



BODO MOVEMENT IN ASSAM: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Mobilization and movement to reclaim lost identity and space as well as to carve out new one is a universal phenomenon. In North Eastern part of India ethnicity and identity are the root causes behind such mobilization. In western part of Assam, the Bodos have been fighting for the cause of a separate Bodoland. A historical understanding of the movement have brought into light different phases of the same: from moderate to militant phases out of its interplay with different factors. The response from the state is visible in different forms; sometimes through the means of suppression while on other times through political and constitutional solutions as evident in the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council. This paper provides a historical account of the long drawn Bodo movement with different phases and different stakeholders whose demand have been ranging from separate homeland to more autonomy that ultimately found a solution with the creation of BTC in 2003. Such an account will be followed by the description of the autonomy arrangement for Bodoland as provided under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and the role of peace accords as well as the post 2003 status of stability and peace in the region.

Keywords: Bodo, Autonomy, Sixth Schedule, Constitution, BTC, Peace Accords.

DOI: 10.48047/ecb/2023.12.8.753

Introduction

Since independence the government of India has taken various measures to improve the lot of the tribal people of the country. Moreover in order to bring the tribal people into the mainstream of national politics and also for their welfare, there are provisions in articles 330, 332, 338 and 339 of the constitution of India. These articles are applicable for all tribes of India including North-East. But article 244 (B) of the constitution provides for a sixth schedule for bringing development of the tribes of North-East India only because it was assumed that these tribes have some special problems of their own. The constituent Assembly referred the matter to a sub-committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi. The recommendation of this committee is included in the draft sixth schedule. The idea behind the sixth schedule was to provide the tribal people with a simple administration of their own, so that they could safeguard their own customs and tradition and to provide them maximum autonomy in the management of tribal affairs. Thus we see that by the time some of the District councils are coming up. All these District Councils are autonomous. Autonomous means self-governance. Although, tribal autonomy was ensured through the sixth schedule of the constitution yet, the tribal movement for autonomy did not come to an end rather the plain tribes like Bodos demanded for creation of separate state (Sarma, 2014). The Bodo Movement has been the most stringent tribal movement in contemporary Assam. This movement had seeded in the colonial times but intensified into a radical political, cultural and extremist assertion in the 1980s. The Bodo movement draws its sources from the ostensible feeling of discrimination, deprivation and injustice experienced by the Bodo community in Assam. During the campaign in order to attain political, economic and cultural suzerainty, the

leaders of the Bodo Movement emphasized that the Bodo people are ethnically different from rest of the people of present-day Assam and hence entitled to political entitlement in the form of a separate state-Bodoland (Kalita, 2011).

Historical Background of Bodo Movement in Assam

The Bodo movement since its inception has taken different trajectories from the demand for more electoral inclusion to the demand for a separate state and further to the secessionist movement spearheaded by the insurgent groups. While some have resolutely expressed the need for more autonomy within the present set-up, other movements have evolved more militant, secessionist idea of political and geographical demarcation of territory. The aim and purpose of this autonomy movement is not only to bring change in the existing system, but also to augment legitimate expressions of aspirations by the people having a distinct culture, tradition and common pattern of living (Lalfakzuala & Sharma, 2019).

The First Phase (1933-1952): The Phase of Political Awakening

The Bodo leadership propagates the idea of Bodoland through the assumption that political autonomy will remove their deprivations. The first phase commenced with the formal organization of the Bodo polity with the Bodos feeling the need for a political party that represented their interests. This phase is also considered the phase of political awakening that lasted from 1933 to 1952. A memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission was submitted in 1929 by the Bodo community of Goalpara and the “Kachari Juvak Sanmiloni” (Kachari Youth Meet) demanding political power. Subsequently, the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL) was formed in 1933 as a political party under the leadership of Rupnath Brahma. The main objective of this party was to protect the identities and interests of “tribal people” of Assam. The demand during this phase was more electoral participation and the demand for separate electorate system, reservation of 5 seats for Plain Tribals in Assam (Hussain, 1987).

The Second Phase (1952-1967): Issue of Language and Script

The feeling of nationalistic attitude among the educated Bodos grew with the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952, which submitted a memorandum to the then Assam Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi for the introduction of Bodo Medium schools in 1953. The movement during this time is to the assertion of linguistic identity due to the threat posed by the dominant Assamese community due to the introduction of the Assam official language bill, 1960. This phase is also marked by aggressive mass movements on questions relating exclusively to Bodo identity for the first time in history. This phase has also witnessed radicalization of the Bodo political scenario compared to the time of the tribal league. This phase has achieved the introduction of Bodo language as the medium of instruction in schools in Bodo dominated area in 1963 (Mahanta, 2013).

