

Transformation and Consolidation of Bodo Identity: An Enquiry into the Role of the Middle Class

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Abstract—The complex trajectory of identity assertion by the Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam, a state of northeast India, is an interesting area of research. The study begins with a brief survey of the contemporary literature on the relationship between particularistic identities and 'national integration' and then goes on to conceptualize the different stages of nationality formation in order to locate the precise stage of identity consciousness among the Bodos. The different stages of identity assertion have been dealt with in a critical manner and an attempt has been made to examine whether the emerging educated middle class has been playing a catalytic role in the transformation and consolidation of the Bodo national identity and whether the demand for a separate Bodoland reflects the interests of this middle class.

Keywords—Autonomy; Middle Class; National Integration; Nationality Formation; Secession.

Abbreviations—All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU); Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC); Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF); Bodo People's Party (BPP); Bodo Security Force (BdSF); National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB); National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN); Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA); United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

I. INTRODUCTION

THE motivation of this research is: (a) to ascertain what led the Bodos to assert their linguistic, cultural and political identity in the first quarter of the twentieth century and (b) to identify the social forces that were instrumental in the articulation of this identity. The objectives of the research are: (a) to explore the role of the educated middle class in the consolidation of Bodo national identity and (b) to examine the factors responsible for the transformation of the Bodo movement from autonomy to secession. This research is likely to contribute towards an understanding of the politics of social forces such as the middle class. The study may also stimulate future research on the nationality question in India because it highlights the response of the Indian State on this issue as a significant factor responsible for the alienation and marginalization of smaller nationalities like Bodos.

A critical analysis of the different stages of identity articulation among the Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam, a state of North-East India, indicates that the educated middle class is playing a catalytic role in the process of transformation and consolidation of Bodo national identity. The observations and arguments in support thereof have been laid down in five sections. The first section deals with the

conceptual framework. The next section traces the advent of the Bodo middle class, identifies a few middle class organizations and examines their demands for an understanding of the class interests they seek to promote. The third section highlights the changing face of the Bodo struggle from autonomy to secession. The fourth section will enquire into the role of the middle class in the transformation and consolidation of Bodo identity. The fifth and the final section will summarize the findings of the research.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The key concepts of the study are – 'national integration', 'nationality formation', 'secession' and 'middle class'. The various cultural and ethnic communities inhabiting India have their own distinct cultures and traditions which make them assert their identity as separate nationalities. Such assertion of identity is integral to the understanding of the socio-political reality of India's North East, in particular. Paul Brass notes that the tendency in the literature on political development and modernization of late has been to focus upon 'national integration' as a process of State-building and to treat all other loyalties except those to the State as 'parochial' or 'primordial' loyalties divisive in their impact and detrimental to national integration [Paul R. Brass, 1975]. This tendency

noted by Brass is, of course, one trend only. The approach seems to find its echo in the melting pot theory which equates the concept of the State with that of the nation. In this connection, we may refer to the favourite arguments of authoritarian political leaders that even regimes with competitive political parties are dangerous threats to national unity and national integration in multi-ethnic societies because the parties tend to reflect ethnic differences [Rupert Emerson, 1966]. Such an attitude aims at imposing homogeneity on essentially heterogeneous societies and embarks on forced integration generating perennial socio-political tensions in these societies. Diametrically opposite to this approach is the view that particularistic identities are necessary for national integration. As Baruah rightly argues, that the assertion of identity by smaller nationalities need not be regarded as a threat to the Indian State because it is possible to accept the existence of more than one nationality within a state without expecting them to assimilate with the dominant one of the state concerned or suspecting them as secessionist and leading to the disintegration of the present state [Apurba K. Baruah, 1991]. Interestingly, this approach distinguishes between the state and the nation unlike the other approach.

It is important to point out that although the term ‘ethnic’ is commonly used in the Northeast to refer to groups of people with distinct cultural characteristics, such an usage does not reflect the reality that these groups are in different stages of nationality formation [Apurba K. Baruah, 2005]. In the first stage of ethnicity, a cultural group differentiates itself from other groups, but remains politically insignificant. In the second stage, political consciousness of cultural identity evolves leading to the pursuit and protection of community interests. In the ultimate stage of nationality formation, right to self-determination is sought to be asserted through political action and political mobilization [Paul R. Brass, 1991]. Baruah (2005) argues in this connection that the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Nagas and even the Karbis appear to have become nationalities demanding the political right to control their own affairs. In fact, all nationalities in the contemporary world have been demanding homelands of their own where they can protect their cultural, political and economic interests and this reflects the political dimension of nationality. Nationalities in the Northeast are no exception to this worldwide trend. However, political aspirations of nationalities in this part of India have assumed different forms, ranging from the demand for sovereign independent homeland to the demand for separate statehood within India, in their quest for self-fulfillment and self-determination.

