

State's Response To The Ethnic Identity Movement: A Study Of The Bodo Movement Of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic identity assertion in Assam has been an enduring occurrence over a considerable period of time. The Bodo movement has had a significant impact on Assam's socio-economic and political landscape. It has played a key role in shaping the Bodo identity and in safeguarding the Bodo culture. The quest for a separate homeland has prompted both peaceful and violent activities in the state. Over the years, the state government has made numerous efforts to curtail the movement. The state administration has negotiated with the Bodo factions using both harsh and peaceful methods since the beginning of the movement. As a result, the state and central governments have struck a number of Accords with Bodo organisations till date. In this study, an attempt has been made to comprehend the various ways in which the state has responded to the ethnic identity movement among the Bodos of Assam.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Autonomy, Bodo Movement, State government

Introduction

The movement for ethnic identity and autonomy has been a source of great upheaval in different parts of the world for a considerable period of time. India has borne witness to a multitude of ethnic and identity-based movements over the course of several years, which have exerted significant and far-reaching effects on the governance structures within its states. These movements have brought about significant transformations, shaping the socio-political landscape of India. The North-Eastern states of India have witnessed ethnic identity-based movements and assertions both prior to and after independence, and these movements are quite distinct from the movements in other parts of India owing to their geographic location, socio-cultural diversity and historical context.

The ethnic composition of the northeast varies from that of the rest of the country. Identity is one of the interconnected issues for the many social movements, and the desire for identity and autonomy has a strong effect on the people here. The Naga movement, the Mizo movement, the Khasi movement, and a variety of ethnic movements are examples of assertions based on identity and a demand for autonomy within the Indian Union and to some extent sovereignty as well. Apart from these tribal groupings, several other ethnic groups in the region are routinely called for a separate homeland, and the desire for autonomy is dominant. All of these movements show a dominant vision of the situation and also demonstrate how indigenous people are concerned about preserving their identity. The Bodo identity assertions and desire for autonomy is one such movement in the state of Assam.

The state of Assam is home to several ethnic groups, each with a distinct culture, language, and customs, culminating in a composite Assamese society through socio-cultural fusion. The Bodos and Bodo-Kacharis are Assam's plains tribes. They constitute the majority of the tribal people in Assam. According to the 2011 Census Report of India, there are approximately two million Bodo people in Assam, totaling around 5.5% of the state's total population (Census, 2011). The Bodos are of Indo-Mongoloid descent and speak Tibeto-Burman. Scholars such as Sir Edward Gait, J.D. Anderson, and K.L. Barua have said that the Bodos are the autochthons of the Brahmaputra valley (Choudhury, 2013). According to Deka (2014), the Bodos are primarily concentrated on the Brahmaputra River's north bank, particularly in the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri, with scattered populations throughout the state.

The Bodo movement is the outcome of a protracted historical process of identity construction that began during the colonial period and progressively picked up steam after independence. The awareness of their subjugation at the hands of non-Bodo communities and those who moved from the former East- Bengal had

prompted the Bodos to unify under British rule. The movement itself is an expression of the Bodo community's commitment to and desire for self-rule. They had to support their concerns in numerous ways in post-Independence India due to the prolonged suffering from socio-economic backwardness.

Review of Literature

There are several reasons for the Bodo claim in the Brahmaputra valley, and scholars in the field of social movement studies have written extensively on the identity concerns connected to the Bodoland movement. According to Hussain (1992), the Bodos, along with other tribal groups, first demanded Udayachal for all plains tribals, and then Bodoland for the Bodos, as a state or Union Territory (UT), and desired political autonomy for all tribal populations of Assam. Despite being the largest indigenous plains tribe in the Brahmaputra basin, the Bodos have been denied socio-economic progress over the years. The movement arose not just from a desire to preserve culture and history, but also from a desire to improve their disadvantaged socio-economic situation.

George (1994) aptly said that the Bodos' desire for a separate state known as Bodoland is the outcome of their economic and social ambitions. Since the 1930s, the Bodos have been submitting memoranda and letters to British officials about their socio-economic and educational backwardness, as well as the necessity to maintain their distinct identity from the influence of others. Deka (2014) states in her study on the Bodo movement in Assam that the desire for a Bodo homeland is fueled by memories of an old Bodo kingdom and a distant past. The interpretation of history has played a significant part in establishing the Bodos' distinct identity, and it has motivated the drive for a separate Bodoland state. The desire for a separate state in Assam today is the outcome of the community's socio-economic underdevelopment and the burgeoning political ambitions of Bodo leaders for self-rule or self-determination.

