

“Understanding the Originality of Bodoland Movement”

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Abstract

After achieving independence, North-East India has been a spectator of a series of popular movements on the question of eco-political and cultural harmony. The growing fragmentation, division, divergence and discord among various ethnic communities residing in the region have resulted in disquieting developments of ethnic unrest, conflict, violence and even political secession in different parts of northeast India. A few years ago, Assam witnessed the invidious “Anti-foreigner Movement” led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) which have created violence and destabilized the political process of Assam and also destroyed the social harmony and national unity. Before Assam could recover well from the clutches of the “Anti foreigner Movement”, it faced another serious challenge from the Bodos. The Bodos, under the leadership of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) launched a movement for a separate homeland namely „Bodoland“. A section of Bodo militant outfits - National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) have raised secessionist demands and the creation of sovereign state of Bodoland. This had led to the subversive activities by militant organizations of the Bodos involving the fratricidal killings, bomb blasts, kidnapping, rail blockades and activities of sabotage affecting the neighbouring states like Bhutan, Bangladesh, besides, the entire country. This paper attempts to make a comprehensive study on the various aspects of the Bodoland Movement launched by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), during the 1980s demanding for the establishment of a separate Bodo state in the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. This paper extensively deals with the theoretical aspect of the Bodoland Movement.

Key words: Movement; Unrest; Bomb Blast; Separate State; ABSU.

Introduction:

The background of Bodo movement was prepared during colonial period with the systematic immigration that was allowed by the Britishers and which had continued even after independence. In the early part of 20th century, the Britishers in order to undertake development and cultivation of wastelands, officially encouraged immigration of landless peasants from the densely populated bordering districts of Bengal to the sparsely populated districts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The colonial administration also imported a large number of working hands to work in the tea plantation, road construction, oil field and coalmines. This process of immigration scheme opened a new floodgate for immigration of landless peasants from East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) to Assam and at least 90% of the

immigrants were Muslims. During the period 1911 to 1931, the Muslim peasants formed a significant portion of the population in all the Brahmaputra valley districts. In the post independence period, the flow of the massive immigrants assumed a menacing land problem particularly to the Bodo population. As per census report of 1991, Assam has witnessed the highest growth of voters which is at 13.38% as against the national average of 2.1%. The main reason for the sharp increase of voters is no doubt due to immigration of Muslim settlers from the neighbouring country Bangladesh. The main point to be noted is that the rate of increase is much more alarming in the Bodo dominated areas. Thus, the huge influx of the migrants had shaken the fabric of tribal economy, culture and society. Growing migrant population appeared to be a serious threat to their survival and development as a tribal entity

(Mahanta, 1999).

Table 1.01: Number of persons in different places of Assam from East Bengal (in thousands)

Name of the Places	1911	1921	1931
Goalpara	77,000	1,51,000	1,70,000
Kamrup	4,000	44,000	1,34,000
Darrang	7,000	20,000	41,000
Nowgong	4,000	58,000	1,20,00

Source: Census of Assam, 1931

Table 1.02: Rate of increase of Muslim population in different districts of Assam in % (percent) from 1971-91

Name of the district	Total population	Hindu	Muslim	Rate of increase in %	
				Hindu	Muslim
Bongaigaon	8,07,523	5,16,830	2,64,393	50.93	100.83
Darrang	12,98,860	7,86,332	4,15,323	34.00	108.10
Goalpara	6,68,138	2,66,499	3,35,275	22.76	86.23
Kokrajhar	8,00,659	5,31,447	1,54,801	54.09	100.83
Nalbari	10,16,390	7,87,485	2,02,653	38.11	92.78

Source: Aspects of Bodo movement in Assam (Mahanta, 1998-95)

