

Bodoland Movement: A Historical Perspective**Dr. Oinam Ranjit Singh, Head****Department of History, Bodoland University****&****Gautam Mushahary****Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History****Bodoland University****ABSTRACT**

The Bodoland movement that began in 2nd March, 1987 was basically the product of Socio-political change among the Bodos which led to the identity articulation. Though the Bodos had their own kingdoms in different historical periods, their last kingdom was annexed by the British in 1854. During the Colonial rule up to the early part of 20th century the Bodos remained socio-economically very backward and therefore some Bodo historian termed this period as 'Darkest' period of Bodo History. The economic backwardness and exploitation, the influx or immigration problem, land alienation, identity crisis, linguistic and cultural assimilation policies, political domination by the ruling clique etc. made the Bodos to rise from the suppression and oppression which eventually created favourable atmosphere for social and political movements and as such the Bodoland Movement became the testimony which was not emerged out of a vacuum but through a process of long series socio-economic and political changes and upheavals among the Bodos. The methodology adopted in this paper is interdisciplinary.

Keywords: Social movement, Tribal movement, Ethnic identity, Political consciousness, Language policy

Bodoland Movement is basically a social movement in nature and characterized by the manifestation of assertive political demand for changing the existing political order in the state of Assam. It was in the late 20th century when the social movement of the Bodos exerted its greatest force with its political character (*Bodoland Movement: 2001: 1*). In social movement category, Bodoland Movement can also be viewed from the angle of Tribal movement. The tribes felt that the colonial rulers tried to make inroads into the socio-cultural arena of the tribes. They were apprehensive of losing their distinct identity in future (*L.K. Mahapatra: 1992: 7*). It is this irretrievable discontentment and deprivation of their land and forest that has generated an emotional state of mind wherein the tribals are forced to move for a better alternative of equitable social order for themselves free from exploitation and injustice (*Madan C Paul: 1992: 359*).

The tribal unrest and identity formation movements of the post independence period in the Northeastern region are in a way continuation of the pre-Independence period but, of course, with more demands coming in, while some are newborn movements with the similar kind of demand. Referring to the identity crisis states and identity formation movements Apurba Baruah remarks as "The movement of various communities to assert and protect their, what is commonly called, 'ethnic' identity, are the most important aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India's North East" (*Apurba Baruah: 2005: 17*). J.B. Bhattacharjee also writes "In the post colonial period, the quest for identity in the Northeast essentially originated in the crisis of under-development.The polarization and alienation eventually resulted in the demand for - and creation of - new states or autonomous areas within the states" (*J.B. Bhattacharjee: 2011: 6*).

In the years following independence, Assam has witnessed a number of identity movements and the Bodo identity assertion is one among those (*Hira Moni Deka: 2014: 6*). The educated middle class Bodos began mobilizing themselves in the form of different organizations to safeguard their community which solely played determining role in the Bodo identity formation (*Why Separate State of Bodoland: 1998:22-26*). The Bodo movement was the product of a long historical process of identity formation among the Bodos that started in the colonial period and became gradually assertive in the post-

independence period. The genesis of socio-political consciousness and identity articulation among the Bodos may be traced back to the socio-economic and religious reformation movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma in the early part of 20th century. In the ancient and medieval period and up till the annexation of Kachari kingdom by the British in 1932, the Boros had been playing an important role in the political, cultural and socio-economic spheres of north east India as evident by the existence of their several kingdoms in different periods. B. K. Barua said that 'The Bodo group of tribes includes the Koc, the Kachari, the Lalung, the Dimacha, the Garo, the Rabha, the Tipra, the Chutiya and the Maran' (B. K. Barua: 1986: 7). 'The Bodos built strong kingdoms and with various fortunes and under various tribal names-the Chutiya, the Kachari, the Koc, etc., held sway over one or another part of Assam during different historical times'(Ibid.). S. K. Chatterji also writes 'with the exception of the isolated Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the whole of Assam and North and East Bengal was the country of the great Bodo people'(S. K. Chatterji: 2011: 46). E. Gait also mentioned that 'the Kacharis may perhaps be described as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley (Sir Edward Gait: 1926: 236).' Yet, from 1832 to 1929, the Bodos had disappeared from the socio-political scenario of Assam as an important and influential community. This period is marked by chaos, confusion and disorder in the Bodo society. Dr. Sekhar Brahma writes 'on the eve of the 20th century, Bodo society sunk in the mist of evil, disorder, superstition, backwardness etc. Perhaps it was the darkest period in the History of the Bodo society. There was degradation and degeneration in the socio-economic life of the Bodos (Sekhar Brahma: 2006: 61).' Dr. Kameswar Brahma also asserted that 'the Bodo society of 19th century was totally backward and looked down upon by the other communities. There was total mess in the domain of religious practices too. Due to lack of education, ignorance prevailed all around. There was no political and economic consciousness. The simple, easygoing, God-fearing and mild-natured Bodos always became the victim of exploitation and cheating by the other advanced communities, especially on the economic field.....(Kameswar Brahma:1986: 5-7)

