

The Bodoland Demand: Genesis of an Ethnic Conflict

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Abstract: Since independence Northeast India has been a theatre of ethnic mobilization and violence. The multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic composition of the region has witnessed a number of ethnicity and identity based movements demanding a separate identity and ultimately a distinct space. The policy of 'divide and rule' as propagated by the colonial rulers had a long consequence in the political life of the region. The post-independent state too carried forward the colonial policy of drawing the boundaries on the basis of ethnicity. But even after craving out seven states in the region many minor groups within these states were left without any geographical entity. There were attempts by the larger groups to consume and assimilate such groups into a larger identity. Such attempts were most of the times and in places opposed by the minority group who viewed such centralizing tendency as an attempt to undermine and subdue their distinct identity. It is perceived as a cultural domination by a majority which is at the same time seen as 'outsider'. In this context the demand for a 'Bodoland' an exclusive homeland of the Bodos in Assam, the largest tribal group of the state has become a conflict with an unending cycle of violence and human suffering in the form of death and large scale displacement. This paper attempts to explore the historical genesis of the conflict in Bodoland and and tries to analyse various factors that were responsible for the development of such conflict.

Keywords: *Bodos, Ethnic Conflict, Policy and Alienation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity assertion has in recent years been a major cause of violent conflicts all across the world. Ethnic violence is usually driven by shared uncertainties of the future. As physical safety of community is being feared, it becomes anxious giving rise to a sequence of dangerous and difficult to resolve strategic dilemmas. Such a phenomenon contains within them the probability of violence. The state gets weakened when there is information failures coupled with lack of credible commitment. Under such condition the security dilemma take shape, making groups fearful of one another. Numerous political as well as ethnic activists who operate inside groups strengthen the fears of physical uncertainty and divide the society. Along with it, political recollections, besides, myths and emotions of past conflict also magnify these fears, driving groups against each other. Thus, such strategic interaction- between-group and within-group- paves way to a lethal mix of disbelief and distrust that can burst into violence.

II. ORIGIN OF THE CONFLICT

Any attempt to understand the ongoing violence in the Bodoland area would be incomplete without a proper understanding of the history of state formation and recurrent violence in the region. With the signing of the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 at the end of the Anglo- Burmese war, the British got a foothold in the region. After that the colonial rulers devised a number of policies like excluded areas, partially excluded areas and inner- line permits in order to manage the hills and the tribal population residing there. These devices were effective in breaking down the age old interaction between the hill tribes and the inhabitants of the valley. The pre-British period had seen a large number of indigenous tribes, which were identified by various names but had maintained an independent existence in a closely knit way of life. During the period of colonial rule these tribes, for administrative expediency, were clustered into larger categories such as the "Nagas" and the "Kukis". Such categorization gave rise to an artificial pan tribal identity. The ethnic categorization initiated by the British paved the way for further divisions which many a times sowed the seeds of demand for a separate political entity in the form of home land states. Sanjib Baruah argues that 'colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly 'natural habitats' had triggered exclusive ethnic homeland consciousness among the minds of the tribal people of the region (Baruah 2008, 61). This policy was continued by the post-independent Indian government, who found it a tailor made policy to maintain it "by legitimizing exclusivist, but quite false, histories and memories and ground realities" (Prabhakar 2005, p. 38). The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution was devised to maintain autonomy and distinct cultural identity of the hill tracts. It is important to remember here that the sixth schedule was not applicable to the plain tribes like the Bodos, Mishings, Rabhas, etc. In due course of time, these tribes felt deprived of their rights and privileges by including them within the

'Assamese' fold (Barpujari, 1998). At the same time the British viewed the plains of Assam (the Brahmaputra valley in the north and the Barak valley in the south) as 'wastelands'.

