

Origin and Development of Bodoland Movement in Assam

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Abstract: In the Indian political system Separatist movement is not a new phenomenon. In the pre-independence day it was promoted by the British imperialists and they deliberately encouraged the people of various regions to think in terms of their region rather than the nation as a whole with a view to maintain their hold over India. In India sub-national ideology increasing several types of movements. Some movements seek separate state from India itself and the formation of a new nation from one or more states. The Bodoland Movement in Assam is one of the separate state movements in India. The Bodo-Kacharis of Brahmaputra Valley, particularly some districts like Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Uddalguri are known as Bodos or Boros. The heterogeneous population composition of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam which is large number of tribal and socially background population groups reals multi-dimensional socio-political problems. Since the beginning of the current century, following large scale influx of immigrants into the region the tribal people developed a sense of socio-political and cultural insecurity. Recently, as claimed by various tribal organizations, growing encroachment of non-tribals into the tribal belts and blocks over past few decades, growing dominance of the non-tribals in the polity and economy of the state of Assam and the deteriorating economic condition of the majority of the tribals aggrieved them further and compelled them to develop separatist tendency. The continuing movement for a separate homeland for the Bodo tribal is an expression of such feelings of the tribal population of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bodoland Movement started as a political, socio-cultural and economic movement which has developed for a separate state within the Indian Union.

Keywords: Movement, Bodo, Tribal, Brahmaputra Valley, Bodoland.

INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland Movement started as a political, socio-cultural and economic movement essentially of the Bodo-Kachari tribe who are concentrated in the northern parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts, and which has developed into a socio-political movement for a saeparate state within the Indian Union[5]. The leadership of the movement in its later stage has been provided by the Plain Tribel Council of Assam so that it is often referred to as PTCA movement. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Bodo Students Association have also played important roles in the development of the movement, and their activities are integrated towards a common goal of raising cultural, political and economic status of the Bodo community.

The various article, books, news paper, social media, thesis, souvenir, political documentations were studied and reviewed as reference sources for preparation of this article[1-17].

Origin of the Movement

The earlier Bodo leaders and elites thought of improving the conditions of their people by demanding

through Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly, facilities for education, medicine and irrigation and did not give impotence to the emotional need for establishing a separate identity, although they felt it. The younger generation has taken a new turn with the founding of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha with Sri Ramendra Basumatari as its President and R.N. Brahma, Jadav Haka, Davidson Bhabra and Pali in the schools of Assam. R.N. Brahma and Madaram Brahma published the first book of Bodo songs duing the period 1952-53.

Interestingly, two other developments coincided with the growing awareness of the Bodo leaders—the constitutional provisions for the protection and development of tribal cultures; and the first general elections in free India. According to an informant (S.N. Brahma) the Bodos are trying to find a way to raise their status and to meet the aspirations of their people. They are at the crossroads in their campaign to improve the conditions and status of the Bodos. They wanted to revive their language to unite and develop the Bodos. The Bodo as the largest homogeneous peasant community of Assam—suffering from the evils of landlordism and moneylenders and having experienced

agrarian revolts under communist leadership—later mobilized for their agitation on the issue of language, because the leadership has found it to be more profitable to direct the feeling of economic exploitation into cultural channels [1].

The political movement of the Bodos, thus, more or less emerged out of the movement for linguistic rights and it has been stated [2] that language is the favourite political issue in Assam. In fact, most similar movements of this region have taken off over the issue of language, especially after the enactment of the language Act of the Government of Assam in 1960. The demand for the use of Bodo language in the Bodo concentrated areas was recognized by the Government in 1963 for primary schools and for higher secondary schools in 1968. This was followed by the movement for a separate script on the one hand leading to the adoption of the Nagari script in 1975, and the demand for a separate state of Bodoland on the other. The political phase of the Bodoland movement began before the 1967 elections with the formation of the Plaints Tribal Council[5].

Characters of the movement

This movement obviously started as a socio-economic and cultural one. In fact even in its political face the memoranda issued by the various bodies have expressed their feeling of socio-economic deprivation and grievances and have sought protection against economic exploitation and land alienation. The Bodo leaders are quite conscious about the need for the educational development of the Bodo community at large to achieve their socio-economic aspiration. The movement in support of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction is largely derived from this feeling.

