather violence further intensified creating large scale destructions and the loss of innocent lives.

However, with the change of the guard at the central level after the fall of Rajiv Gandhi government, in the wake of growing violence it was realized that serious political attempt was needed to deal with the situation. Accordingly, some initiative was taken to resolve the crisis through dialogue and negotiation. Whereas the movement was suspended from August 1989, the government also responded positively by ordering the release of those who were detained under TADA and also withdrew the Disturbed Area Act. In the meantime, the process of talks and negotiation continued.

At the eighth round of talk as per the proposal of New Delhi, a three member committee, with Bhupinder Singh as the chairman, was appointed by the government. The task assigned to the committee was to: (i) clearly identify the areas of the Bodos and other plains tribes in the north of the Brahmaputra; and (ii) recommend legislative, financial and administrative powers that could be accorded to these areas.²⁴ The committee was also supposed to submit its detailed report within 45 days. At this juncture the Bodo leaders also responded positively by suspending their agitation for the 45 day period.

Finally, the ninth round of tripartite talks for settlement of Bodo problem was held in New Delhi in January in 1992. However, due to the failure of the expert committee to submit its report the talk could not proceed in the positive direction. This was interpreted by the Bodo leaders as the half-hearted attempts to accommodate the Bodo problem and soon unrest began to simmer again. This period particularly saw the stepping up of violent acts by the Bodo Security Force. In October 1992, two powerful bombs exploded killing 22 people and 50 people were injured.²⁵ In the wake of Bodo Security Force gaining prominence in some areas and the prospect of solution largely looking grim, in order to pressure the government the ABSU/BPAC decided to resume the agitation.

Following the series of violent ethnic clashes between Bodos and non-Bodos on the northern bank of Brahmaputra and some gruesome killings attributed to Bodo Security Force, both Assam and the central government felt the urgency to arrive at a political settlement of the Bodo problem. Finally after some ground work, the prospect of a settlement was created by 1993. ABSU/BPAC responded positively to the Centre's invitation for a political settlement and finally the Bodo accord was signed by the ABSU/BPAC leadership at Guwahati on February 20, 1993.

²⁴Sudhir Jacob George, The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34. No. 10 (Oct., 1994) p. 885

²⁵Sudhir Jacob George, The Bodo Movement: Unrest to Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct., 1994), p. 886

The Bodo Accord, 1993: An Interim Solution

With the signing of the Bodo accord, Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed under the provision of Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution. Bodoland Autonomous Council implied a statutory structure of autonomy within the state of Assam. The Bodoland Autonomous Council comprises the “contiguous geographical areas between river Sankosh and Mazbat/river Pasnoi.” However, on the precise territorial jurisdiction of the BAC, the accord stated: the land records authority of the state will scrutinize the list of villages furnished by the ABSU/BPAC having 50 percent and more of tribal population which shall be included in the BAC. For the purpose of providing a contiguous area, even villages having less than 50 percent tribal population shall be included.”²⁶

The Bodo accord maintained that the BAC will have a General Council comprising 40 members out of which 35 would be elected and the government could nominate 5 members to it. Similarly for the exercise of the executive powers there will be a Bodoland Executive Council (BEC). In the aftermath of the Bodo accord due to the pending elections, the executive powers were placed by the government in an interim BEC, led by former ABSU president Bwismitary and 16 leading members of the Bodo movement. General Council was also given the control over a total 38 subjects including forests, cultural affairs, tribal welfare, land, land revenue and revenue, cottage industry, education and social welfare. However, it did not have the power to make its own laws but its powers were confined to the ways of applying laws made by the state. Towards the later part of 1993, the state government demarcated and declared the boundary of Bodoland Autonomous Council. “It was made clear that the BAC was to have control over 2,700 villages and not 4,000 as the Bodo leaders had originally demanded.”²⁷ The state government also agreed to include 25 tea gardens under BAC, and the release of all Bodo activists in jail. Following such development nearly 2,000 Bodo militants surrendered.

On the other hand, signing of the Bodo accord largely dissatisfied the other ethnic groups such as Rabhas, Tiwa and the Missings who had earlier supported the Bodo struggle as they believed this would help in realizing their own political aspirations. However, at the time of signing the accord they were not taken into confidence. The ABSU/BPAC leadership was also accused of failing to unite all the different ethnic groups of Assam.²⁸ This has on the other hand, created new dimensions in the ethnic politics of Assam as the various ethnic communities then started

²⁶ Memorandum of Settlement (Bodo Accord), Annexure IV in ChandanaBhattacharjee, Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement: Case of BodoKacharis of Assam, p. 335-36

²⁷JyotindraDasgupta, Community, Authenticity, and Autonomy: Insurgence and Institutional Development in India’s Northeast, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 56, No. 2 (May, 1997) p. 360

²⁸TilottamaMisra and UdayonMisra, Movements for Autonomy in India’s Northeast, in T.V. Sathyamurthy ed., Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India, vo. 3, pp. 140-41

pressing for their own set of demands. Similarly though it was assured that all the rights of the non-Bodo people will be protected, the non-Bodo communities strongly opposed the accord.