The rapid growth of tea and rice production witnessed massive migration from other parts of the Indian subcontinent. The policy of settling land hungry peasants from East Bengal continued for a very long time under the aegis of 'Grow more food' programme in the floodplains of Assam. Even the partition of the subcontinent could not prevent the flow of immigrants into the region. Migration from a poverty induced and over populated region to less populated regions has been a worldwide phenomenon. The most adverse effect of this migration was on the plain tribes of Assam, whose traditional forest lands were first to be encroached by the migrant peasants. The colonial rulers who were interested in high revenue collection had little incentive to safeguard the rights and privileges of the plain tribes. Thus the seeds of discontent in the colonial period were fuelled by the policy of grabbing the land of the tribal population in the valley region.

III. BODOLAND MOVEMENT: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland movement has been of great importance and interest in recent times given the violent history attached to it. This movement has been exceptionally contested both in mainstream academic discourses as well as in political discussions. Ironically, most of the observers view Bodo movement as a separatist and violent movement and a challenge against the integrity of the state of Assam. Some scholars see it as an attempt to revive the ancient glory of the Bodo-Kachari kingdom which was uncontaminated by the Assamese culture (Baruah, 2012; Nath, 2013). While others see it as a resistance movement by a group to escape from a socio-political and cultural entrapment of communities perceived to be 'outsiders' (Vandekerckhove and Suykens, 2008). What is evident in such scholarly debates is the failure to recognize the subtleties of the movement which also involves the state response as well as the resistance put forward by other groups in the region to this movement. The movement has been in news for a very long time as being one of most violent statehood demands which led to a large scale death and displacement induced by both militants and state machinery.

In the framework of a constantly declining situation of the plains tribal groups, a section of educated Bodos felt the need to come together to form multiple community-centric organisations at different levels to work for the welfare of the community and negotiate with the powers that be for socio-cultural, economic, linguistics and political rights (Mochahari, 2014). Attempts to unite the tribe had begun prior to independence, but it was after independence that the Bodos were successful to large extent in uniting the community under various socio-cultural, political and economic organizations.

A new phase of the Bodo consciousness had begun with the establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in the year 1952. This organization played important role in articulating the demand for safeguarding of Bodo identity and culture ultimately leading to a demand for autonomy. After some years the need to politically unite all plain tribes of Assam was felt and a political party named Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in the year 1967. The main objective of PTCA was to vigorously demand an autonomous territory for the plain tribes of Assam under the name of Udayachal. In the same year, realizing the importance of youth and students in the movement a student body of the Bodo students named All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was launched. Since 1987, under the leadership of the student leader Upendranath Brahma ABSU got consolidated and articulated the demand for a separate state for the Bodos. During the same period various groups who advocated violent methods had emerged to achieve the objective of a separate state. They include groups like Boro Security Force (BrSF), which later assumed the name of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). This set a new political trend changing the very nature of Bodo unrest. The formation of this organisation and their activities heralded a turbulent political journey of the Bodos in Assam which continues to dominate public life in Bodo heartland in the absence of a pragmatic political solution to the problem (Mochahari, 2014).

IV. GENESIS OF THE CONFLICT

4.1 Assimilation and Language Policy

British scholar, E.A.Gait, who had conducted extensive research on the Bodos writing in the year 1905, had observed that the process of assimilation of Bodos into Assamese had made inroads into the Bodo society. By analyzing the language data of 1891 census, he showed that the languages/dialects of the Bodo groups were dying out and would gradually be extinguished. He commented on the decline of number of speakers of Bodo language group from 1881 to 1891 census. The Bodo-Kachari (present day Bodos) speakers declined by 24% from 2, 63,186 to 2, 00,129 people, whereas Hinduised Bodos of lower Assam (Meche) increased by 19.6 percent. According to him, most of the converted Bodo Hindus could move into some higher status Hindu caste. As a result, those joined the Assamese formation no longer identified themselves as Bodos. Many of them such as Sonowal-Kacharis, Chutias, Rabhas etc. changed themselves into different ethnic identity (Assamese under S.T. category), and as a result did not claim their original Bodo language. In spite of that, a large portion had retained their original language and culture and continued to do so till present day (Baruah, 1999).

