



Bodo Politics- From Origin to Accord

¹Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, ²Varshali Brahma

¹Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology, Jaipur, Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Malaviya Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan- 302017

²Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology, Jaipur, Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Malaviya Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan-302017
Email: vibhutisingh@mnit.ac.in

ABSTRACT : Bodos form the largest tribe group in Northeast but they do not form a compact group and are scattered in various states and this lack of majority in one area denies them the fruit of statehood. Their original religion is Bathou and supreme God is Sibrai. But with Ahom conquest of Northeast, Bodos began sliding towards Hinduism and are called Koch. Brahma is their surname. Education deficit led to their social decline, but Kalicharan Brahma attempted to make good this deficit and succeeded to a large extent. With the accretion of knowledge came the demand for a new state of Udayachal which the Government did not accept and gave the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) for self-governance. People dissatisfied with BAC, took to violence, finally Bodoland Accord was signed in 1993.

Keywords: Bodoland Autonomous Council, Udayachal, Bodoland Accord.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bodos belong to the Mongoloid race of Sino-Tibetan descent (Vijayanumi, M, 1991). Numerically they are the largest tribe in the Northeast, but they do not form a compact group on a fixed territory and are scattered. This non-aggregation in one region denied them the fruit of statehood. They are found in many districts of Assam. Still, the places concentrated in great numbers are Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Barpeta, Goalpara, Nowgong, Darrang, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon and Dhemaji districts of Assam. However, in none of these places they form the majority and hence it is challenging to carve out a state for them.

As regards their origin, it is shrouded in mystery. Like many other tribes of Assam, such as Nagas and Mizos, they too do not have a recorded past, an authentic language and a recognized script. Their physiognomical similarity with the people of the Kham tribe of Tibet puts them in the company of the Trans-Himalayan region. But historians and Gazetteers put them as the earliest known settlers of the Brahmaputra valley (E.A

Gait, 1967). They are Hindus who worship Lord Shiva and his consort Shakti. The pre-historic period of India records the names of many illustrious Bodo kings such as Bhagdatta, Bajrudatta, Pushy Varman and Bhakhat Varman. Their original religion was Bathou meaning the supreme God. Ba means five, and thou implies depth. The supreme God is also known as Sibrai. Those who embraced Hinduism were called Koch. This Bathou religion is polytheism which believes in multiple gods and goddesses. Sekhar Brahma's words, "*Different doctrines of Hinduism like Polytheism, Hemotheism, Ditheism, Monotheism, Pantheism, Theism, absolute Monism came into being in different period*" (Brahma, Sekhar, 2006)

But their political hegemony was short-lived, and soon they were thrown out of the north bank of river Brahmaputra. They were packed off to Nilachal Hill, where they lived as agricultural nomads. They began irrigating their land from hill streams and became expert cultivators of land. Their women specialized in weaving and rearing silkworms to produce Endi and Muga silk of high standard. This made them traders who exported rice, Muga silk and cotton yarn too far off places like Tibet and China. But they had no notion of the money economy, and their total trade was run on a barter basis.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Methodology depends upon the availability of the sources. As far as the methods are concerned, the Historical Method has been employed in this study. The work has been adopted and accomplished through secondary resources of materials taken from census reports, articles, books, magazines, journals etc.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Bodo Rule: The Slide From Pinnacle to Nadir:

The Bodos, also known as Boros, were the ruling class that produced an illustrious chain of valorous kings who ruled for centuries, but in 1536, the Ahoms attacked

their capital Dimapur and put an end to their rule. Their last prince Detsung was assassinated, and the capital town was ransacked and looted to the hilt. That put an end to the famous Dimapurempire.

After losing Dimapur, the Bodos retreated to Maibong in North Cachar Hills and founded a new kingdom but were again overcome by the might of Ahom ruler RudraSingha. The latter drove them out of their empire and occupied it. The Bodo King Tamradhw was fled away to khaspur in the Cachar district and founded another Kingdom. Still, continued attacks by Ahoms and Burmese forced him to accept British suzerainty in 1832 became their tributary. He died without a male heir, and that gave the British the pretext to annex his kingdom. That marked the end of Bodo imperial dominance through assembling rulership still survived for another two years when Tularam Senapati held away in Cachar hills. But his capitulation in 1834 and death in 1854 signalled the end of Bodo supremacy. The Ahom rule over the Bodos led to a slow but steady Hinduisation of Bodos who accepted Hindu names and began worshipping Hindu gods and deities. The Brahmin became the final arbiter in religious matters, and during the rule of king GopichandraNarayana, Bengali Brahmin families became very powerful. With the loss of power under the British Government, the Bodos declined both socially and economically. All prominent places in the bureaucracy were occupied by high caste Hindus of Assamese origin, who, unlike the Mongoloid Bodos, were of Aryan extraction and descent.