The massive increase of migrant population put tremendous pressure on tribal land because these new section of population continued to settle down in the reserved forest belts and blocks meant for the tribals. The migrants tempted poor tribals by offering much too high prices and compelled them to part with their land. This resulted in considerable eviction of tribals from their own lands and put them under severe strain for livelihood as well as necessary resources. In the post colonial period, tribals were forced to be dependent economically and subservient politically to the Hindus, upper caste landlords ruling class. The tribals were also deprived of the benefit of industrialization and they remained at the level of peasant economy. 33 belts and blocks were created in Assam under the provision of the Assam land and Regulation Act, 1947 in order to protect tribal land alienation and encroachment by the outsiders. But these measures were inadequate. Confronted with such critical situation, the Bodos developed a deep sense of resentment against the caste Hindus Assamese who have ruled the state

since independence. The imposition of Assamese language as the official language of the state led to vehement protect from the various non-Assamese speaking linguistic groups. Besides, the Bodos became highly apprehensive about their cultural and political identity. All these factors have made the Bodos feel unsafe and insecurity has threatened their very existence (Mahanta: 95, 96)

Apprehending more problems, a political organization in the name and style of Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) came into existence in 1967 and raised the demand of political autonomy for Bodos. The PTCA was formed in that year to fight for full autonomy in the predominantly tribal areas of Assam. This demand articulated the political aspirations of the rising Bodo middle class and found concrete expression in the idea of a separate union territory, namely, Udayachal comprising all the tribal areas of the North bank of the river Brahmaputra. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) formed in 1967 also raised the demand for the creation of separate state for the Bodos. So, the year 1967 marked the beginning of a

new phase in the evolution of Bodo movement.

D.K. Kundu observes that the Bodo movement started by the PTCA with a demand for full political autonomy for the tribals of Assam gradually lost its political appeal among common Bodos because of their internecine conflict and their brief electoral alliances with the then Assam Government as PTCA had joined the short lived Janata Dal ministry led by Golap Borbora in 1978-79 and eventually moderated its demands to make the new administrative unit an autonomous region within Assam. The flux of PTCA leaders were regarded as betrayal by Bodos and as well as by other Plain Tribals of Assam. They thought that the PTCA leadership had overlooked the genuine political aspirations of the tribals and thus dissension led to a split in the organization in 1979. Thus, the movement for the creation of Udayachal remained a major plank during the entire decade of seventies and early eighties.

Emergence of ABSU: The departure of PTCA from the mainstream of Bodo politics prepared the ground for the arrival of All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) which provided leadership to the political articulation of Bodo demands in a more unified manner. As long as PTCA was dominant in Bodo politics, ABSU's role was always secondary – normally it used to look after the operational aspects of the activities that were mooted and sponsored by PTCA or by the already existing All Bodo Sahitya Sabha (16 Nov. 1952). ABSU's emergence projected itself as the sole spokesman to represent the Bodo cause since 1985 onwards actually marked the culmination of the process of the Bodo assertion that had its beginning in the late nineteenth century.

From 1987 onwards, the Bodo movement was totally dominated by ABSU led by the Charismatic leader Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma, with the demand for a separate state which was to be named as

„Bodoland“. Assuming this new role, ABSU submitted a memorandum to the Central Government on 22nd January 1987 demanding a separate state. On 10th November 1987, ABSU submitted another memorandum expressing its bitter feelings against the Assamese Chauvinism. The ABSU began mobilizing people through pamphlets against Assamese Chauvinism. The Assamese people were

blamed for alienation of the tribals of Assam. The ABSU alleged that the Assamese people, the Assam Government and the administration consider the Bodos as the number one enemy for demanding a separate state (why separate state Memorandum by ABSU). Meanwhile, an umbrella organization named Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) was formed to unite all sections of Bodo people irrespective of age and political affiliation. The ABSU and BPAC jointly launched agitation for the redressal of the Bodo grievances. Confronted with the task, they organized a huge rally on 12th June 1987 at Judge's field in Guwahati (Assam) where they coined the slogan “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty” (Mahanta: 96). Since then the slogan became the most important motto for the Bodos. They felt that only separation from Assam would help the Bodos to maintain their identity and save themselves from encroachment.

