

The gist of Political Myopia and ramification of Bodosin Assam

Pankaj Kumar Sarmah

*Assistant Professor Deptt. Of Political Science
Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit & Ancient Studies University, Nalbari*

Abstract: The study has been undertaken in the background of violence and human insecurity that persist in BTAD of Assam. The present work is an effort to understand the dynamics of violent conflict in BTAD in general and Bodo's stir for political milieu in particular. The most pertinent issues are how civilian's space and freedom from fear are being impeded by violent conflict situations. The BTAD of Assam which has been chosen for this study is one of the most vulnerable regions of Assam in terms of armed violence. Enforcement of hegemonic role by the dominant group and the process of exclusion in BTAD is problematic. In this paper, effort is to be made to provide a critique of homeland discourse of Bodos and shall argue how to represent the interest of each and every caste and community residing within the BTAD area.

Key Words: Political milieu, Homeland discourse, Violence

Date of Submission: 30-10-2017

Date of acceptance: 11-11-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Right from the time of independence the North East region of India has been confronting serious problems and most of these problems are centred on growing assertion by various ethnic groups. This ethnic assertion by these various ethnic groups has a very complicated impact on the politics of the region. Infact we can say that the issue of ethnic identity has been a very crucial issue in the socio-politico and economic aspects of the all north eastern states which has led to the emergence of many tribal movements in the region. The state of Assam is also not an exception in this regard. In Assam a number of ethnic groups have launched their movement to protect and preserve the identity and interest of their respective communities. One of such movement is launched by the Bodo people. The genesis of the Bodo movement has its roots in the socio-cultural and economic aspiration of the Bodo people. The Bodo Movement which aimed at the preservation of the ethnic identity and culture of the Bodo community turned into a full-fledged Movement aiming at the creation of a state of Bodoland outside Assam. This Movement has paved the way for the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) within the state of Assam. In other words we can say that the socio-political scenario of Assam has been profoundly influenced by the Bodo Movement.

Historical Background of the Bodo Movement:

India's North East region is predominantly a tribal inhabited area and a large number of groups have been agitating for a long time to protect their identity, status, culture and rights. The state of Assam is also confronting with a major threat to its integrity ever since post independent period in the form of various autonomy and secessionist movements launched by various groups. One of such major threat has come from the movement launched by the Bodos. The Bodo people belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid ethnic group and are the most numerous among the plains tribes of Assam. Bodos are scattered across the north bank of the Brahmaputra river.

The genesis of the Bodo movement has its roots in the socio-cultural and economic aspiration of the Bodo people. Before discussing about the Bodo movement, it must be mentioned that Bodo people had already merged into Assamese identity; they had already accepted Assamese language. But in 1960 Assamese was made official language in Assam. Efforts were made to impose Assamese language over all communities living in Assam. This created feeling of insecurity among the tribes of Assam, including Bodos, about the future of their identity and culture. This official imposition of Assamese language made the Bodo people suspicious about the motive of the Assamese leaders. They became conscious about the hegemonic nature of the Assamese leaders who were trying to make Assamese language and culture to be dominant over other communities. The sense of insecurity among the Bodo people, which was the fallout of the attempt of Assamisation of Assamese leaders, gave birth to the feeling of unity among them against the Assamese people and the Government. Infact the urge to preserve the Bodo identity has been a major cause behind the Bodo Movement and it runs counter to the

effort of the Assamese to Assamize Assam¹. In late 1960s the Bodos began their agitation for the introduction of Bodo language as the medium of instruction. The Bodo people, including its premier organisation the Bodo Sahitya Sabha demanded the Government of India to include Bodo language in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution to protect Bodo interest. Another major cause of Bodo movement is economic cause. Bodo economy was mainly agrarian which depended mainly on land. But due to migration of non-tribals into Bodo areas the size of land available for Bodos reduced which adversely affected their economy. Landlessness and poverty became their main problems. Meanwhile the spread of education raised political consciousness among the Bodos. The policies pursued by the Indian Government during 1960s and 70s leading to the creation of separate tribal state for population smaller than the Bodos made the aspiration of the plain tribal Bodos for autonomy seem legitimate². So to improve their economy and overall condition, the Bodo people started movement for greater autonomy.