Such a miserable and pathetic condition of the Boro society had made Kalicharan Brahma very sad. He appeared as a messiah of the Boro Society who realized that the Boros need to be educated and the entire socio-economic and political condition need to be transformed and the traditional Bathou religion did not suit for the time. On the other hand, Islam or Ek Sharan Nam Dharma would not protect their identity, language and culture. At last he saw a ray of hope in Brahma religion, which would save the Boro society from that critical stage (Sekhar Brahma: Ibid). Brahma came forward with a dream to advance the backward Bodo community. To make them aware of socio-economic aspects, he stressed more and more on education, and he himself was a pioneer in the sphere of education (Chandana Bhattacharjee: 1996: 155). He launched campaigns for social reforms along with the propagation of Brahma religion and called upon the people to give up the traditional practices of rearing pigs and poultry birds, brewing and consumption of liquor and encouraged trade, business, weaving, carpentry etc. to generate employment to the Bodo youths. In 1912, with government grant of rupees thirty thousand, he opened up Minor and Middle English schools, driving and carpentry schools. He also opened a Brahma Boarding for the convenience of the students studying in Dhubri Government High School. Some of the Boro traders provided free timbers in the construction this boarding (Kameswar Brahma: Ibid: 32-36). This boarding, with the passage of time, became the centre of the Bodo intellectuals and their activities. This boarding produced some intellectual Bodos with progressive outlook who, at the same time, faithfully assisted Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in his mission as well as built their careers both as social workers and as political activists. Some of its members, with the assistance of some Bodo students, went further on to form the Bodo Chatra Sanmela in 1919 (Assam Sahitya Sabha: 1983: 20).

Brahma also took strong initiative of organizing the first ever conference of Boro Mahasammilani at Bhaoraguri in 1921. Second Boro Mahasammilani was at Rangia in Kamrup District in 1925. The third

Mahasnamilani was held at Raumari village, little distance away in the north of Bongaigaon in 1929 which was presided over by Jadavchandra Khakhlary. Brahma took the leading part and suggested many measures to reform the germs infected Boro society and helped in the adoption of many effective far-reaching resolutions such as complete ban on consumption of liquor, totally giving up of rearing of pigs, restricting the Bodo womenfolk from going out unnecessarily to market in swarms, etc. (*Kameswar Brahma: Ibid: 16*). Some of his noted disciples and followers were Charan Mandal (Brahma), Jamadar Brahma, Bir Narayan Brahma, Karan Mondol, Malsing Brahma Choudhury, Manbaru Brahma, Dhajendra Nath Brahma, Katimal Brahma, Kalicharan Brahma (Junior) etc (*Ibid*).

The British annexation of Brahmaputra valley brought about many changes in the socio-economic and political life of the people of Assam. They introduced conflict of interests between the local tribals and semi-feudal rulers, on the one hand and the new mercantile bourgeoisie, on the other. For the first time land was purchased like commodity and thrown open to the market for sale in this pre-capitalist economy which was undergoing a process of peasantisation (*Madan C Paul: Ibid: 360-361*). During the colonial rule series of killings, uprisings, insurrections were surfaced when the tribals suffered incursions and loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy and deprivation of their livelihood (*Ibid*). For example, in Nowgong district of Assam, the tribal ryots of Phulaguri village stood against the decision of imposing taxes on their houses, gardens and pan (betel-leaf) and eventually attacked and killed Lt. Singer in 18 September, 1861 who came to control the mob numbering around three thousands armed with clubs (lathies) gathered to protest the decision (*H. K. Barpujari: 1999: 89-93*).