The Third Phase (1967-1986): The Demand for Political Autonomy

With the quest for linguistic identity in progress, the movement has taken a huge leap and for the first time has demanded an arrangement for autonomy. Assurance given by Congress to the Tribal League, the promise of the protection of tribal rights and land was not codified in its true sense. The Bodos thus take a new turn in its movement with the formation of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 27th February, 1967. Its aim was to demand a Union Territory called “Udayachal” in the Bodo dominated areas. The All Bodo Students“ Union”

(ABSU) was also formed on 15th February, 1967 at a time when the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi proposed to reorganize the state of Assam on 13th January, 1967. The PTCA has taken the front seat in the movement during this phase with the whole hearted support of the ABSU. This period has also witnessed the anti-foreigners agitation of the All Assam Student Union and All Assam Gana Sangam Parishad (AAGSP) in 1979. The PTCA and the ABSU has supported this movement. This has ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The Assam Accord has failed to meet the expectation of the Bodo people which has led to another wave of movement post-Accord (Mishra, 2012).

The Fourth Phase (1987-1992): Demand for Separate Statehood

The PTCA and ABSU worked together till 1979. ABSU withdrew the support of PTCA as it felt that the PTCA had failed to fulfil the aspirations of the Bodo people for a separate state during the reorganization process of Assam. From the 1987, the ABSU has taken central stage in the movement. The ABSU under the leadership of late Upendra Nath Brahma launched vigorous mass movement on 2nd March, 1987 with a series of political demand the most resounding of which is the demand for separate state of Bodoland.

The Fifth Phase (1993-2003): Post Accord and Secessionist Movement

The Bodo Accord of 1993 failed to meet the expectation of the Bodos and large scale agitation has started due to the ambiguities in the territorial boundary of the BAC. From 1994 onwards, the BdSF resorted to extreme violence, which resulted in worsening of the situation, negating the primary objectives of the Bodo Accord. The ethnic cleansing carried out by the armed outfit has led to communal riots in September and October 1993 leading to death of many and rendering many people homeless. The BDSF was renamed as NDBF (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and another armed outfit called the Bodoland Liberation Tigers rises in 1995 due to the ideological difference with the NDBF which led to the fight and killing among the two armed group. There was a leadership crisis during this period and has led to the splitting of ABSU (Singh, 2004).

The Quest for Peace in Assam

Violence continued with the fighting between the armed group and with the state forces. The second Bodo Accord was signed in 2003 between the BLT and the state government with the former shunting the arms struggle. The Second Bodo Accord created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under modified provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Subsequently, the BTC was to comprise four districts: Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri, which were to be created by reorganizing the existing districts of Assam. These four districts are otherwise known as the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). This however was challenged by the NDBF who hold onto the idea of a sovereign state and other non-bodo ethnic communities within the proposed BTC. The post accord has not seen much progress in the movement with the splitting of the NDBF and the peace process held with the government. However, it is strongly held that the BTC failed to fulfil its promise- identity, language and culture not protected by the state (Roy, 2005). By 2003, negotiations between the state government, the central government and the BLT led to the signing of a peace accord popularly known as the second Bodo accord. The second Bodo accord created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under modified provisions of the Sixth schedule of the Constitution. Subsequently, the BTC was to comprise four districts: kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri, which were to be created by reorganizing the existing districts of

Assam. These four districts are otherwise known as the Bodoland Territorial area Districts (BTAD). In contrast to the 1993 Bodo accord that was signed by the ABSU, the sole signatory on behalf of the Bodo people to the 2003 accord was Hagrama Mohilary, Chairman of the BLT, whose relations with the ABSU remained tangential. The creation of the BTC met various formidable challenges, including that of the NDFB which was committed to a sovereign Bodoland. Besides internal opposition from within the Bodo community, the creation of the BTC also faced opposition from the non-Bodo community, that, under the aegis of the sanmilita Janagoshtiya sangram samiti (SJSS), an organisation comprising 18 non-Bodo groups, was opposed to any form of greater political autonomy for the Bodos. The successful completion of formalities witnessed the biggest ever surrender ceremony in the country as a total of 2,641 BLT militants along with varieties of sophisticated weapons bade farewell to arms on December 6, 2003.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the unarmed section of the Bodo groups such as the ABSU and erstwhile Coordination Committee for Bodoland Movement (CCBM), which spearheaded the revived Bodoland state movement were sidelined at the signing of the 2003 Bodo accord even though they are argued to have enjoyed more popular support. Nevertheless, these groups backed the peace deal signed by the BLT. Initially, some ABSU/CCBM leaders were accommodated in the ad hoc BTC, but at the time of the formation of the full-fledged BTC, and during the election to the Tribal Council, the ex-BLT leaders sidelined them. As a result, there was a split in the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF), a political party constituted by former BLT and ABSU/CCBM leaders. With this split, there were widespread clashes between the factions of the BPPF during the first election to the BTC which the BPPF (Hagrama) won (Rajagopalan, 2008).