According to Hussain (2000), the Assamese language movement of the 1960s in Assam completely disregarded the state's multiethnic and multilingual nature. Plains and hills tribal communities of the Brahmaputra river and Bengali-speaking inhabitants of the Barack valley resisted the campaign vigorously. As a result, the Bodos were outraged and skeptical of the intentions of the Assamese upper-caste leadership. Since the 1960s, the Bodos have endeavoured to promote their own culture, heritage, and identity on the border of ethnicity. Hussain claims that the ethnicity of the Bodos may be understood using Milton Yinger's notions of soft and hard ethnicity. Initially, the Bodo ethnicity was soft, but with the passage of time, it progressively evolved into a hard ethnicity.

In the state of Assam, the anti-foreigner campaign known as the Assam movement has had a significant influence on Bodo identity awareness. Initially, the Bodo leaders supported and participated in the Assam agitation. With the signing of the Assam Accord in August 1985, the protracted six-year Assam agitation came to a conclusion. The members of the Bodo community, particularly the leaders of the Bodo movement, were dissatisfied with the Assam Accord, which simply vowed to maintain Assamese cultural identity and language. Baruah (1999) contends that traditionally, tribal populations such as the Bodos, Karbis, Tiwas, and Rabhas viewed themselves as part of the indigenous population of Assam as a whole. Over time, however, they have distanced themselves from the Assamese subnational formation; even the Bodos are demanding territorial independence. The desire for a Bodo homeland inside the Indian Union has become the most severe cause of political violence in the state of Assam, even more so than United Liberation Front of Assam's separatist militancy (ULFA). Baruah claims that the Bodo leaders were unhappy with the two provisions of the Assam agreement. The first concern was the constitutional protection for the cultural identity of the "Assamese people," and the second was evictions from protected forest lands. The leaders of the Bodo think that the term "Assamese people" and its preservation of cultural identity will lead to the imposition of the Assamese language on them. On the other hand, they anticipated that the eviction of people from public or forest areas would negatively affect the Bodo and other indigenous people. He also noted that the Bodo homeland movement was, to some extent, an extension of the Assam struggle.

Hiren Gohain (2014), an Assamese scholar and social critic, has stated that the Bodo case has its own history. Since the early twentieth century, educated Bodos have led other tribal people against Assam's dominant castes or groups, accusing them of caste-based discrimination, abuse, and infringement on their rights. He also examines how Bodos, under the banner of the tribal league, fought against tyranny and demanded land rights for people used to shifting agriculture, facilities for their children's education, and reservation of jobs in the government service.

From the preceding discussions, it is apparent that the Bodo movement in Assam for a separate Bodoland is motivated by a number of factors: socio-economic and educational development, preservation of their distinctive culture, identity, and aspiration for self-government are the primary motivating factors behind the Bodo movement.

Objectives of the study

The study primarily focuses on the ethnic identity movement of the Bodos of Assam and the state government's strategy and response to the movement across time. It seeks to examine the trajectory of the Bodo movement and the role of the state government in addressing the movement.

Research Methodology

The descriptive research design has been employed for this qualitative study. This study attempts to analyse the Bodo movement and the state government's response to it over the years. The whole study work draws exclusively from secondary sources. The secondary sources of data include books, journal articles, research papers, the BTC settlement memorandum, and newspaper articles, among many others.

Issues of Ethnicity, Identity and Autonomy

After World War II, the issue of ethnicity and identity gained significant prominence in academic debates. The term "identity" first appeared in social analysis, the social sciences, and public discourses in the 1960s, primarily in the United States (Brubaker, 2004). According to Nash (2005), the new social movement theorists opened up history to many new players by emphasising the ethnic, gender, and racial mix of movements that were suppressed by those who valued class status. In the context of South-east Asia, the subject of ethnicity has assumed greater importance in academic discourse. Over time, the region has witnessed an increase in ethnicity and identity-based movements.

In India, both prior to and following independence, there has been a strong ethnicity and identity-based movements. In the state of Assam, the subject of ethnic identity assertion and the demand for autonomy by the various ethnic groups has long been present. There are many different reasons for these ethnic claims. There are multiple issues with these movements for identity and autonomy. The most important reason is that they want to preserve their own identities. Ethnic identity claims are made out of a desire for self-government, economic growth, protection of the language, and participation in the political process. For many years, ethnic groups such as the Koch-Rajbangshi, Rabhas, Karbis, Dimasas, Misings, Bodos, and Sonowal-Kacharis have been asserting their ethnic identity and demanding self-rule in the state. Since independence, the Bodos, who are the largest plains ethnic group, have been demanding for their own homeland. The Bodo cultural, literary, and student organisations, as well as non-state actors, are using various political, social and violent movements to fight for an exclusive homeland called Bodoland. Similarly, the Koch-Rajbangshi faction has long advocated for a distinct homeland known as Kamatapur. In addition to the Bodos and Koch-Rajbangshis, several other minor ethnic groups are requesting autonomy in order to manage their socio-economic affairs and preserve their identity in the state.