The movement has also clear-cut cultural overtones both in terms of its declared goal and in terms of the effort of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to preserve, revive and develop Bodo literature and other aspects of their culture[4]. They are making conscious efforts to motivate and educate the people about the traditional glories and cultural achievement of their ancestors. The publication of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which are largely contributed by the PTCA leaders, amply illustrate that elite and leaders of the movement are actively encouraging and inspiring cultural research and creative work for the development of Bodo culture. Even their movement on the issue of the script has been based on linguistic and scientific arguments to a large extent apart from the strong desire and aspiration to maintain their ethno-cultural identity.

The political movement for a separate state is strengthened by their urge to maintain and preserve their identity[5]. As has aptly been said, the demand for

the language and script is thin end of the wedge—the thick end being their political demand of Bodoland. However, the political nature of the entire movement can hardly be denied especially when one examines the form, content, strategy and tactics at every stage of the movement. The leaders themselves have repeatedly argued that since the nature of the movement has been political and their aspirations are based on political and economic principles, they should be dealt with on a political and democratic level. Thus, the movement can be appropriately characterized as a complex of socio-economic, cultural and political factors.

The PTCA's demand for separate State concern almost the entire part of Assam valley on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The details of the geographical area demanded as separate state has been published in a press note in Assamese dated 12 December 1972 by the PTCA headquarters of Kokrajhar.

However, the epicenter of the movement is obviously Kokrajhar subdivision of Goalpara. The other important places in terms of meetings and location of organizations have been Gauhati and Narama (from where the president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha hails) in Kamrup District and Udalgiri of North-Lakhimpur as also the tribal concentrated areas of Darrang District. Although the movement described here is limited to the State of Assam, their cultural activities and the organization of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha concerns the Bodo people inhabiting the neighboring states as well.

Organization and Communication:

The movement is quite well-organized both from the structural and functional points of view. There are three principal organizations with their headquarters at Kokrajhar which have taken to lead during the different phases and programmes of the movement.

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha is a three tier body as follows:

- The all Bodo Sahitya Sabha.
- District Bodo Shitya Sabha.
- Primary units at village level.

At each level there are Presidents, Vice-Presidents and secretaries and other executive members. The primary units are responsible to the district Sabhas who in turn are subordinate to the central organization. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha holds meetings and functions involving the local people, and organizes volunteers and action committees from time to time on particular issues.

The PTCA has only a central organization with all the normal office bearers, who are individually very

active. The all Bodo students Association is a well-organized body in line with the BSS. They have actively associated themselves with the goals of the BSS and the PTCA. They have conducted meetings and organized action programmes in co-ordination with the action committees from time to time. Volunteers and leaders of all the organizations actively tour the area to contact the masses on particular issues to strengthen their respective organizations and to raise the consciousness of the people about their goals, programmes and aspirations. They hold periodical meetings at different places to inspire and involve the local people in support of the movement.

Publications have played a very important role in the communication and organization of the movement. These include literary and analytical essays by the elite and leaders, press notes, booklets and pamphlets and handbills and circulars sometimes containing extracts from folk-songs and poems composed during the movement. The PTCA uses the the symbol of the rising sun in support of the movement for Bodo Land and prints it on pamphlets and the party flag.

Because of the distinctive cultural characters and language the Bodo people in general have a clear-cut concept about insiders and outsiders whom they describe as *harsa*. The *harsa* are all non-Bodo people. However, as regards their movements they have maintained friendly relations with the neighboring people, particularly the Bengalis who have not opposed their movement for language and script and with whom they have jointly worked for linguistic rights of the minorities. However, the Constitutions of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha clearly lay down that only Bodos can become members of the Body. On another plan, the PTCA which consists largely of the BODOS considers itself as the spokesman of the socio-economic and political aspirations of all the plain tribals of Assam of whom the Bodos of course are the majority. In practice, they speak for the supporters of the PTCA and not for those who oppose the movement.

In fact, there is no problem as the identity of the group for whom the BSS or the ABSA stand. Along with the PTCA they are mainly concerned with the problems of Bodo people whom they identify as target population.

The socio-economic background of the leaders of the movement has already been discussed. It can only be added that the principal leaders are highly educated, well-informed, enlightened and analytical in their arguments. They are emotionally involved not only with the cultural traditions and socio-economic welfare of the Bodos but are deeply inspired by national cultural traditions.