Most importantly the solution offered by the Bodo accord was rejected from within the Bodo community as the radical and militant organizations regarded it as the “stooge of Dispur”-referring to the capital of Assam. Subsequently the chief of the interim BEC resigned over differences with the state on the issue of demarcation of BAC area. The ABSU/BPAC gradually realized that the accord did not provide adequate autonomy besides falling too short of their original demand. BAC was somewhat handicapped in exercising whatever limited autonomy was provided to it primarily due to the insufficient financial powers and overwhelming domination of the state over most of the transferred subjects. Neither could it make its own laws. Though the ABSU/BPAC initially emphasized on the proper implementation of the accord, the proposed solution through the Bodo Autonomous Council failed to satisfy the leaders of different Bodogroups and organizations. Bodo Security Force rejected the accord and maintained that the only solution of the Bodo problem was the creation of state. The chief of the interim BEC, who resigned in protest over the territorial jurisdiction issue, claimed that the additional 515 villages were promised verbally by the state government during the negotiation and therefore, those villages must be included within BAC. However, the state refused to include those villages considering the presence of large number of non-tribals who have been living there since long, and maintained that those villages did not fall in the contiguous geographical area.

Over the tussle of territorial claim, the Bodo militants then unleashed ethnic violence around those 515 villages in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts during September and October 1993. “These riots left nineteen dead; most of them belonging to minority settler community, and over thirty thousand fled their homes and sought shelter in relief camps.”²⁹

Thus, in the wake of disagreement surrounding the territorial jurisdiction of the new body, apart from half-hearted implementation of the accord, the ABSU/BPAC leadership revived the movement for a separate state. Importantly, the failure to arrive at a negotiation and proper solution in regard to the territorial dispute resulted in intense violence around the contested areas and it has led to a pattern of ethnic cleansing.

Revival of the movement: Militancy and ethnic cleansing

Following the failure of the solution of the territorial dispute of the BAC, the leadership revived the movement with the demand for a separate state. As we have already stated, the Bodo accord largely failed to meet the popular aspirations of the different organizations operating within the Bodo movement and violence was resumed in and around the disputed areas. The military wing

²⁹Sudir Jacob George, *The Bodo Movement: Unrest to Accord*, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct., 1994), p. 890

of the ABSU which was supposed to end its operations following the accord instead organized itself and gave birth to Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). On the other hand, another militant organization National Democratic Front of Bodoland, led by Ranjan Daimary, emerged with more radical objective which even aimed at creating a sovereign Bodoland through an armed struggle. Like the previous phase, during this period these two organizations have used violence against each other, and it can be seen as an attempt of the rival organizations to emerge as the representative organization of the Bodos in the ongoing movement. However, due to the organizational and mobilization strength, the BLT has largely claimed the status of the representative organization. Apart from infighting between the two militant organizations, there has been large scale violence directed against innocent civilians. The two militant organizations intensified violence and killings which during this phase has acquired new dimension with a pattern of ethnic cleansing. Simultaneously there have been large scale extortions and kidnappings. The two militant organizations after having organized themselves used violence “more strategically and in a planned manner by carefully selecting their targets, who were mostly non-combatants individuals and groups that were suspected of having possible links to government forces, or an affiliation with rival organizations or because they belonged to opposing ethnic groups.”³⁰

It is important to note that the demarcation of territory for the BAC and the criteria on which the government refused to add other 515 villages into BAC, made the Bodo leaders and militants that their numerical strength in the proposed area of Bodoland was important if the demand for Bodoland had to realize. On the other hand, the non-Bodo population in the BAC area strongly opposed the accord claiming that the Bodos did not form a majority in many of the villages included in the BAC. Importantly, many of Assam’s “immigrant communities” have also settled in the historical Bodo areas during different phases of time and history. Many of the Bodo areas are now marked by the presence of Santhals, who were brought to Assam by the British to work in the tea industry, Na-Asamiya Muslims, who are often loosely referred as Bangladeshis, the Nepalis, who migrated to Assam in different phases of history, and Hindu Bengalis. Hence, in the present context the Bodo areas largely represent the case of mixed ethnic settlement. Importantly, prior to the Bodo movement for a Bodo homeland, these communities had been living more or less peacefully with no serious ethnic trouble. However, at this juncture the Bodo movement, and the militancy around it, has largely altered this position of democratic and peaceful living since the territorial claim of the Bodos, with the dispute over the territorial jurisdiction of BAC, experienced the hurdle in the presence of other ethnic groups and immigrant communities. After the accord when the fate of the five hundred villages- those that fell short of the requisite 50 percent Bodo majority- remained unclear, the solution outlined by the Bodo