A Brief Account of the Bodo Ethnic Identity Assertion

In Assam, the movement for a distinct Bodoland state inside the Indian Union has a long history of identity construction. It has a long history of protest and agitation at different times during India's colonial and post-colonial periods. Various research scholars have stated that the Bodo movement was in its infancy in colonial India and progressively acquired traction after independence. The character of the movement at its start differs from that of the movement today. There are also variances in the manner of actions at different stages of the Bodo movement. The movement has had a significant social and political impact on the people of Assam. The desire for a separate state by the Bodos is not the result of a sudden outbreak of Bodo sentiments. Its roots may be traced back to the socio-economic underdevelopment and political aspirations of those who initially expressed the desire for a separate homeland during British rule (George, 1994).

The beginning of the Bodo movement may be dated to the first part of the twentieth century, when the Bodo middle class emerged under colonial rule (Kundu, 2010). It is thought that the emergence of socio-political and ethnic identity consciousness among the Bodo middle classes was responsible for the movement's emergence in colonial India. It is also apparent from their submission of a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1929 (Bhattacharjee 1996). Das (2014) shares a similar viewpoint, pointing out that the rise of the Bodo middle class has assisted the Bodo movement. Since its start, the Bodo movement has displayed both integrationist and separatist impulses, and it has engaged in both violent and nonviolent activities (Sharma, 2007). K.S. Singh identified three distinct periods in the formation of the Bodo movement. The initial phase of the movement focused on the socio-cultural development of the Bodos; the intermediate phase dealt with building solidarity among the Bodos through demands for language, script, and economic upliftment; and the final phase of the movement focused on the formation of a separate state known as "Bodoland" on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra (Kundu, 2010).

Since 1987, the Bodo movement has somewhat taken two forms: (1) socio-political movements and (2) violent armed movements headed by insurgent groups. All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF), and many more social, literary, and student organisations contributed to the growth of the movement's social and political dimensions. The armed movement, on the other hand, was led by insurgent organisations such as the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Since the 1990s, the ABSU, a student organisation, has been the Bodo movement's perennial mouthpiece. Women in the Bodo community have also played an important part in the quest for a separate state.

Three Accords have been signed as a result of several years of struggle and protests by Bodo organisations. In 1993, the ABSU-Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC), the state Government of Assam, and the Government of India signed the first Bodo Accord, which established the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). In 2003, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), the Government of Assam, and the

Government of India signed the second Bodo Accord, which formed the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the amended Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The third Bodo Accord, named as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) dubbed the Bodo Peace Accord, has been signed on 27 January, 2020 by the Government of India, the Government of Assam, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), various factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and the United Bodo People's Organization (UBPO). The movement for a separate Bodoland state has long caused unrest within the state. In this regard, the non-state actor's role in the movement is also significant. Evidently, the Bodo organisations began the movement peacefully, but it degenerated into violence and resulted in the deaths of a large number of innocent people. As an ethno - political movement, the Bodo movement garnered support from all sectors of Bodo society. The leaders of the movement were also influenced by the Naga, Mizo, Gorkhaland, Telangana, and other movements in their quest for a separate state within the Indian Union. In all the rallies, meetings, gatherings, and protest marches that constituted an integral part of the movement's activities, women from the community were prominently present and actively participated in the activities for the cause of a separate Bodoland. The magnitude of the movement has affected the lives of both Bodo and non-Bodo population over the years.

State Government's Response to the Bodo Movement in Assam

The Bodo movement has long been a source of unrest and a security threat in the state of Assam. This movement has had a profound and far-reaching impact on the state's society, culture, and economy. On the other hand, it is also concerning to contemplate the accusations made by Bodo movement activists against the Assam state government. From the beginning of the movement, the Bodo leadership labelled the successive Assam state governments as anti-tribal or anti-Bodoland. The activists of the movement claimed that all of the state's ruling governments attempted to suppress the movement, and former Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta-led Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) government from 1985 to 1990 had committed not to allow further division of Assam.

The Assam Gana Parishad (AGP)-led government enacted a number of policies to thwart the Bodo movement, and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) also campaigned against it. The subsequent Assam state governments were unresponsive to the Bodos' cause; instead of probing their demands, they repeatedly tried to crush the movement. All of these events prompted the Bodos to emphasise the importance of creating a separate homeland to address their grievances. During the strike and *bandhs* declared by the ABSU, volunteers clashed with the state government administration. During the AGP government's sixteen months in power in Assam, the Bodos' sense of alienation and separatist tendencies grew. ABSU activists organised numerous protests against the AGP government's policies in 1990s. The United Tribal National Liberation Front (UNTLF), formed by a faction of Plains Tribal Council of Assam leaders, expressed concern about the State government's plot to label the ABSU-led movement as violent and extremist. The ABSU has always held the AGP government accountable for any clashes or violence in the state.