The colonial rulers openly encouraged massive migration of various groups into Assam from different parts of India with the introduction of tea plantation. In 1942, Government of India directed the Assam Government to launch an intensive 'Grow more food' campaign by utilizing all available land to provide adequate food to the allied troops stationed in Assam. Taking advantage of the direction the Saadullah Government of Assam arranged massive immigration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam and settled them mainly in the Boro inhabited lower Assam districts (*Ajay Roy: 1995: 32*). The worst sufferer of this colonial policy was the poor and oppressed tribals. The Bodos in general suffered economically due to the British land-revenue policies which made payment in cash mandatory. In order to avoid taxation many Bodo peasants engaged themselves in wage-earning jobs in the tea plantations or in oil fields initiated by the British (*Hira Moni Deka: Ibid: 21*). It is found out that 53.2 per cent plains tribals of Goalpara district alone were indebted to Kabuliwalas (money lenders) who provided them 70 per cent of loans at the interest rate ranging upto 100 per cent. Failure to refund loans eventually resulted in losing their land (*Draft outline Fifth Five Year sub-plan: 1975: 4*). The flow of the immigrants in the Bodo and other tribal dominated areas assumed a menacing problem by the 1920's so much so that Government had to introduced the famous 'Line System' whereby imaginary lines were drawn in the districts under immigration pressure to segregate the indigenous population with that of immigrants. But this only ensured large and compact blocks of immigrant settlers in each districts, whereas on the ground corrupt revenue officials and other interested parties helped settling even new arrivals inside the 'line' (*Ajay Roy: Ibid: 32-33*).

Towards the end of the 1920s the Bodos showed a definite sign of political consciousness (*Ibid: 56*). When Simon Commission visited India in the late 1928, the Bodo leaders led by Gurudev Kalicharan and others submitted a memorandum to the commission in 14th January, 1929 at Shillong demanding for a separate Electorate and reservations in the State and central Legislative Councils and also prayed for solutions on many other serious matters (*Kumud R. Brahma:2005: 57-58*). Bodo Chatra Sanmilani was formed in 1919 at Dhubri which took up the issues of general improvement for the language, culture, education facilities and also some of the burning political and economic issues like employment facilities of the Boros (*Ajay Roy: Ibid: 41*). The Tribal League was formed in 1933, which basic aim was to fight the socio-economic problems of the tribals (*A. C. Bhuyan: 1999: 311-312*). The Tribal League

dominated the tribal political affairs in Assam for more than 20 years which was transformed into a socio-cultural organization in 1954(*ABSU & BPAC Memorandum: 1991: 74*).

The Bordoloi Ministry in 1947 by passing an amendment added Chapter X to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886 whereby tribal Belts and Blocks were constituted in the compact areas predominantly inhabited by the tribals and backward classes entitled to be protected from land alienations and illegal encroachments, but despite this action, the various settlement policies implemented by successive Assam governments increased the number of non-tribals in these areas. Bodo leaders also note that the state government appropriated 600,000 acres for government projects (*J. N. Das: 1989: 335-36*). Within a few years of Independence the greater part of the Belts and Blocks went out of their control. After the partition of India in 1947 thousands of Hindu refugees fleeing persecution in East Pakistan poured into Assam and settled in these Belts and Blocks. Again in 1971, during the war of Liberation in East Pakistan thousands of refugees arrived in these Belts and Blocks (*S. N. Mondal: 2011: 100*). Thus, the Act of 1947, did not provide 'adequate protection to the tribals from the pressure of non-tribals' (*Dhebar Commission Report:1960-61: 118*) even though the clauses of the Act mentioned plainly that 'no person shall acquire or possess by transfer, exchange, lease, agreement or settlement any land in any area or areas constituted in Tribal Belts and Blocks' (*M. C. Paul: Ibid: 364-65*).

On November 16, 1952, a cultural and literary organization known as the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' (BSS) was formed (*S. N. Mondal: Ibid: 101*). The BSS aimed at uniting the Bodos 'on the issue of language and encouraged the development and research on the Bodo language' (*Noas Swargiary: 1997: 84*). The BSS fought hard for a long period for the introduction of Bodo as medium of instruction at the school levels in the Bodo dominated areas and due to its constant efforts it was recognized for primary stage of education in 1963 (*Chandana Bhattacharjee: Ibid: 99*). Along with the strong opposition of Assam Official State Language Bill of 1960, the Sabha also played more vital roles like pushing further ahead the Bodo medium instruction upto secondary level in 1968, launching vigorous movement of getting Roman script for Bodo language in 1974-75 though Devanagari script was finally accepted by the intervention of the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi (*ABSU Memorandum: 1991: 74*). In 1984, the Bodo language was also recognized as the Associate Official language of Assam in Kokrajhar District and Udalguri Sub-division due to the efforts made by BSS and ABSU (*Why Separate State: Ibid: 4*).