Even after a long period of assimilation into the Assamese caste society there were groups who could maintain their distinct identity, language and culture. Those groups who did not share any close geographical and political ties with the caste Assamese or the Ahom rulers were out of the ambit of the process of assimilation. Attempts to assimilate them into the Assamese society began only during the 19th century with the policy of official language and desire for homogeneity by the caste Assamese. The language policy of the state government after independence has been a major factor in alienating the tribal population of Assam. The Assamese middle class who held the leadership of the state and dominated the politics subsequently held sway over the cultural manifestation of minority groups. The Assam government passed the Assam Official Language Act, 1961 making Assamese the sole official language of Assam. This policy was vehemently opposed by various non-Assamese speaking linguistic groups of people of Assam. Strongest opposition came from the various Hill tribes of Assam who formed the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) to fight against the hegemony of the elite Assamese leadership. This ultimately turned into demands for separate hill states or union territory for each major tribe.

Today, language is no longer the only prominent issue for the demand of a separate state by the Bodos. The demand for a separate state is more often than not driven by a desire of self-rule with control over the politics and economy of their geographic region. This has been the trend of almost all tribal groups of Assam who desire some sort of autonomy when it comes to their language and culture.

4.2 Land Alienation and Economic Exploitation

The Bodos primary economic activity being agricultural practices, they were exclusively dependent on the land for their livelihood. Since the advent of British rule and general improvement in transport and communication the Bodo inhabited areas witnessed the influx of traders belonging to various communities. Most important among them were the Barpeta based traders; commonly known as 'BarpetiaMahajans', who in course of time became owners of large tracts of land in Bodo inhabited areas owing to the land- mortgage system. These new landlords facilitated the migration of labourers from East Bengal. The immigrant settlers gradually moved to new areas and procured large tracts of land within the Bodo areas. The colonial administration did little to prevent such unabated influx of migrants as it benefitted them in the form of higher revenue collection. By 1930's the situation became so grave that the government was forced to appoint a Committee under the chairmanship of F.W. Hockenull, leader of European party in the Assam Legislative Council, to study the situation and make recommendations. Interestingly, the Hockenull committee recommended continuation of the process of immigration with strict application of the Line system which was formulated to divide the settlements of the tribes and the non-tribes.

With the fall of the Congress ministry in 1939, the Muslim League headed by Sir Saadullah formed the government. His ministry actively facilitated the immigration of poor Muslims from East Bengal in order to convert Assam into a Muslim majority province and include it into the new nation of Pakistan. However, due to vehement opposition from all sections of people Assam remained a part of India. After independence the Bordoloi ministry took up the issue of tribal land alienation and added chapter ten to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886 by passing an amendment act. According to this Chapter the Government of Assam was authorized to constitute compact areas of tribal Belts and Blocks in the localities inhabited by tribal population as notified by the government. The Chapter and the act provide that land within these Belts and Blocks would henceforth be settled only with the notified class of people and that non-notified population who had settled in those areas would be ejected.

Unfortunately as a result of rampant corruption, large scale illegal transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals continued with the active involvement of the low ranking revenue officials. The Government of Assam on receiving numerous complaints in this regard constituted a Sub-Committee of the Advisory Council for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes (Plains) headed by R.N. Choudhury to look into the matters pertaining to the settlement in the Tribal Belts and Blocks. After two years of enquiry the committee submitted its report in which it held responsible the officials who were entrusted to ensure the implementation of the provisions of the act. As a result, the committee observed that a large number of illegal occupants over the tribal lands had not been evicted. It made recommendations for a time bound programme to restore Tribal lands to their lawful owners and institute additional legislations to prevent any further illegal transfer of land.