With the progress of the movement, the ABSU and other associate Bodo organizations realized that their demand for a separate state would not easily be accepted by the state government. They were compelled to think that both the state government led by Assam Gana Parishad and the Central Government led by Congress remained a silent spectator of the plight of Bodos and did not take seriously the Bodo stir for a separate homeland. So, to pressurize the political authorities in both Delhi and Dispur to accept their demands the ABSU and BPAC selected the path of violent activities. Since then mass rallies, demonstrations, roads and rail blockades, prolonged bandhs, submission of memorandum, destruction of public properties, disruption of communication and supply of essential goods became a routine affair. (D.K. Kundu). The Government handled the Bodo movement with a heavy hand and invited police action but failed to suppress the movement. Monirul Hussain, the author of “Assam Movement” observes that “like the Assam Movement, the Bodo Movement also generated widespread destruction, fear and terror for a relatively longer period.” According to M. Hussain, there are remarkable similarities between the Assam movement and the Bodo movement in terms of the techniques of political mobilization. Bodo youth leaders worked in close association with All Assam Students' Union (AASU) during the movement for the eviction of foreigners and for greater autonomy in the period 1979-1985. Politically

too they were deeply impressed by the success of Assamese student leaders in sustaining a prolonged campaign and then capturing power. They followed many of the techniques of political mobilization of Assam movement. Like the Assam Movement, Bodo movement too successfully made use of cultural and historical symbols and social networks to mobilize people behind their political demand.

Meanwhile, a section of the Bodo youths turned militant and formed extremist organization. One such organization Bodo Security Force (BSF) was formed on October 3, 1986, at Odal Khasibari village, Darrang district. Their aim was to „liberate the Bodos with armed struggle from India and to create a sovereign state of Bodoland.” But the ABSU did not support the demand of the BSF on the ground that the Bodo people only wanted a separate state within India and the demand for sovereign did have the backing and support of the common masses.

Signing of Bodo Accord: Finally, after a prolonged series of bipartite and tripartite talks held among the Government of India, Government and the leaders from ABSU and BPAC since 1988, the ground was prepared to clinch a permanent solution to the long six years Bodo movement in Assam. The Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) popularly known as Bodoland Accord was signed on 20th February, 1993 in Kokrajhar by the following signatories, Mr. S.K. Bwismuthiary, the then President of ABSU, Mr. Subhas Basumatary, Chairman of BPAC, Mr. K.S. Rao, the Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Sri Hiteswar Saikia, the then Chief Minister of Assam and Sri Rajesh Pilot, the then Union Minister of the State for Home Affairs, signed as witness and central observer respectively (The Assam Tribune, 21st Feb. 1993).

The Bodoland Autonomous Council Bill (BAC Bill) was introduced in the Assam State Assembly on 5 April 1993 and the Bill was enacted as Bodoland Autonomous Council Act, 1993 (Notification 10 December, 1993). It provided for the establishment of a Bodoland Autonomous Council within the state of Assam with maximum autonomy within the framework of the constitution of India. The BAC would comprise contiguous geographical areas between river Sankosh and Mazbat /river

Pasnoi. The villages having 50 percent and above tribal population would be included in the BAC area. Moreover, the BAC area would also include reserve forests as per the guidelines laid by Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India and the tea gardens located completely within the BAC areas. The BAC Act enumerated in detail the structure, powers, functions and funding of the council, election of the members, framing of laws by the BAC, rules of business, etc. were also provided in the Act. (Source: BAC Act, 1993, Government of Assam)

The accord provided for the formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council comprising the proposed area of Bodoland to be demarcated latter after much discussion and consultation between the Government of Assam and the ABSU and BPAC leaders. Indeed, the accord signed on the acceptance of the Bodo leaders to have an Autonomous Bodoland Council in place of a separate state, had considerably defused the tension on the Bodo areas as the violent agitation launched for a separate state was withdrawn.

Militant Bodo Organization: The formation of BAC failed to cope up with the expectations of all sections of the Bodos. Rather, it gave rise to ideological conflict between two sections of Bodos. The ideological polarization set the stage for the emergence of two militant outfits (1) BSF i.e. Bodo Security Force, it has now renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB on 25 Nov 1994) and (2) Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF). While the NDFB is demanding a sovereign “Bodoland”, the BLTF is aiming for a separate state for the Bodos on the North bank of river Brahmaputra.