Language policy of Assam Government created displeasure and resentment among the tribes including the Bodos but despite all objections, the Assam Government passed the language Bill making Assamese as the sole official language of the state on 24th October, 1960 (*Ibid:38-39*). Language problem reached such a stage that the Naga Hill District was separated to form a Separate State, Nagaland, in 1963; the Khasi Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills together constituted Meghalaya in January 1972, while Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh gain the status of Union Territories following the North-Eastern Areas Reorganization Act in 1971 (*Chandana Bhattacharjee: Ibid: 97*). Similar reaction was found among the Bodos when the Legislative Assembly approved the decision of the Academic Council of the Gauhati University making Assamese the sole medium of instruction at the University level. The decision convinced the Bodos that they could not preserve their cultural identity within the political structure headed by the Assamese. Their aspiration was articulated by the Plains Tribal Councils and the BSS who demanded an autonomous area for them (*Snehamay Chaklader: 1987: 24-25*) and thus the political movement of the Bodos got a fillip with this language issue.

While Srimati Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India announced the policy of reorganization of Assam on Federal basis before the delegation team of Mizo Union in New Delhi on the 13th January, 1967 the Goalpara District Bodo Students' Union warmly welcomed the policy and immediately took the initiative to form the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in 15th February, 1967 and since then demanded a Separate State for the plains tribal people of Assam (*Why Separate*

State: Ibid: 22). With the same view, at the enthusiasm and initiative of ABSU the Political Party of Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) was also formed on the 27th February, 1967 at Rongjasali Hall, Kokrajhar. The PTCA for the first time submitted Memorandum to the then President of India Dr. Zakir Hussain on the 20th May, 1967 at New Delhi for the creation of an 'Autonomous Region' for the Plains Tribal people of Assam. The wave of the demand of Autonomous region gradually gain momentum and thus Autonomous Region demand was upgraded to the demand of 'Union Territory' which was given the nomenclature as 'UDAYACHAL' on the 7th January 1973 (*Ibid*). But the PTCA was not successful to launch further programs since the BSS planned to begin a movement with the demand for Roman Script for the Bodo language. This, therefore, resulted in the postponement of the PTCA movement for Udayachal for the time being (*Samar Brahma Chaudhury: 1989: 116*). The Bodo Sahitya Sabha introduced the Bodo primer 'Bithorai' in class 1 of the Bodo medium schools in the early 1974 on its own accord. The state government rejected this move of the BSS and adopted a rather harsh method to deal with the situation by stopping all kinds of grants to those schools which had introduced this unrecognized text book. This further worsened the situation and began a mass movement by the BSS in 1974-75 and language issue largely contributed for the movement by the Bodos for the break-off from Assam (*Chandana Bhattacharjee: Ibid: 102-3*).

In 1977 election, PTCA won one seat from the ST reserved Kokrajhar Parliamentary Constituency and won four out of nine contested in Assembly election, and finally joined the Coalition Ministry headed by Golap Borbora (*Ibid*). The PTCA leaders Mr. Samar Brahma Chaudhury and Mr. Charan Narzary returned to the Legislative Assembly and Parliament respectively. But suddenly, most shocking to the Tribal mass people the two PTCA leaders announced on the 4th April, 1977 that the PTCA had given up the demand of Udayachal, the Union Territory but wanted to experiment only Autonomous Region once again and thus retreated from the popular and emotional mass demand (*Why Separate State: Ibid: 23*). The sudden withdrawal from the demand of Union Territory in favour of Autonomous Region was largely resented and reacted by the party hardliners and ABSU and vehemently condemned the top PTCA leaders for belying the mass people's political aspiration of separate state (*Ibid*). This ultimately led to the split in the PTCA on ideological lines and gave rise to the PTCA (Progressive) led by B. K. Basumatary who formed the United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) (*L. S. Gassah: 1992: 86*). Thus the PTCA lost its hold on the Udayachal issue in 1985 General Election (*Abdul Halim: 1989: 66*).

The ABSU submitted memorandum to the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi demanding for a separate state on several occasions in 1972 at Shillong, in 1980 at New Delhi and in 1983 after the turmoil of 1983 election in Assam: (*Why Separate State Ibid: 25*). The delegation of ABSU also submitted a memorandum on demand of separate state to the then Home Minister of India Giani Zail Singh in 1980 while he visited Guwahati. Again, on the 10th July, 1985, a delegation of ABSU submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi urging him to create a separate state. Among many others, the most important memorandum was submitted under the leadership of its President Mr. Upendra Nath Brahma to the Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi on 22nd January, 1987 at New Delhi which contained all the detailed issues and justifications for the demand of a separate state for plains tribal people of Assam. The same delegation also met Home Minister Mr. Buta Singh and the President of India Mr. Giani Zail Singh respectively on 24th and 30th January, 1987 and raise the demand of separate state (*Ibid: 26*).