Political Participation and Voting Behaviour of Bodos

The Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was initially in favour of participating in elections as an organization and had even boycotted and agitated against the elections during the bye-elections of 1967 and 1968. Individual leaders of the PTCA had, however contested elections both at the local and state levels before the PTCA was formed. In fact, the lack of success of these leaders in the 1967 elections has been suggested to be a contributing factor to the formation of the PTC. One of the leaders as mentioned above was elected as the President of the Kochgaon Anchalik Panchayat in 1964. The PTCA began to participate in elections at the state and national levels from 1971 onwards and entered into an electoral alliance with five left wing parties during the general elections of 1972 in which they won a seat. The analysis of the 1972 election results show that the PTCA has a stronger hold in Goalpara and Darrang Districts in which, taken together, slightly less than 50% of the adults who casts their votes, favoured the party. In the Kamrup Schedule tribe constituency, roughly one –third of the votes were cast in favor of PTC candidates. Their support in Lakhimpur District was rather negligible.

Bodo People's Progressive Front, (BPPF) is a political Party in Assam formed on April 12, 2005 for participation in the Bodoland Territorial Areas District elections. The party Bodo People's Progressive Front, BPPF (H) President Hagrama. It becomes aligned partner with Assam government in various time. These are the historical occasion since the Bodo's, long associated with the Bodoland statehood movement, are now sharing power in Dispur, the capital of Assam. The Bodo People's Progressive Front BPPF(R) President Rabiram Narzary. It never wins any seats in the Assam Assembly.

Before the polling of 2011 Assam Assembly election in BTAD 30 innocents lives were killed, majority of which were women and children. Again the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), when they barged into houses in villages of Kokrajhar and Baksa and brought down houses to ashes. Even though the area is inhabited by majority of Muslim speaking Bengalis, BPF has been in power ever since the second peace accord was signed with the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) in 2003. The situation took a U-turn this election when BPF had to face the insecurity of losing its seat in Kokrajhar and being trampled over by Heera Sarnia, a reformed ULFA militant, who is contesting the elections from Kokrajhar as an independent candidate. In this election 86% vote was casted in the BTAD areas but major part of vote which concentrated in muslim peoples, they did not vote to the BPF that is why BPF could not win the Lok Sabha election in 2014.

Support for the movement

The PTCA programs in general and particularly the one concerning language have received direct and indirect support from the non-Assamese speaking minorities communities of Assam who were themselves aggrieved over the introduction of Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in the Universities of Assam. There have been attempts by sections of the press and some sections of Assamese State leaders “to explain away the agitation of Bodos as being CIA inspired, missionary inspired, bangali inspired and government of India inspired [1]. It is no doubt apparent that the PTCA leaders actively participated in the LMRC movement against the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction along with other communities, specially the Bangalis of Assam, who in turn supported their language movement. During the agitational periods when there were measures for preserving law and order against the Bodo agitators, the movement got better publicity and more sympathetic recognition from the press at Calcutta and Delhi.

The PTCA leaders have, however, strongly denied that they have received any support from any foreign agencies. During the action of police against the picketers in 1972 and 1974 a number of local political organizations—namely UARP, Jana Sangha and CPI (M)—asked for the release of PTCA leaders and volunteers. The PTCA has also received messages from the President of Adivasi Mahasabha in support of its movement for an autonomous state. Five left wing political parties also supported the PTCA during the 1972 elections.

CONCLUSION

The movement declined in its intensity at least apparently, after achieving the aim of introducing Bodo medium of instruction up to the secondary level of education as also a separate script of their own. Their political and cultural organizations are still in existence they have also not forgotten their socio-economic and political goals.

The recognition of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction up to the secondary stage was the first concrete achievement of the Bodo movement. The accepted the Devanagari script to keep the distinctiveness of their own language from Assam. Indirectly, the movement has alienated the Bodos from the composite Assamese society in recent times. For the long time, some section of the Bodos and their plains tribals were eager for an entry into the lower ranks of the Hindu caste system, but what was once a phenomenon of mass conversion has now stopped altogether [1].

The government of Assam officially admitted that the PTCA movement was initially underestimated and the time had now passed when some PTC leaders could be won over. They felt that political, economic and administrative measures were immediately necessary to put a check to the growing strength of the PTCA movement. Following this, on 14 October 1973 Government of Assam accepted the Idea of having an autonomous Plain Tribal Development Board for the development of the Plains tribals.

The most important achievement of the movement has been the increase of Bodo ethnic consciousness, particularly among the young sections and students. There has been a sort renaissance or cultural upheaval in terms of creative literature and poetry and cultural research into the distinctive contributions and past glory of the Bodo people. The younger sections have even been politically oriented in support of the demand for a separate identity. There has been a meeting of the students who, on their own initiative, proposed to form a ‘young PTCA’ in support of such demands. This move, however, been reported to have been abandoned due to the lack of support from the elder leaders.

Government should give importance to manifestoes declared before is election fore priorities, and should fulfill the commitments and agreements with councils like BTC or others without delay.

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