The ABSU and the UNTLF jointly demanded the creation of Bodoland as a separate administrative unit in 1989, by dividing Assam fifty-fifty (Kundu, 2010). However, the then-Assam Chief Minister and the Prime Minister of India were unwilling to consider the proposal for further division of Assam. In 1989, the Assam administration held an informal but futile meeting with the ABSU. This occurrence prompted ABSU activists to believe that the administration was indifferent about addressing their issue. This incident sparked widespread rage among the Bodo people (Deka, 2014). Finally, the state and central governments proposed that the indigenous people be given liberty to govern themselves. Although they did not totally agree, the ABSU-BPAC leaders approved the agreement for the construction of an autonomous region. Despite the fact that the ABSU-BPAC jointly initiated the movement, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Accord was signed between the newly established Bodo Peoples Party (BPP) and the Congress (I) -led state government (Das, 1994). The BAC Accord was unable to meet the aspirations of the Bodo community, emphasising the campaign for separate Bodoland state inside the Indian Union.

The leaders of the Bodo movement contended that the Assam Gana Parishad's (AGP) acquisition of political power had resulted in no major improvement in the Bodos' situation. The successive Congress and AGP administrations failed to address the problems of the Bodos but neglected the issues of the Bodo-inhabited areas (Nath, 2008). During the AGP government's tenure, the Bodos' socio-economic situation deteriorated. The AGP administration also attempted to expel illegal settlers from protected areas, which resulted in the expulsion of several Bodos, fueling the Bodo movement (Baruah, 1999). The AGP administration enacted legislation to expel unlawful residents of forests and other restricted sites. This was enforced by forcible evictions, the burning of indigenous tribal homes, and cruel police *lathi*-charges (Das, 1994).

To put an end to the Bodo agitation for a separate state, the AGP administration adopted a policy of resistance from the outset. The AGP government constantly insisted on '*Asamiya*' as a prerequisite for employment to government positions, which the Bodo leaders strenuously opposed (Das, 1994). Instead of integration, succeeding Congress governments, including the AGP administration, pursued a policy of complete assimilation. As a result, the Bodos and other tribal believe they have little hope of preserving their culture and traditions. The AGP-led administration has refused to discuss the idea of a separate state with ABSU activists, seeing the agitation as a state law and order issue. The AGP administration was less

interested in resolving the Bodo issue and more interested in taking political measures to repress the movement. The Congress (I) administration likewise brutally crushed the movement.

For many years, the Bodo campaign for a separate homeland was carried out via socio-political protests as well as violent armed revolt by various Bodo insurgent groups such as the BLT, NDFB, and others. After several years of agitation and protest, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Accord was signed in 2003 between the Bodoland Tigers Force (BLT), the state administration, and the central government for the establishment of an autonomous area under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Even the BTC agreement cannot meet the desires and ambitions of the Bodo people. Bodo student organisations, literary groups, women's organisations, and many other civic organisations continued to work for the demand and formation of Bodoland. This led in the signing of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) agreement in 2020. The agreement was signed between ABSU leaders, the state administration, and the central government to provide the Bodo people greater autonomy in managing their own affairs and socio-economic development.

Conclusion

The Bodo movement in the state of Assam has expressed the identity crisis of the Bodo people and reaffirmed their desires for self-government. This ethnic community believed for long years that they had been excluded from the political arena. The preservation of culture is one of the movement's essential components. This movement negatively impacted the socio-economic growth of the state. Over the years, the subsequent state administrations of Assam responded fiercely to the movement's violent actions. The state government even made many efforts to repress the movement throughout time. The authorities used harsh measures to weaken the activists of the movement. The primary complaint is that the state and central governments are uninterested in resolving the Bodos' challenges and problems. Both the state and the central government have made intermittent attempts to suppress the Bodo movement. However, they have also resorted to a peaceful strategy of engaging with Bodo leaders while ignoring their demand for the creation of a separate Bodoland state. As a consequence, various Accords with the Bodo tribe have been struck over time.

The Bodo movement is also a result of the Bodo community's developing political aspirations and awareness. The Bodos want political authority in order to govern their own society. Because they do not trust Assamese high-caste people to look after their development, the Bodos want to be involved in their own socio-economic and political concerns. They have grown more politically aware and cognizant of the rising danger to their identity as time has passed.

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