The Bodo leadership in 1967 formed a political party called the Plains tribals Council of Assam (PTCA), which demanded a union territory called Udayachal for Bodos and other plains tribes of Assam. All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was also formed in 1967 representing the Bodo interest and it gave its support to PTCA in its demand. But due to the failure of PTCA in fulfilling the deepest aspiration of the Bodos for a separate state during the time of reorganisation, the ABSU withdrew its support from PTCA in 1979. During the period of Assam Movement (1979 to 1985) there was cordial relationship between AASU and ABSU. But after the formation of AGP Government as a successful result of the Assam Movement, the Bodo people began to realise that the new Government's attitude towards them is not much different from that of earlier one. Here it can be mentioned that in 1950, the Government of Assam (Congress I) established several tribal blocks and belts in Assam to settle down the tribal people. But the implementation of various settlement policies by the successive Assam Governments increased the number of non-tribal people in these areas. Due to the paradigmatic shift towards the process of modernisation in the state of Assam the poor tribal people were pushed back into the forest. Here the differences arose between the ABSU and AGP Government because the AGP Government had promulgated a new law to evict unauthorised occupants of forest reserves and lands which affected the tribal people most.

To protect the Bodo interest, ABSU on March 2, 1987 launched a movement for the creation of a full-fledged state of Bodoland outside Assam. ABSU demanded mainly the following 3 points:

1. Formation of a separate state namely Bodoland on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.
2. Establishment of autonomous district councils in the tribal dominated areas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra.
3. Incorporation of the Bodo-Kacharis of Karbi-Anglong in the 6th Schedule of the Constitution.

ABSU and Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) led the Bodo Movement persisted for 6 years. The Bodo Movement, though was peaceful in its initial stage, became violent in later phase. Infact the Bodo Movement paved the way for the formation of Bodo Security Force (BSF), a militant outfit aiming to achieve the goal of Bodoland through violent activities. The Bodo Movement led to considerable loss of life due to bomb explosions, police actions and acts of destruction. Non-Bodos living in Bodo areas were particularly harassed and tortured. The prolonged agitation saw extortions and harassment of non-tribal, non-Bodo school teachers, clerks, foresters posted in tribal areas and tea plantation managers and employees³.

The Bodo Movement which continued for 6 years came to an end with the signing of the Bodo Accord on 20th February 1993. The Accord provided for a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). It provided maximum autonomy to the Bodos for their social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement within Assam. The territory of BAC included an area of 5,186 km² with a population of over 2,100,000 of which about 38% are plain tribals⁴. However the Accord failed to solve the political aspiration of the Bodos. Most of the Bodo leaders rejected the BAC terming it anti-democratic and anti-Bodo as it did not include 515 villages of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon where Bodos lived along with non-tribal population. The state put forwarded its argument that it could not incorporate 515 villages into BAC as it was accountable for the interest of a large number of non-tribal people living in that area for a long time.

¹. George, S.J., The Bodo Movement In Assam: Unrest To Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct. 1994), University of California Press, California, p 882

². George, S.J., The Bodo Movement In Assam: Unrest To Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct. 1994), University of California Press, California, p 882

³. George, S.J., The Bodo Movement In Assam: Unrest To Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct. 1994), University of California Press, California, p 883

⁴. George, S.J., The Bodo Movement In Assam: Unrest To Accord, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (Oct. 1994), University of California Press, California, p 890