³⁰Pahi Saikia (2011), Political Opportunities, Constraints, and Mobilizing Structures: An Integrated Approach to Different Levels of Ethno-Political Contention in Northeast India, *India Review*, 10:1, p. 29

militant groups like BLT and NDFB was the exclusionist politics and violence inspired by ultra-chauvinist thinking, that is to follow a pattern of ethnic cleansing by removing the non-autochthons from the areas in order to pave way for Bodo homeland. To quote Sanjib Baruah, “at least to some Bodo activists, ethnically targeted violence seemed to hold the promise of changing the demographic facts on the ground, which they have been told repeatedly, stand in the way of a separate Bodoland.”³¹

There were riots against Muslims of Bengali descent in Kokrajhar district in May 1994 followed by which the Bodo militants in July 1994 organized large scale massacre of Na-Asamiya Muslim peasants in Barpeta district of Assam. The massacre is claimed to have left 1,000 people, mostly women and children, killed whereas thousands got injured and about 60 villages were burnt down to ashes.³² Describing the Barpetamassacre Hussain reveals that “the militants not only killed innocents at their homes, fields, forests and villages, they did not spare even those who took shelter at the Banhbari relief camps run by the state...they were gunned down while they were asleep by the militants at midnight with sophisticated arms and ammunition.”³³ Apart from the massacre of Na-Asamiya Muslims there has also been large scale violence against and killings of Hindu Bengalis and Nepalis. Targeting the Kalaigaon Anchalik unit of Samagra Assam Begali Yuva Chatra Parishad (SABYCP) the Bodo militants on October 9, 1995 killed eight people.³⁴ The particular unit of the Samagra Assam Begali Yuva Chatra Parishad was targeted in the wake of the call given by the organization against the violence perpetrated by the Bodo militants against the non-Bodos, and the Bengalis in particular. Following this incident in another act of violence by the militants 8 people were killed, out of which six belonged to the Nepali community, in Mussalpur near Nalbari district. Observing such killings one newspaper in fact observed that the killings could be viewed as kind of retaliation by the militant groups against non-Bodos settled in the BAC area.³⁵

By the year 1996, with the reorganization of Bodo Security Force as National Democratic Front of Bodoland violence and ethnic cleansing process reached its highest level creating another problem of huge displacement. In the ethnic violence between the Bodos and Santhals in May-June, 1996 whereas about 1,000 persons were killed as many as 2,50,000 persons became

³¹Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 196

³²Monirul Hussain, *State, Identity Movement and Internal Displacement in the North-East*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No.51 (Dec. 16-22, 2000), p. 4521

³³Monirul Hussain, *Understanding Barpeta Massacre 1994: Ethnicity, Communalism and State*, *Towards Secular India*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (Jul-September, 1995), p. 40

³⁴ Assam Tribune, October 11, 1995

³⁵ Assam Tribune, October 16, 1995, also see Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 195

displaced.³⁶ Unlike other incidents of ethnic massacre here Santhals strongly registered their resistance as a result of which some Bodos were also killed. Importantly, with the state proving highly ineffective in providing the security of life in the prevailing atmosphere of barbarity, the incidence of violence continued creating fear psychosis and panic among the non-Bodos living in the area. Those who have been displaced were afraid of returning back to their villages as they feared fresh attack.

The state which primarily relied on repressive measures to deal with the situation utterly failed to provide security to the innocent civilians. To say the least, even people taking shelter in the state run relief camps were not secured in the prevailing atmosphere. Bodo movement also represents a case of state failure.

“Intense phases of attacks and counter-attacks between the government forces and Bodo militants, and against non-Bodos in the Bodo areas engulfed the years through late 90s to early 2000.”³⁷It is only in the post 2000 period that that a settlement was signed in the form of memorandum of settlement between the BLT leaders and the representatives of central and state government.

Conclusion

Writing in a period prior to the Assam movement, M.S. Prabhakara claimed, “In a way it is silly to make a distinction between the Assamese and the Bodo for the Bodos are Assamese”.³⁸ The Bodos before the start of the Bodoland movement more or less regarded themselves as a part of the composite Asamiyasub-nationality. They have for a long period thus remained as the minorities within the Asamiyasub-nationality. However, soon after the Assam movement what we see is basically an attempt to make that very distinction between the Assamese and the Bodo, where Bodo’s try to assert their own distinct identity and culture and therefore, they also seek differentiation from the ethnic Assamese. Thus, in the process, they challenged the very formulation of the dominant Asamiyasub-nationality. The agenda of the Assam movement to preserve and consolidate the distinct Asamiyasub-nationality by disfranchising and deporting the ‘illegal foreigners’ received challenge from within with the rise of the Bodo movement.