With the loss of political power, the economic ruin of Bodos also began. They accepted the lowly profession of rearing pigs and sacrificing animals, owing to which they lost social respectability and were looked upon as almost untouchables. Mocked by Hindus and derided by Brahmins, many Bodos embraced Christianity. At this period of their social decline, Kalicharan mech, a Bodo social reformer who converted the Bodos to Brahma Dharma, and they now came to be addressed as Brahmas. It was thus a moment of introspection for the Bodos, who, being deprived of their economic powers, began clamouring for political ability to regain their lost supremacy. It was time for identity assertion. They were intent upon seizing political power to get their due share in the Governance of the state.

3.2 Resurgence and Reformation:

Having lost their political power and relegated to social backwardness and economic deprivation, the Bodos began making strident efforts to revive and resurgence their past glory. In this hour of social disarray, many Bodos attempted the conversion route to attain social advancement. The Bodos of the Panbari area in Dhubri embraced Islam, and several others converted themselves to Christianity through the Santhal Mission of Lutheran Church. Many turned to Vaishnavism and became Hindus. But all was not over yet, and many of them still professed loyalty to their original God, Bathou. There appeared a saviour Gurudev Kalicharan

Mech who taught the Bodos the principle of Brahma Dharma. A monolithic religion believed in the supreme being called Brahma, who manifested in a light emanating from Sun and Moon. The light was the Ahuti, i.e. **worship of fire**. They accepted the Saraniya cult, became Hindus, and accepted the titles of Koch, Das, Rajbanshi, Choudhary, Deka, Saiba, and so on. Kalicharan Mech petitioned the English Deputy Commissioner to permit the Bodos to use Brahma as their surname, which was acceded to by the British. Since then, the Bodos began using this suffix. The Bodos gave up the lowly profession of rearing pigs and poultry birds and stopped brewing alcohol through his efforts. They now entered trade and business such as weaving and carpentry. A middle school weaving and carpentry centre was set up at Tipkai in 1913. Later on, the M.E. school at Tipkai was upgraded to become a high school with Assamese language as the medium of instruction (Mashahary, R.N., 1985). In 1918, All Bodo ChatraSanmelan(Bodo student union) and Bodo MahaSabha was set up in the year 1924. This was done to provide education to the Bodos and remove their backwardness. In 1929, Kalicharan, who had adopted the suffix Brahma, submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission, demanding seats for the Bodos. In 1933, the first Bodo political organization, the tribal League, was formed. Through its efforts, Bodos benefited from reserving five seats in the Legislative Assembly of Assam in 1937 (Assam Tribal Sangha, 1986).

3.3 Tribals and Land Alienation:

It is a well-known fact that the British Government amended the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886, and permitted Muslims from East Bengal to settle in Assam, which enabled them to encroach upon the land of Bodos. This was done under the pretext of growing more food for the British troops engaged in World War II. This was done despite the imaginary Line system, which segregated indigenous people from the immigrants who could settle only outside this line. This facilitated the creation of large, compact groups of Muslim immigrants to come to Assam, and with the connivance of British officials, ignored the line system (Roy, Ajoy, 1995). This was in addition to the land mortgaged to the traders from Barpeta who had lent money to the poor Bodos. Since they could not pay the mortgaged money, they lost their land. The Bodos were thus exploited by two dubious owners-the Barpetiah traders and the immigrant Muslims, which made them run from one reserve forest to another in search of land. In 1946, when Formed GopinathBordoloi's Congress ministry, with the support from the members of the Tribal League, raised hope that the tribals would get justice. Law was amended, and three Belts and Blocks were created which were not to be infringed upon, but this only remained a paper safeguard as largescale illegal transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals was made through bureaucratic manipulations and malpractices. The tribals felt cheated in their homeland.