The split between the BPF and BPPF widened in the subsequent assembly elections of 2006 and 2011. While the BPF won the Lok Sabha election in 2009, in 2008, the BTAD areas witnessed a fresh round of fratricidal killings when gunmen apparently killed numerous people who were allegedly supporters of the ABSU, NDFB and BPPF. According to an ABSU publication, nearly 100 Bodo people were killed in 2008 in their effort to control Bodo politics and society. While the leaders of the erstwhile BLT were entrusted with the task of framing the Constitution of the BTC under the amended provisions of the sixth schedule, they were also accused of bullying their opponents or even killing them. The NDFB, however, remained a formidable challenge as its agenda revolved around a sovereign Bodoland and even in the present times, the NDFB cadres persistently clash with the erstwhile BLT cadres. The NDFB sees the formation of the BTC as an exercise in futility. Nevertheless, on October 8, 2004, the NDFB announced a six-month-long ceasefire with effect from October 15, 2004. The move by the outfit was not reciprocated by the government then—instead, the government and the security forces continued operations against the outfit. However, the government, later realizing that the NDFB represented the Bodo ethnic group, considered the significance of its announcement for which the Assam government released Govinda Basumatary, the arrested General Secretary of the NDFB with the motive of opening a channel of communication with the outfit's top leadership based in Bangladesh. Subsequently, several discussions between the outfit's leadership and representatives of the Union government and Government of Assam led to the signing of a tripartite ceasefire agreement on May 25, 2005 (Saikia, 2011). The ceasefire with the NDFB since then has been periodically extended and several peace talks with the NDFB (Progressive) led by Govinda Basumatary have taken place. While the NDFB (P) is in talks with the state agencies, the Ranjan Daimari faction of the NDFB also declared a unilateral truce in August 2011 after its top leadership, including Rajan Daimari, was arrested. However, the Rajan Daimari faction still maintains the armed wing of the NDFB under the leadership of I k songbijit who runs the

anti-talks and armed faction of the NDFB from Myanmar. While the cadres of the NDFB (P) faction are lodged in various designated camps located across the Bodoland areas, the NDFB (Songbijit) faction continues to carry out violent armed activity, including kidnappings and extortion, in the lower Assam areas. The formation of the Bodo national Conference (BNC) in 2010 with the intention of bringing all political and non-political Bodo organizations' under one umbrella signalled some hope for a united struggle for a separate state of Bodoland. But by November, 2011, the NDFB (P) distanced itself from the BNC, on the issue that a separate state of Bodoland was not in the BNC's agenda. On the contrary, the NDFB (P) stated that it was in talks with the Indian government on the issue of a separate state of Bodoland. By December 2010, there were visible signs of the ABSU reviving the chant of "Divide Assam 50-50". Meanwhile, the BTC was accused of having failed to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the Bodo people. The ABSU also went to the extent of accusing the Assam government of failing to protect the identity, culture and language of the Bodo people. The BPF, the ruling party of the BTC, on the other hand, claimed that it has been demanding the creation of separate state of Bodoland and took a position similar to that of the ABSU. Under such circumstances of claim and counter-claim, the Bodo people have been shoved into utter confusion as to which organization they should side with in the demand for a separate state of Bodoland. The recent developments, as far as the NDFB is concerned, are that its leader, Ranjan Daimary has been released from jail on bail and the NDFB (P), the pro-talks faction of the outfit, in the aftermath of the declaration of Telengana, has changed its stance from a demand for a separate state of Bodoland to a demand for a Union Territory of Bodoland. Some analysts have viewed the release of Ranjan Daimary, who is likely to negotiate with the central and state governments, as giving rise to a scenario wherein there is a high probability of a clash with other personalities who are already negotiating on Bodoland with the government at various levels. This probable clash between Ranjan Daimary, Govinda Basumatary of the NDFB (P) and the present Chief of the BTC, Hagrama Mohilary comprises a highly destabilizing scenario not only for the BTC but the whole of Assam (Baneerjee, 2013).

4. Conclusion

The historical analysis of the Bodo movement has shown the course in which the movement has found a settlement with the creation of an institution that is BTAD. The creation of the institution reflects first of all a bargaining and consensual process between the rebel groups, the Government of Assam and the Central government. In a country with deep level of diversity, such arrangement becomes possible due to the democratic, multicultural federal political system of the country. Such arrangements are driven by the mandate of the Preamble of the Constitution that incorporated unity and integrity as the basic principle. In this light, the creation of such self-governing autonomous institution have manifested accommodation of multicultural diversity within the nation with the larger goal of restoring unity and integrity of the nation state. However, in the case of BTC such settlement is neither comprehensive nor an end. It is not comprehensive in the sense that such solution has not been worked out in agreement with all the stakeholders involved in the movement. Many dissident groups have remained unrepresented the outcome of which are manifested in the growing violence even after the creation of the BTAD. The movement for the separate homeland has been continued, although in a dormant stage that sometimes burst out with heinous violence. Also the movement has not dead with the creation of autonomous institution. In other words, it has not taken a final shape. There has been growing sense of disaffection regarding the autonomy arrangement among the ruling body. Also neither Bodo nor non-Bodo people have been

satisfied with the working of the present administrative set up. In the context of the evolving nature of the movement, it appears necessary to address certain other aspects like the working of the BTAD, certain structural issues of India's political system within which such system operate.

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