MonirulHussain holds that the political mobilization on the part of the Bodos in the form of Bodo movement is a reflection of their desire to overcome their socio-economic oppression and

³⁶MonirulHussain, State, Identity Movement and Internal Displacement in the North-East, Economic and Political Weekly, Vo. 35, No.51 (Dec. 16-22, 2000), p. 4522

³⁷PahiSaikia (2011): Political Opportunities, Constraints, and Mobilizing Structures: An Integrated Approach to Different Levels of Ethno-Political Contention in Northeast India, India Review, 10:1, p. 10

³⁸ M. S. Prabhakara, The Politics of a Script: Demand For Acceptance of Roman Script For Bodo Language, EPW, Vol. 9, No. 51 (Dec. 21, 1974), p. 2100

cultural backwardness. The political consciousness on the part of the Bodos inspires them to strive for attaining more political power. No doubt, the Bodos remained marginalized over a long period and their aspirations related to social, economic, political and cultural aspects have been relegated to negligence. The insensitivity and cultural chauvinism on the part of the ethnic Assamese not only had a negative influence on the Bodos but simultaneously it also alienated them to a great extent. On the other hand, political institutions of representation largely failed to meet the underlying aspirations of the Bodos where the Bodos had little control over such institutions of representation. To quote Sanjoy Barbara, “the dramatic position has been the product of years of systematic mobilization of political resources of the community to interpret its marginalization as a failure of institutions of representation and participation.”³⁹ The three member expert committee appointed by the government to look into the concerns of the plains tribes pointed out that following the pattern of complain made by the Assamese organizations and individuals against the colonization of Delhi, the leaders of the Bodos and “plains tribal” organizations also expressed their concerns over the colonization by the “Assamese chauvinists”. Bodo organizations complained of “dispossession of their lands, non-compliance with the reservations in public services and posts, imposition of language etc. all by an administrative system biased against them.”⁴⁰ However, the Bodo movement in its course of development reflects the chauvinist tendencies and exclusionist agenda marginalizing the claims of poor and hard-working innocent civilians. Thus, the analysis of the Bodo movement reveals that when a particular ethnic group obsessively pursues its identity politics with definite territorial claim in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, it essentially involves the greater risk of undermining the democratic process of sharing a particular homeland. Territorial claim based on narrow ethnic lines driven by exclusivist tendencies and informed by militant politics renders the other minority communities in the particular living space in a position of grave disadvantage.

During the course of the Bodo movement, and more particularly during the first phase of it, the ABSU/BPAC emphasized more or less in the peaceful methods. But what is important to note at this juncture is that the democratic methods of protest and agitation like the hunger strike, ‘bandh’ call, public rallies and ‘dharna’ etc. went hand in hand with violence and killings unleashed by the more radical and militant organizations. Importantly, both ABSU/BPAC and their radical and militant counterparts shared the same objective, the separate Bodoland. Therefore, we can say that the method of political mobilization mixing with violence was perfected during the Bodo movement. This can also be attributed simultaneously to the lesions given by the Assam movement which also more or less followed the same pattern of political

³⁹SanjoyBarbora, *Autonomy in the Northeast: The Frontiers of Centralized Politics* in RanabirSamaddar ed., *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences*, p. 196

⁴⁰ Government of India 1992, p. 47, also see Sanjib Baruah, *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 188

mobilization mixing with violence. UdayonMisra holds that unlike the Assam movement, the Bodo agitation took the violent course at a much earlier phase of it. On the other hand, in the case of Assam movement, it was the ultra-chauvinist elements within it which indulged in violence and in certain cases, also prepared grounds for civilian violence directed against the particular communities, whereas the radical and militant organizations have undertaken the task in the context of Bodo movement.

The narrow construction of 'others' as a potentun balancing factor of demography, land and community resources only resulted in the vulnerability of the non-Bodos. The movement largely reflected the undemocratic nature when the leadership of the movement directed the wrath of the Bodos as a majority community against the non-Bodos. Such insensitivity on the part of the leadership of the movement about the rights of 'others' only glorified violence and hatred against 'others' by refusing to accept the hard historical realities. The attempts made by the Bodo leadership to create a homogenous Bodo-inhabited area by carrying out a string of indiscriminate attacks, and process of ethnic cleansing against the non-Bodosin a shared homeland that is characterized by ethnic diversity not only in terms of plurality but of shared geographical and cultural space, essentially negates the idea of democratic living in a shared homeland. Such a manifestation is clearly informed by the exclusivist tendencies generated by the movement

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