

Identity Assertion among the Bodo: An Analysis from Relative Deprivation Perspective

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Abstract

Bodo is the largest plain tribe of Assam, a state of North East India. Historically they scattered in the whole North East India and even established Kachari kingdom in a greater part of Assam. However during Ahom rule this bodo community sidelined from the power politics and scattered in different parts of lower Assam assimilating with the greater Assamese nationality. After independence, the process of formation of nation started on the basis on ethnicity, culture and religion. But this nation building process failed to address the problems of plain tribes of north east India. As a result, Bodo, the largest plain community felt a kind of relative deprivation compared to the tribal community inhabited in the hills of North East India who got constitutional safeguard through Sixth Schedule, a special administrative measure of constitution designed to provide autonomy to the hill tribes. This led to development of a kind of insecurity among the middle class of the bodo and they tried to organize themselves to protect their language, culture and glorified past history. Thus the feeling of bodo nationality grew among the bodo and they started a movement for their own homeland.

The present study has been done with an attempt to study the different stages of nationality formation among the bodo and different stages of identity assertion. This study will also help in bringing out some solutions for resolving the present bodo problem.

Key words: Identity Assertion, Bodos, Relative Deprivation

Because they are so many, and so various, the people of India are also divided.¹ India, the largest democracy in the world is known for its diversity. It is considered an ideal of multiculturalism. But it does not mean that the country is free from conflicts. Social conflict has emerged as a major problem of India since pre independence period. Post-independence period has also experienced the problem in many new incarnations. Identity assertion, demand for separate system of administration, demand for autonomy etc. represent some such problems. North East India represents one of the most diverse region of the country with a large number of social groups having different cultures and way of life. Indeed it can be regarded as the highest diverse area of the country. Since independence it has experienced numerous conflicts both social and economic in nature. In this paper an attempt is done to study the genesis of the Bodo problem of Assam through the relative deprivation perspective.

Bodo is the largest plain tribe of Assam, a state of North East India. Historically they settled in the whole North Eastern part of India and even established Kachari kingdom in a greater part of Assam. However during Ahom rule this bodo community sidelined from the power politics and scattered in different parts of lower Assam assimilating with the greater Assamese

nationality. After independence, the process of formation of nation started on the basis on ethnicity, culture and religion. But this nation building process failed to address the problems of plain tribes of north east India. As a result, Bodo, the largest plain tribe community felt a kind of relative deprivation compared to the tribes of hills area of North East India who got constitutional safeguard through Sixth Schedule, a special administrative measure of constitution designed to provide autonomy to the hill tribes. This led to development of a kind of insecurity among the middle class of the bodo and they tried to organize themselves to protect their language, culture and glorified past history. Thus the feeling of bodo nationality grew among the bodo and they started a movement for their own homeland.

Methodology-

The method of this paper is descriptive and analytical. Most of the data are collected from the secondary sources like books, journals, government report, newspaper and other published bulletin.

Theoretical Background-

Ethnic identity is one of the sensitive issues for the people of North East India. From the very early stage of nation building process the lawmakers tried to address the problems of different tribal groups from different view point. However in some cases some tribal groups were able to get more privileges in some aspects due to their numbers. This happened during the period of formation of the constitution. The indigenous communities of hill areas of north east India got a separate administrative privilege under sixth schedule. It created a sense of relative deprivation among the other tribes like bodos, karbis etc... with reference to those hill tribe groups. Again the bodos feels a sense of deprivation from the results came out from Assam movement. The sixth no of clause of Assam Accord has declared some kind of special protection to the "Assamese people." When the Assam Accord was signed everyone was hopeful that it will bring some economic development packages along with protection to the 'composite Indigenous' people of Assam. But the word 'Assamese people' of the accord create an apprehension among the bodo leaders and they tries to define the 'Assamese People' only means to the assamese language spoken people. The bodo leaders tries to differentiate themselves from the so called 'Assamese People. Hence, a sense of dissatisfaction arises among the bodo leaders and they tried to mobilize the bodo people for a separate nationalism.