The All Bodo Students Union, in a Memorandum, alleged that the Government of Assam has again deconstituted those tribal belts and blocks as and when it felt necessary to acquire land for various purposes even without notification. For instance, tribal villages of the South Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Bijni, Tmalpur, and Baska tribal belts and Blocks were de-reserved by the Assam Government at different times (All Bodo Student Union, 1991).

Facing harsh Bodo resentment, the Government appointed the U.N. Dhebar Committee, which inter alia suggested cancelling illegal land transfer Pattas and restoring the land to the tribals (U.N. Dhebar, 1960-61). The report remained a dead letter and was not implemented. Subsequently, appointed a subcommittee headed by a non-tribal M.L.A., R.N. Chaudhary to look into the grievances of the tribals. It recommended a time-bound action plan to restore the land to the tribals, but as usual, nothing was done, and the situation continued to drift from bad to worse. Given this deteriorating situation, some Bodo leaders, mainly those belonging to ABSU (All Bodo Students Union), concluded that the only way to protect Bodos' interest was by establishing a separate Bodo state. With this memorandum in mind, the ABSU submitted to the Government of India (Memorandum to the president, 1987).

3.4 Education and Knowledge Deficit:

Employment is linked to education, but for the Bodos, they remained practically insulated from education during the British days. The British Collector of Nowgong wrote in 1838 that there was not a single Bodo who was capable of reading and writing in his district because the community as a whole remained inflexibly hostile to educational institutions (Mills, J. Mofatt, 1853). One reason for this state of affairs was that the Assamese language, which was the language of instruction in schools, was as much foreign as English for the Bodo children. Till 1910, there was not a single private school for the Bodos in the Doar region and from which a Bodo could clear any examination. They did it only in Government-run schools. The first Bodo to graduate was Sitanath Brahma Choudhury in 1936, and in the last decade of nineteenth century, Anandrambarua became an I.C.S name belonging from the Bodo community.

All this was because of language problems, which was increasingly challenging because the Bodos had no script and used only Roman Script. When Indira Gandhi came to power, had made Devangari the script for them in 1977. The Bodos reluctantly accepted it, and the militant sections among Bodos continued to oppose it. It is said that every calamity is followed by prosperity and every curse is the precursor of a blessing provided there is a will to do. The saner and mere educated among the Bodos realized that there was no substitute for higher learning and decided to go the whole hog toward imparting education to the Bodos to rid them of the

curse of mass illiteracy. Assam ChatraSanmela took the lead in 1918. Then came the Bodo MahaSabha in 1924, which pledged to create a mass awakening among the Bodos. Kalicharan Mech, who later became Kalicharan Brahma played a pioneering role in this. In 1928, the Assam Cachari Youth Association and Goalpara District Bodo Association submitted a memorandum to the Commissioner of Shillong, demanding separate electorates for the Bodos and the formation of a Bodo Regiment in the Indian army. In 1933, the Assam Plains Tribal League was formed, the first political party meant to serve as a common platform for all Mongoloid tribes. It stood for preserving the line system to protect the Bodos from an unchecked influx of migrants, mainly the Muslims from East Bengal.

Post Independence, a Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) came into being on September 28, 1950, with the manifest objective of promoting Bodo language and literature. Then came Boro Literacy Body on September 26, 1957. Eminent literary figures who assisted in this venture were Nandharam Kachari, Dharaniahwar Basumatary and Joy Bhadra Hagjer. The BSS published an annual report that all Bodos must learn three languages: Bodo, Assamese, and English. Under the pressure of BSS, the Assam Government made Bodo language the medium of instruction in elementary stages of education in 1963. Bodo also became the Associate Official Language of Assam in the Bodo area.

3.5 Demand for Upayachal:

On January 13, 1967, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced that Assam would be reorganized on a federal basis, which encouraged Bodos to demand a separate Bodo autonomous region. To achieve this objective, a political party named Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed on February 27, 1967, at Kokrajhar. The PTCA split into two on the demand of Udaychal, and its splinter group, the progressive Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA-P), demanded the formation of Udaychal as a Union Territory. Meanwhile, two militant outfits – United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UNLF) and Boro Security Force (Br. SF) came into existence. They used violent means to the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) under Ranjan Daimary and pledged to achieve a Bodo homeland. This was joined by another militant outfit Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT). Finally, a Bodoland Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) was formed to carry on the struggle, and it succeeded in getting the Bodoland Accord signed on February 20, 1953. The Accord envisaged the formation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC).