To incorporate these 515 villages into BAC the Bodo militant group Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) resorted to ethnic cleansing in these villages of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts in September and October 1993. The Bodo militants resorted to violence to drive-out non-Bodos and ensure that the Bodos would form a majority group in the BAC area. In the ethnic cleansing campaign the Bodo militant group targeted non-Bodo people including immigrant Muslims, Assamese and Adivasis. The immigrant Muslims were perceived as threat to the Bodo interest since they largely depended on land and this created a sense of insecurity among the Bodos that immigrant Muslim peasants have posed a major challenge to tribal land and reserve. In May and July 1994 Bodo militants attacked Muslim peasants which led to death and displacement of large number of people. In 1996 and 1998 ethnic conflict occurred between Bodos and Adivasis. Bodos consider themselves as different from and superior to the Adivasis who were immigrant population. The Bodo-Adivasis conflict is perceived as Bodo effort of ethnic cleansing to throw the non-Bodos out of the territory to legitimise Bodo's authoritative claim over the area. Since the Adivasis, more particularly Santhalis, began to dominate the land holdings of the Bodo area, they were perceived as the main threat to the territorial integrity of the Bodos. That's why Bodo militants also targeted Adivasi community. Thus a large number of people were killed and displaced by the attacks of the Bodo militants. However these killings were not one sided, as there were also revenge killing of Bodos by the Adivasis and Muslims.

Due to seriousness of the situation negotiation process was initiated. The process of talk between BLT and Government started after the outfit declared a unilateral ceasefire in June 1999; following a series of negotiation a ceasefire agreement was signed with the Centre in March 2000. BLT gave up its demand for separate state of Bodoland after the Government assured to fulfil its demands under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution by creating an autonomous self-governing body Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) on 10 February, 2003. Along with this the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) came into existence comprising of four districts- Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa and Chirang. Around 3,082 villages, with a population of about 23 lakhs come under the purview of the Council. Three new districts – Udalguri, Baksa and Chirang are carved out of the 8 existing districts of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Nalbari, Barpeta, Kamrup, Sonitpur and Darrang. However another Bodo militant outfit National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has rejected the formation of BTC and is engaged in armed movement against the state to achieve the goal of independent sovereign Bodoland.

Present Scenario in BTAD:

Though peace was expected after the formation of BTC, lots of violent conflicts are still going on in BTAD. The problem in BTAD lies in the fact that the ethnic mix of people living in the area makes it impossible for the Bodo group to declare the autonomous district an exclusive Bodo zone. The population of the Bodo community in BTAD accounts for just more than half, but the number of non-Bodo and non-tribal people living in that area is also large. The non-Bodo population living in the BTAD have the constant fear of monopolisation of power by the Bodos which to a great extent is a bitter truth in BTAD. The creation of a particular ethnic homeland without ensuring the constitutional rights of the other communities living in the region was the beginning of the conflict lines leading to the repeated clashes between the Bodos and other communities specially Santhalis and the Muslim peasants⁵. The rights of the non-Bodo communities living in BTAD are under great threat. In BTAD there has been a campaign by the Bodos to save their 'exclusive areas' from the illegal migrants. Bodo leaders perceive that the major challenge to Bodo homeland may come from the immigrant Muslim population who are seemed to be the most organised among all the non-Bodo communities in the BTAD area. Moreover the fact that the immigrant Muslim population depended almost solely on land strengthens the impression that they are the main threat to the tribal land and the protected reserves. This is the cause of conflict between the Bodos and Muslims in BTAD occurred in 2008 and 2012. The Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) a federation of 18 non-Bodo organisation from the BTC area strongly opposed the BTC Accord and had decided to start a democratic movement against the BTC Accord.

The present situation in the BTAD has become very complex. The armed conflict in the BTAD has resulted in greater insecurity for the common people. The inter-ethnic clashes between the Bodos and Muslims and between Bodos and Adivasis have resulted in the death and displacement of a large number of people. The first major attack by the Bodos on Muslims took place in October 1993 in Western Assam. This conflict led to the displacement of about 3568 families consisting of 18,000 persons⁶. In early 1994 Bodos burnt over 60 villages in Barpeta district predominantly inhabited by Muslims. They also attacked one refugee camp in Barpeta district. In these attacks 90 persons were killed. These attacks on Muslims were not one-sided; there

⁵. Mishra, U., Bodoland: The Burden of History, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XVII, No. 37, September 15, 2012