Relative deprivation as a theory helps to understand the causes of dissatisfaction of some groups or institutions of society. Feeling of relative deprivation arises from the dissatisfaction towards the society due to the unequal behavior. The theory takes a comparative study among some groups where some are in a privileged position due to the favoritism of the authority. The privileged groups are reference point for the marginal or for the disadvantageous.

Genesis of the Bodo Problem: Pre Independence period-

If we look at the historical roots of Bodo struggle, the British Raj is the pioneer of the problem. British through their tea plantation programme opened the Bodo inhabited areas for the non Bodos like Adivasis, Santhals, Nepalis and East Bengal Muslims to engage them as tea labour

for commercial purpose. As the tribals had no permanent land document so it became easy for the British to encroach the tribal land for their business. Before the coming of British to Assam, the Bodos used to do Jhum cultivation and used land for a temporary period. But the colonial power was not in favour of such cultivation as it did not help them to collect the revenues. As a result the British used to encroach the land lying vacant in the tribal areas and take those lands for their business purpose. However the British also realized that if they encroached the land in such a way, one day the tribe will organize themselves to prevent the process taken by the British. To make their administration permanent, British used dual policy regarding tribal land. On the one hand they themselves encroached those lands to increase their revenue and on the other hand they introduced "Line System"² to keep those areas free from other immigrants. The 'Line System' draws an imaginary line in districts under pressure to settle immigrants in separated areas.³ However Muslim league from the very initial period opposed the Line system and demanded for its abolition.

Sir Mohammad Saddulla formed government with the support of Muslim League in 1942 which made him bound to reform the earlier land policy and opened the grazing land unreserved for the settlement of East Bengali immigrants under a "grow more food campaign" while the hidden agenda behind this was open secret for all. In this context, Amalendu Guha writes "S. P. Desai a senior ICS man was appointed special officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserve could be declared as surplus available for settlement. Desai reported that the encroachment of grazing land by immigrants had already taken place to a large scale even in primarily Assamese and tribal areas. His conclusion was that there was no surplus land available for new settlement. Ignoring the report, Saddulla's Muslim League coalition government threw secret professional grazing reserve open for settling immigrants"⁴

Under the Saddulla government new scheme a greater areas of central and western Assam was opened for settlement of immigrants and it led a severe implication on the local inhabitant people, specially on tribals. The tribal people are accustomed with the shifting cultivation process as they have not proper land documents..⁵ The land policy of Sadulla government was highly criticized by the Congress leader Gopinath Bordolai. In 1946 as Congress came to power, one of their first acts was to clear the grazing and forest reserve from encroachment. The immigrants opposed the Bordoloi governments, decision and the fear of revenges on local people villages resisted the government from strong action. Thus tribal land continuously alienated.⁶ As the encroachment of tribal land went in a very high level so demand for formation of tribal block and belt came from the tribals. In the very first year of independence the Bordolai government actively worlks to prevent encroachment and amended the Assam Land Revenue Act 1886. This act declared some areas as reserved tribal belts. The main aim of this declaration was to protect the tribal people from other non-tribal specially from the outsiders.

The rights of the tribal people on land were tried to protect by Bordoloi government by improving the land regulation act 1886. But according to some scholars the reformed land regulation act has many loopholes. Even from the title of chapter X of reformed bill the word 'tribal' was absent. One is left wondering if the amendment was really meant to benefit the tribals or had a much larger target in mind.⁷ Even clause 160(1) and 160(2) of the chapter X of

Land Reform Act does not lay down special privileges for only the tribal and empowered the State government to specify whom will be sheltered from such procedures. As the provisions had it some defect so it helped the manipulative officials to subvert the provisions. 'In the year that followed, continued pressure on land held by the indigenous kept mounting because of immigration from East Pakistan.'⁸