Meanwhile, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) signed the Assam Accord in August, 1985 bringing to an end the six years long Anti-Foreigners movement where initially ABSU and other Bodo political leaders supported the agitation with the same view to drive out the illegal migrants from their areas. The final rift came when the Accord was signed and no specific provision was made in the Accord to protect the Boro interest in particular (*Ajay Roy: Ibid: 62*). The ABSU took particular exception to two specific provisions of the Assam Accord. Clause 6 of the Accord asked for legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote "the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the

Assamese people.” The ABSU leaders naturally took it as complete negation of the composite and diverse cultural and linguistic milieu of Assam in the context of the most indigenous section of the population of Assam i.e. the Boros (*Ibid: 63*). The other clause 10 provided for strict prevention of encroachment on all Government lands and lands in the tribal Belts and Blocks. The ABSU leaders apprehended that while the first part of the clause would be enthusiastically implemented by the AGP government because Assamese people would not be affected by this as there is no encroachment by the Assamese people in the government lands such as reserved forests whereas it would do so to the Boros who due to the landless status already had made massive encroachment in the forests, but the second part of the clause would be conveniently ignored because it would benefit the Boros and affect the sentiments of many Assamese people, particularly the Barpetiahs (*Ibid*). Again the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) Government just after assuming power imposed Assamese language as compulsory third language upon the non-Assamese medium students in secondary schools. The Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) came with a circular to this effect on 28 February, 1986. The ABSU started the movement against the circular (*Lohit Hazarika: 2014:25-26*). The intentions of AGP government was clear to the fact that it wanted to make the “knowledge of Assamese an important requirement to enable one to get Government jobs (*Hira Moni Deka: Ibid: 35*).

Under all the above circumstances, the ABSU had left no other option than to more intensely strengthen the movement for solving all the vexed Bodo issues including the statehood demand and ultimately decided to launch a vigorous democratic mass movement for the fulfillment of its 92 points Charter of Demands scheduled to be started from 2nd March, 1987 and three major political demands would also be raised before the Government of India as well as Assam. They were- creation of a Separate State of Bodoland, creation of two District Councils on the Southern bank of river Brahmaputra and the inclusion of Bodo Kacharies of Karbi Anglong into the S.T. (Hills) list (*Why Separate State: Ibid: 4*). Thus the “Bodoland Movement” marked the beginning on the 2nd March, 1987 under the leadership of late Bodofa (Father of the Bodos) Upendra Nath Brahma who until his dead led the entire courses of the movement up to 1990. In the 18th Annual Conference of 1988 held at Bashbari in Dhubri District, ABSU scaled down its 92 points Charter of Demands into three comprising only the said three major political demands (*Ibid*). In that very conference itself the ABSU, for the first time launched a people’s organization namely “Bodo People’s Action Committee” (BPAC) to bring a vigorous mass involvement into the Movement (*Ibid: 4-5*).

The ABSU-BPAC led movement lasted for six years passed through many stages and phases, and marked by prolonged period of Bandhs (Blockades, closures), disrupting the rail and road links of Assam and the rest of the North-Eastern Region. Although its leaders termed the movement peaceful, it resulted in considerable loss of life due to bomb explosions, police action and wanton acts of destruction (*Sudhir Jacob George: 1994: 883*). The prolonged movement seriously affected the economy of Assam and the entire North-Eastern region. The Chief Ministers of the six northeastern states that were affected by the frequent bandhs urged the movement leaders, the Assam government, and the center to move quickly toward a settlement (*Ibid: 884*). Finally, on 20 February, 1993 the Bodo Accord was signed at Guwahati formally ending the six years Bodland agitation leading to the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) (*Memorandum of Settlement-Bodo Accord: 1993: 1-10*). Another Bodo Accord was signed in 10th February, 2003 between the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), State and Central Government bringing into end the long pending political autonomy demand of the Bodos.

Thus, the whole writing of this paper may be concluded in the words of B. M. Das as he says “in a very general way it may be said that many of the ethnic groups of Assam at one time (even now) were economically exploited, socially ill-treated and neglected, deprived of their dues and rights, dominated by the more powerful groups because of their backwardness, illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, simplicity and the like. With the passage of the time spread of modern education through different agencies has

enlightened them, helped them to realize their condition, made conscious of their rights. Influx of outsiders has created a major problem. They feel that they are losing their earlier status in their native land. They want to grow, develop, progress, and prosper in their chosen ways and means. They want to be rule by themselves (B. M. Das: 2002:16).

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