⁶. Hussain, M., and Phanjoubam, P., A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, 2007, p 07

were revenge killings of Bodo people too. In May-June 1996 ethnic conflict between Bodos and Adivasis took place where more than 200 persons were killed and almost 42,214 families consisting of about 2, 62,682 persons were displaced by this conflict⁷. In 1998 and 1999 ethnic violence broke out in Kokrajhar in which more than 50 persons lost their lives and over 80,000 people were displaced. After the creation of BTAD, violence again occurred in 2008. This time conflict took place between Bodos and Muslims in Udalguri and Darrang districts which resulted in the death of 70 persons and displacement of about 2,15,000 people. In the recent conflict in BTAD more particularly in Chirang and Baksa in 2012 nearly 50 persons have lost their lives and 1,70,000 rendered homeless. Due to these conflicts a large number of people (including Muslims, Adivasis and Bodos) continue to live in camps as IDPs. The lives of the people living in the camps have been very pathetic. They have to survive without proper and adequate food, nutrition and medical facilities. Infact they are living in a dehumanized environment. Infact we can say that in BTAD people have to live in constant anticipation of fear and violence. Their security, rights and freedom have been greatly undermined.

Concluding Remark

While analysing the conflict of BTAD it can be said that the failure of the political stakeholders in articulating an inclusive agenda, which stems from their utter insensitivity to the multi-cultural differences among various communities living in BTAD is the cause behind the recurring incidents of violence in the area. The Bodo Movement and the consequent conflict have given rise to an urgent need to rigorously re-examine the nature and working of Indian democracy. In democracy each and every groups have the right to protect their identity and the political system must have the capacity to accommodate their demands. The atmosphere of conflict and violence of the BTAD area cannot be get ridden of unless the other communities i.e. the non-Bodos residing in BTAD are acknowledged. In BTAD basic norms of human security have been clearly violated. Concerted action to enhance the protection of all civilians living in such conflict prone area is urgently required.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:

- [1] Baruah, Sanjiv. (2009). *Beyond Counter Insurgency: Breaking The Impasses In North East India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press Publication.
- [2] Baruah, Sanjiv. (1999). *India Against Itself : Assam And The Politics Of Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press Publication.
- [3] Bhattacharjya, Chandana. (1996). *Ethnicity And Autonomy Movement : Case Of Bodo Kacharis Of Assam*. New Delhi: Vikas Publisher.
- [4] Bhuyan, Abhijit. (2007). *The Socio – Political Movement For Bodoland And Beyond : A General Paradigm*. Guwahati: Peace Studies Publication.
- [5] Chaklader, Snehamoy. (2004). *Sub- Regional Movement in India: With Special Reference To Bodoland And Gorkhaland*. Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi and Company Publication.
- [6] Esman, M.J. (2004). *An Introduction To Ethnic Conflict*. USA: Polity Press Publication.
- [7] Maitra, K. (2001). *The Noxious Web: Insurgency In North East*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers and Distributers.
- [8] Roy, A. (1995). *The Bodo Imbroglia*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- [9] Sen Chaudhury, S. (2004). *The Bodo Movement And Women's Participation*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication.

Articles:

- [10] Dasgupta, A., *Civilians And Localisation Of Conflict In Assam*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 39, No. 40 (October 2-8, 2004)
- [11] George, S. J., *The Bodo Movement In Assam: Unrest To Accord*, Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 10 (October 1994), University of California Press
- [12] Hussain, M., *Tribal Question In Assam*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 27, No.20/21 (May 16-23, 1992)
- [13] Hussain, M., *Internally Displaced Persons In India's NE*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 05 (February 4-10, 2006)
- [14] Hussain, M. And Phanjoubam, P., *A Status Report On Displacement In Assam And Manipur*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, 2007
- [15] Misra, U., *Bodo Stir: Complex Issues, Unattainable Demands*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 24, No. 21 (May 27, 1989)

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Pankaj Kumar Sarmah "The gist of Political Myopia and ramification of Bodosin Assam." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), vol. 22, no. 11, 2017, pp. 56-59.

⁷. Hussain, M., and Phanjoubam, P., A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, 2007, p 07