Post Independence period-

After Independence, the Constituent Assembly decided to review the problem of tribes and for that purpose they formed a subcommittee under Gopinath Bordolai which is known as Bordolai Committee. The Committee inspected the problems of the tribe and recommended a special type of administrative structure for hill tribe under Sixth Schedule. This has provided the Autonomous District Council for the major tribe and Autonomous Regional Council for the minor tribe. As a result of it many Autonomous District Council have come for the major hill tribe viz. Khasi, Karbi etc. Thus it led to the creation of autonomous hill district council in Assam and subsequently led to the formation of separate state, such as Mizoram, Meghalaya etc. But for eight schedule tribe of Assam viz. Bodo, Deuri, Hajong, Lalung, Kachari, Mech, Miri, and Rabha inhabiting different areas of Assam plains, the provision of Sixth Schedule was not applicable. In this situation the Bodos, main plains tribe of Assam, with a feeling of relative deprivation tried to organize themselves through different movement. The Bodos, Largest plain tribe Population was about 22.4 million in 1991, out of which 9.2 percent are plain tribal and 1.9 percent are 'hill tribal'. In 1991, 1.2 million people or 5.3 percent of the population identified themselves as the speaker of Bodo language.⁹ The relative deprivation feeling came to forefront as the Bodos formed an organization called Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1960 for a separate statehood in the name of 'Udayachal'. In 1967 PTCA gave a memorandum to the President of India by stating their complaints. The Plain Tribal Council of Assam considered that it will be a great injustice to them if their genuine grievances, sentiments and viewpoints are not given due importance and sympathetic consideration... The Plain Tribal Council of Assam deems that full autonomy within the charter of the Indian Constitution will help the plain tribes to grow to their own traditions. The Plain Tribal Council of Assam had been demanding full autonomy comprising the tribal inhabited areas of the plains of Assam.¹⁰ Later it was leaded by All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), the only student organization from the Bodo community. ABSU tried to transform the movement into a mass movement by increasing support base among the grass root people. During the time, the Assam agitation started under the leadership of All Assam Student Union. The Bodo leaders offered its support to the Assam Movement as the prime issue of the movement was deportation of illegal migrants. But once the movement was over and it came up with an Accord, the Bodo leaders became more dissatisfied. The objection of the Bodo leaders was with two important clauses in the Assam Accord. The sixth no of clause of Assam Accord has declared some kind of special protection to the "Assamese people." When the Assam Accord was signed everyone was hopeful that it will bring some economic development packages along with protection to the 'composite Indigenous' people of Assam. But the word 'Assamese people' of the accord create an apprehension among the bodo leaders and they tries to define the 'Assamese People' only means to the assamese language spoken people and this clause also may lead to assamese

cultura and language imposition on the other language communities. Therefore, the bodo leaders tries to differentiate themselves from the so called ‘Assamese People’ declared in clause six. And it leads to a sense of dissatisfaction arises among the bodo leaders and they tried to mobilize the bodo people for a separate nationalism.

As the Bodo leaders felt a kind of insecurity they tried to fulfill their demand in consultation with the government authority. In 1987 ABSU submitted a 92 point claim to the Prime Minister of India in the title of “Why Separate State for Bodoland”. In their memorandum they stated that “Land problem is the most burning problem of tribals. In fact the tribals cannot live without land. Without land, lives of common tribal people become very wretched which is now happening to tribals of Assam. Now about 75 percent of tribal families have become practically landless whereas 90% of tribal people depend on agriculture. Little plot of agricultural land cannot suffice to tribals to procure a good harvest to cover whole year for their maintenance of food. As a result, most of the rural tribal families are half starved.”¹¹ ABSU demanded for eviction of non tribal people from ther demanded homeland as they immigrated to the tribal areas and formed majority in tribal areas. According to ABSU without eviction the reights of the tribal people will not be secured.¹² According to Sanjib Baruah the 92 points demand of ABSU encompass entire range of grievances which can be classified in three categories-

- a) Cultural and language demand
- b) Demand related to economic development and expression of economic opportunities
- c) Residual demand.