The political and ideological differences between the NDFB and the BLTF and also their rivalry resulted in the fratricidal killings. The NDFB and BLTF have been crossing swords on the issue of providing leadership to the Bodo community liberation and in the process both the outfits have killed not less than 200 members of each other organization. In reality, the Bodos have killed Bodos because of their differences on the approaches and ideologies (K. Sonowal:)

Apprehending more problems, the Bodo

militant organizations rejected the “Bodoland Accord” and demanded an independent “Bodoland”. The militants started this movement with renewed vigour. At this stage, the Bodo militants started ethnic cleansing operations in the districts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon. The Bodo militants attacked the houses of the Santhals living in Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts in May-June 1996 which resulted in the ethnic riots between the two communities. As a result of the ethnic riots, about 1000 persons were killed and 2,50,000 persons of both the communities were displaced. The main reason behind the violence against the Santhals was the large scale encroachment on forest lands and infiltration of people of doubtful identity to the Bodo areas of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts (The Assam Tribune, 28th June 1996). It has created apprehension in the minds of the Bodos about their own identity. The Bodo militants, not being content with 1996 massacre, again attacked and displaced more than 25,000 people mostly Santhals, Nepalese and Muslim people in June 1998. Many Hindu Bengalis too became displaced in the wake of the Bodo militants ethnic cleansing operations. One of the noticeable aspect of systematic killings by the Bodo militants is that apart from the non-Bodo communities (like Santhals, Nepalese, Bengalis), the Muslim immigrants as well as the Assamese speaking people have also become their target for onslaught. This carnage shows clearly that Bodo groups are determined to drive out the non-Bodo groups, no matter how long they have been staying together (N.G. Mahanta: 99). The method of terror and violence unleashed by the Bodo militants i.e. the NDFB and the BLTF, in the form of ethnic cleansing indicated their outlook and approach for achieving their perceived homeland. It is worth mentioning here that in recent time insurgent groups in the name and style of Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF), Birsa Commando Force (BCF) Bengali Tiger Force (BTF), Islamic Revolutionary Army (IRA), Immigrant Muslim Liberation Army (IMLA) and many other have emerged in the second half of 1990’s, in order to emancipate their respective community from the onslaught of the Bodos (Mahanta: 1999).

Extortions by the militant organization were another frequently occurred incident of the Bodoland movement. Both the NDFB and the

BLTF had been frequently indulged in extortion bids. It is reported that the so called “Bodoland Tax” collection system of the militant organization are different to each other. When the BLTF used to collect „Tax“ on monthly basis, the NDFB do the same on yearly basis. The victims of the extortion are government officials, businessman, contractors, petrol pump owners, tea companies etc. (K. Sonowal: 2013). Since 1993, the lower Assam has been witnessing unprecedented violence, arson and killing at the hands of Bodo extremists. There were many instances of indiscriminate bombing in public places and running trains and killing of non-Bodo people. The Bodo insurgency problem remained even after the formation of BAC.

As already has been mentioned that the Bodoland Accord of 1993 failed to satisfy the Bodo grievances and demands. The BAC started to function with many issues unresolved - the most important among these was the territorial boundary of the council. Both the state government and the Bodo organizations have failed to reach an agreement on permanent demarcation of boundaries of the BAC. Besides, political wrangles frustrated all attempts for election to the BAC. Having failed to satisfy the common Bodos through the creation of BAC, the formidable ABSU and BPAC termed the “Bodoland Accord” of 1993 as “Betrayal to the Bodos” and rejected the Accord. They held the view that nothing short of a separate state of Bodoland could solve the problem of the Bodo people. Rejecting the Bodoland Accord, in 20th February 1999, in the 31st annual conference of ABSU held at Datoma (Kokrajhar), the ABSU and BPAC again declared a fresh movement demanding the creation of separate state “Bodoland”, the way the three new states Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Uttarkhand were created under the provisions of the constitution of India (The Assam Tribune, 21st February, 1999).

BLT’s Negotiation and Creation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC): The post BAC accord period has been witnessing large scale violence, kidnapping and an increase in disruptive activities due to upper hand taken by the Bodo Militant organizations. It was fortunate that Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) that remained a force to reckon with reached a cease fire agreement with the