The difficulty in forming the BAC was apparent. The Bodos, despite being the most significant tribal group, were scattered over a large area in Northeast, Bengal and even Nepal. They did not form a compact and contiguous size comprising of one community such as Nagas and Mizos. There were large non-Bodos villages in Bodo-dominated areas, and they opposed their

inclusion in the bac. To solve this vexing problem, the state government of Assam suggested that towns were having fifty percent Bodos be included in BAC. The Bodos wanted over three thousand villages in the proposed BAC, which included about 25 to 39 tea gardens, but the Assam Government was not inclined to include the tea gardens in BAC. Finally, the Government decided to welcome 2570 villages in BAC which has 1490 villages with less than 50 per cent of the Bodo population (The Assam Tribune, 1997).

Even this demarcation did not satisfy all Bodos and they wanted the inclusion of 10 Kilometer stretch of land on Bhutan border which the Central Government did not agree because this was a very sensitive international border and its proximity with China made it all the more important. There were some 400 old villages which the Assam Government was willing to give to BAC, but they were unwilling to give 25 to 39 tea gardens and two non-Bodo majority towns (Assam Tribune, 1996). Thus the formation of BAC was only a halfway house and this is the causal factor of Bodo discontent and unrest.

One may now see why the formation of BAC did not solve the Bodo problem. One reason is the ideological discord between the two sections of Bodos- one demanding a Bodoland within India and the other rooting for a sovereign Bodoland outside India. Between these two rival camps, there was no love lost and mass killings and extortions became a routine.

Secondly, the violence unleashed by those dissatisfied with the Accord had already taken a heavy toll of lives of ethnic minorities including Bengali, the personnel of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and government employees. One can furnish a litany of violent activities of militant Bodos. On October 10, 1995, (BrSF) killed eight Bengalis, and five persons of CRPF on February 21, 1996 at Kokrajhar. An Arunachal state passenger bus was waylaid causing several casualties. On December 30, 1997, the Guwahati New Delhi Rajdhani train was attacked which led to fifty killings. Arms were looted from police picket at Chapakata Micro Wave Station under Bongaigaon police station on August 7, 1996. This ideological rivalry caused fierce fratricidal killing between rival Bodo groups.

Cases of extortion and the infamous Bodoland Tax (Assam Tribune, 1996) too have taken a heavy toll of human life. On March 17, 1996, the BrSF killed four employees of Powergrip Corporation of India Ltd., at Balipara, for no other reason than their refusal to pay Bodoland Tax. It is widely rumoured that the National Democratic Front of Bodoland collected over 20 crores from government employees, businessmen and citizens from Barpeta, Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar (Sonowal, Khema, 2013) . Victims were asked to deposit money ranging between Rs. 2000/- to Rs. 5000/- as illegal tax (Sonowal, Khema, 2013). Even peons were not spared and were forced to pay upto Rs. 30 a month. The mode of collection of this tax differed from one group of militants to another. The Bodoland Liberation Tigers

(BLT) collects it on monthly basis, whereas the NDFB does it on an annual basis.

Inter- ethnic riots and killing between Bodos and Santhals too became a common occurrence in the forest areas of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar because the latter raised the demand for creation of a Jharkhand area on Bodoland and to achieve it, they even raised a Birsa Commando Force (BCF).

In view of these frequent violent clashes and human killings, there is no surprise that ABSU rejected the Bodoland Accord of February 20, 1993. To modify the militants, the state Government added 259 more villages to BAC area, but even that, did not satisfy all and militancy remains unabated.

4. CONCLUSION:

The above narrative makes it abundantly clear that Bodoland issue is far from being solved and carries with it a powder keg of pent up emotions that can blow up any moment. The post period witnessed large scale killings and violence. Being the largest tribal group, the Bodos justify demand the creation of a separate state on the pattern of Nagaland and Mizoram but the lack of a compact and contiguous area defies solution. But this does not mean that the Bodos can be taken for granted for ever. A just solution of their ethno-cultural cum linguistic demand cannot be delayed indefinitely. A regional movement in a multi-national state is natural and this should not be viewed as anti-national. It is not a disintegrating force. It is a demand for readjustment of territorial claims which, given a firm will can be achieved. It demands re-integration of national identity to accommodate state identities.

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