The logic behind all those demands were to declare a separate homeland for the Bodos as they felt that their language, culture and identity will not be secure if such type of encroachment, assimilation process goes on. Even it is not possible to protect identity along with the territory of Assamese nationalism. The demands for separate homeland became more violent and a radical group under the banner of Bodo Security Force was formed.

Indian government take some initiative like forming of committies to negotiate and mitigate the bodo peoples’ demand. At the end of extended session of the 8th round tripartite (ABSU, BPAC and Indian government) talks on 13 September, 1990, a decision was taken to constitute a 3 member expert committee on 25th February, 1991 with the following members –

- i) Dr. Bhupindar Sing
- ii) Dr. K.S. Sing
- iii) Sri A. M. Gokhle

The Committee submitted its report in March 1992 with proposal to grant the Bodos greater autonomy within the Indian state. In February 20, 1993, ABSU and the Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) signed Bodo Accord with the Central and State government to solve the problems of bodos. The accord makes a way for self-determination rights of the bodos under some limitations. Under the accord an elected body namely Bodo Autonomous Council(BAC)

was assured to form holding a attached geographical areas between river Sankosh and Mazbat river Pansoi. However the BAC experiment had inherent shortcomings. The area mapping and demarcation process of BAC was handed over to the land record authority of State government of Assam. Again the no. of villages submitted by BODO leaders having more than fifty percent of tribal population which to be included in BAC areas have to be scrutinized by the land record authority was became a time consumed process. Again the list of villages submitted by ABSU was an issue of discord. Because in 515 villages, for creation of attached bodo homeland demanded by ABSU bodo population were less than 50 percent. 'Further there was also disagreement about the exclusion of a 10-kilometer stretch of international border with Bhutan and the Srirampur toll gate in the Assam West Bengal border'¹³ Even the leader of Bodo movement realized that they will not get much power if an Autonomous Council under State Act constituted. The ABSU and BPAC leaders stated their dissatisfaction regarding the unilateral decision of the State Government regarding BACs power and territory. Thus the dream of BAC was not pragmatized. "The failure of BODO ACCORD on the issue of demography, territory, boundaries and the inclusion or exclusion of villages with majority Bodos and non Bodos within the boundaries of imagined homeland of the Bodos and more so within the contentious areas of BAC discord."¹⁴ The movement again took its violent mode and in early 1994, 50 Bengali speaking muslims were killed in Kokrajhar and Bangaigaon district. 'Again, in July 1994, in the north part of Barpeta district more than hundred Bengali muslims people were massacred. This incident leads to more than 1000 people's death in community clashes.'¹⁵ All these incidents create unrest in the bodo inhabited areas. As a result , All Bodo Students Union and BPAC started a movement for restoring peace and implementation of Bodo Accord and again in 1996 it reversed its demand for a separate statehood, Bodoland. The movement took a more violent turn after the formation of a rebel organization that is Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). The Bodo Liberation Tigers due to its support base and strength become the self-declared guardian of Bodo Community. It continued its dominant violent attack for two years. In July 1999, Bodo Liberation Tigers declared a unilateral ceasefire in response to Central government appeal for talk.

In March 2000, Union government and BLT came to an agreement, 'General Rule for Truce' In June 2001 central government, state government and BLT starts a tripartite talk continued the formation of Territorial Council. In February 13, 2002, the Assam cabinet formally approved the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council under the revised Sixth Scheduled of the Constitution of India. The new accord paves the way for the formation of a new administrative set up known as Bodoland Territorial Council, which was approved by central government on February 10, 2003. Like the BAC, the Bodoland Territorial Council has same constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and has definite territorial demarcation. On 27th January of 2020 another reformed bodo accord was signed between the Government of India, The government of Assam and Bodo representatives. This accord pave a new structure of administration known as Bodoland Territorial Region under the leadership of Promod Boro, CEO of BTC. However demand for more autonomy continues still today.

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