Government of India on March 29, 2000. The ABSU also took initiative in bringing the BLT to negotiating table with the central government to find out a solution of Bodoland issue. After a series of tripartite talks held between the Government of India, Government of Assam and BLT, finally a Memorandum of settlement was signed on February 10, 2003 in New Delhi by the following signatories, Mr. Hagrama Basumatary, the BLT Chairman, Mr. RCA Jain, secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India, Mr. P.K. Dutta, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Sri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam and Shri L.K. Advani, Honourable Deputy Prime Minister of India. The main objectives of the agreement are to create an autonomous self-governing body to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the state of Assam and to administer a territory spanning 3082 villages making four districts – Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India, to abolish the Bodoland accord of 1993, to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up the infrastructural development in the newly formed BTC area (Memorandum of Settlement). The formation of BTC is the outcome of the devolution of political and cultural autonomy by the state under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. All most all the national and regional political parties and pressure groups of Assam supported BLT's demand for the formation of BTC because it reflects the idea of power sharing within the state without upsetting the basic constitutional framework. The formation of BTC under the Sixth Schedule has provided the Bodos wider context towards empowerment and advancement of their community. For the state, it is indicative of its political strategy to strengthen cooperative and multi-level federal democracy in the face of growing challenges of ethnic assertion and mobilization by marginalized and relatively backward ethnic communities like Bodos in Assam (Kundu: 2010).

NDFB and Cease Fire: On May 26, 2005, all morning newspaper carried the refreshing news about Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's announcement on ceasefire with NDFB.

However, under an agreement on May 24, 2005 with the Government of India and the NDFB has been maintaining a ceasefire since June 1, 2005. Since the ceasefire, the level of threat posed by the NDFB has dropped. The agreement stated that the NDFB agree to cease hostile action against security forces and civilians. In return, the security forces would not carry out operations against the group's members. The agreement also stipulated that NDFB members would disarm and live in camps protected by the military for a year, and would refrain from assisting other militant groups. The ceasefire is expected to lead talks between the armed group and state agencies. And ultimately to a complete halt in armed conflicts (Ahmed: 78).

It is worth mentioning here that in the contemporary period, the NDFB has split into three factions– because of their ideological differences and approaches. The NDFB (Progressive) led by Govinda Basumatary and the NDFB (Ranjan) led by Ranjan Daimary had been maintaining cease fire with the Government of India. It is worth mentioning here that Govinda Basumatary is an elected member of Assam Legislative Assembly winning from the Udalguri LAC in the 2021 Assam Bidhan Sabha Election.

Conclusion:

Assessing the various phases of the Bodo movement, it seems that the movement is not a sudden outcome, but a result of genuine aged old grievances. It is a movement for autonomy and all round development. The Bodo movement, in the contemporary period, had emerged as a powerful autonomy movement in Assam that has engaged long standing deliberations and negotiations with federal state on the issue of autonomy. The state has affected by devolution of power to the mobilized Bodos of Assam through the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993. As the BAC failed to satisfy the grievances of the Bodo people, the union government after long deliberations made necessary amendments in the relevant provisions of the constitution of India and granted sixth schedule status to the Bodos of Assam. The BAC was abolished with the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council

(BTC) in 2003 with a view to reduce ethnic tension and violence in the tribal dominated areas of Assam and to secure better community representation in the political process by conferring more institutional and political autonomy on the BTC. The formation of BTC under the sixth schedule has provided the Bodos wider context towards empowerment and advancement. However, with the signing of Bodoland Territorial Region Accord on 27th January 2020 at New Delhi, the BTC was abolished and a new era of Bodo Peace was established. Many enlightened Bodos think that the creation of BTR will help to fulfill their aspiration, provided the government and the Boro leaders are sincere to the cause of Boro people.

It is worth mentioning here that, it seems that the formation of BTR has not fully satisfied the grievances of the Bodos. It is observed that nothing short of a separate state could satisfy the Bodos.

N.G. Mahanta observes that whatever be the outcome of the Bodoland movement, a more sagacious and pragmatic stand is required from the Bodo leaders. The Bodos can never dream to have a one language homogeneous society. As already has mentioned in the previous chapter that the present BTC area is inhabited not only by the Bodos, other tribal groups like the Rabhas, the Saraniyas, the Mechas, the Miris and Deories are also there. Besides, non-tribals like the Koch- Rajbongshi, a large of schedule caste, caste Hindus, Muslims both original and immigrants, the Santhals, Mundas and Nepalese are also residing in the BTC areas since time immemorial. In the longrun, if the majority of Non-Bodo population have to lose their political rights and social status, it may be that common interest and motive will unite them all, irrespective of their castes, religion and creed and may be induced to adopt insurgency activities, as the Bodos have done in the past against the Non-Bodo establishment.

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