During the Assam movement of the 1980s both the All Assam Student Union and All Bodo Student Union demanded the eviction of all non Tribals from the notified Tribal Belts and Blocks. Consequently, Clause 10 of the Assam Accord stipulated that strict enforcement of all relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks. Increasing growth of population among the Bodos and related issues of modernization in the state had compelled the poor Tribals to take abode into the forests. Since the Assam GanaParishad(AGP) government had promulgated a law to evict unauthorized occupants of forest reserves and lands, the Tribals were the most affected ones. At the same time, the AGP Government failed to evict encroachers from the Tribal Belts and Blocks.

4.3 Education and Unemployment

The Bodos were late entrants into the western education though there was a considerable presence of western missionaries in the region. The first Bodo graduate would come out only in the year 1936. Due to unavailability of schools at a reasonable distance the secondary level education too was unsatisfactory. The medium of instruction being Assamese, the Bodos initially had to suffer from being ignorant of the Assamese alphabet and in many cases even the language. With such delayed progress in education the Bodos lacked behind in terms of Government jobs and other forms of employment which required the knowledge of Assamese language. Even when it came to availing other facilities from the Government Schemes they had to face a communication gap with the bureaucrats who were ignorant of the Bodo language. AjoyRoy, writes that "Even Government statistics provided in Assam Government Personnel Department communications show that as on 6.6.1986 the backlog of plains tribal employment even in Grade IV of the Assam Secretariate Staff was as high as 66.20% in consideration of the 10% reservation quota for the plains tribal community. As in 1975 out of the total 100660 employed by the Assam Government only 5488 were plains tribal people which was almost half of the required 10% quota" (Roy, 1995, pp. 51-52).

4.4 Rise of Political Consciousness

With the spread of education, the Bodo youth became politically conscious of their degrading situation. At the same time the policies followed by the Indian government during the 1960s and 1970s which paved way for the creation of separate tribal states for populations lesser than the Bodos made the demand of the plains tribal seemed legitimate and possible. As a result of the suppression and unrestrained use of force by administration and its security agencies on Bodo agitators after 1987, the movement got a new lease of life. Several thousand activists were detained under various anti-terrorist acts, and many of them at one time or another lodged in jails. Thus, the shortsighted policies of the state and the central governments accentuated the Bodo movement to a violent ethnic assertion. During the same period the accords signed by the government of India with the one-time secessionist Mizo National Front (MNF) of Mizoram (1986), the insurgent Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) of Tripura (1988), and also the signing of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Pact with the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) of West Bengal (1988) increased the hopes and aspirations of the Bodos for a Bodoland state. The above discussed issues were some of the important and pertinent concerns of the Bodos which gave birth to the separate statehood demand. The response of the State as well as the approach taken by the ruling class was important in shaping the movement.

V. CONCLUSION

In this contemporary period, which is characterized by rapid social transformation, governments are often confronted by the complex challenges posed by the varied ethnic identities. As the effects of such socio-political revolution expand, struggles intensify and challenges to multicultural states continue, it becomes vital for states to develop the capability to meet the challenges posed by global and local changes. If left unmanaged or managed poorly, these struggles over cultural identity can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability and in so doing generates conflict that obstructs development. Previous experiences show that this is usually trailed by a predicament over legitimacy when the institutions designed are unable to address the needs of a diverse society. Along with this are the dangers of subversion of the democratization process if the political system is prejudiced towards particular ethnic groups and is unable to accommodate them democratically. This is sufficed to sow the seeds of discontentment which eventually gives way to conflict and sometimes even secessionism. There is a widespread perception that Northeast region has been subject to neglect and relegation and whose presence in the Indian nation has been seriously challenged by many groups. This has given rise to identity politics which has shaped the politics of resistance and retribution. The struggle for political and economic power in such a context becomes bloodier. Numerous struggles which attempt to establish their own identity and political right have carried historical reprisal to an extreme extent through militancy and unprecedented violence. Democratic politics in India is built upon on the logic of vote banks and the politics of numbers munched together with caste and tribe. Also, religious configuration has made identities very crucial in the postcolonial period. Thus, territoriality and political power coupled with a desire to gain control over resources for the ruling classes of such communities have given rise to politics of exclusion and politics of fear.

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