It is interesting to note in the context of the above that the nature of identity assertion in the North East is determined, to a large extent, by the varying stages of nationality formation [Chandan Kumar Sharma, 2000]. For example, the recognised nationalities seem to focus more on the demand for greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Union Government. Integral to such demands is the process of bargaining with the Indian State and central political

authorities for a better deal than what the existing scheme of things offer to them [Susmita Sen Gupta, 2005]. As far as the emerging nationalities are concerned, however, their self-assertion assumes a different dimension altogether. Their struggle is twofold, viz., at a core-periphery level in which a protest movement is launched by the peripheral nationality against the real or perceived exploitation by the dominant nationality of the region [Michael Hechter, 1975]. At another level, even an autonomy movement by such aspiring nationalities may exhibit signs of secession in the hands of a militant section of its leadership. Secession implies the act of separation from an existing state by some section of the inhabitants of that state, based on an identifiable territory which they occupy, in an attempt to set up their own autonomous state, or perhaps to join with some neighbouring state [Geoffrey K. Roberts, 1971]. It appears from a study of secessionist movements that most secessionist groups claim themselves as nationalities and therefore seek to withdraw from the state in which they constitute only marginalized groups [Urmila Phadnis & Rajat Ganguly, 1990].

Another key concept to be used in the study is ‘middle class’. It may be noted that the term ‘middle class/es’ was in common use in some parts of the world by the 1840s when it came to be viewed as basically consisting of various social groups which occupy an intermediary position between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie [Nadel, 1982]. The term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ was more familiar than ‘middle class’ in Marxist literature. Non-Marxist scholars have been using the term in the Weberian sense. Marxists have been arguing that the term ‘middle class’ as used by bourgeoisie social scientists was unscientific because it was based on an unscientific concept of class in the sense that it was not defined in terms of the position occupied in the system of production. Rather it looks at class as an economic position in a society, based on individual achievement and birth. Though these two different approaches to the use of the term middle class has important distinguishable consequences for social and political analyses, yet the term is commonly used in social science literature to refer to social forces [Apurba K. Baruah & Susmita Sen Gupta, 2013].

2.1. Review of Existing Literature

A review of the available literature on Bodo identity assertion shows that significant work has been done by scholars like Udayan Misra, Mosahary, Snehomoy Chakladar, Ajoy Roy, Sanjib Baruah and so on. Udayan Misra in his book *North-East India: Quest for Identity* [Udayan Misra, 1998] critically discusses the struggles of different nationalities in northeast India, aimed at identity assertion. Mosahary (2002) analyses the factors behind Bodo identity assertion and the role played by different Bodo organizations in the process. Snehomoy Chakladar (2004) argues that the cultural movement of the Bodos preceded the political movement. He points out that the Bodos realized that they could not preserve their language and protect their land unless they acquired political power. He also discusses the methods used during different phases of the Bodoland movement. Ajoy Roy (1995) observes that pan-

Bodo sentiment has a concrete basis and cannot be ignored in any study of the Bodos. Sanjib Baruah (1999), an eminent scholar on the northeast, examines the causes behind the growth of Bodo sub-nationalism and tries to analyze the Bodo political movement by applying the theory of relative deprivation. He points out the inadequate share of Bodos in modern occupations, a condition that Bodo activists attribute to discrimination by the ethnic Assamese.

Although the aforementioned literature focuses on different dimensions of the Bodo movement for self-determination, the issue of transformation of the Bodo identity and the role of the middle class in this process has not been highlighted in a significant way. This research, therefore, is an attempt to throw light on this theme.

III. MIDDLE CLASS ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR DEMANDS

Keen observers of the Bodo movement for socio-political assertion tend to believe that this phenomenon is not a new development and seek to trace its origin historically from the first quarter of the twentieth century. Sharma, for example, observes that this period was marked by the emergence of a nascent middle class among the Bodos of Western Assam. He accounts for this phenomenon in terms of two important factors, viz., the advent of cash economy in the Bodo society and its proliferation during the colonial period which transformed the tribal social and economic structure and the emergence of a religious reform movement among the Bodos led by Kalicharan Brahma which transcended the domain of religion and extended itself into the realms of society, polity and economy. The impact of this 'renaissance' on the sphere of education facilitated the entry of many Bodo youths into the colonial job market, thereby triggering the advent of a middle class among the Bodos [Chandan Kumar Sharma, 2010].

Sharma argues that this essentially job-centric Bodo middle class had a vested interest in land as their forefathers belonged to the landed gentry [Loc.cit]. An interesting point that emerges from this formulation is that on the one hand, the world view of the emerging middle class was different from its predecessors because securing government jobs and availing new socio-political opportunities took precedence over landed interest, but on the other, its role as a liberating force was restricted because of its sustained interest in land. Such contradictions in its class character led to the exclusion of issues like land reform from the agenda of the movements launched by the emerging Bodo middle class [Hiren Gohain, 1976].

It appears that the Tribal League, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) etc. were some of the prominent middle class organizations which were instrumental in the assertion of Bodo identity in different phases [Chandan Kumar Sharma, 2010]. The Tribal League, a pioneer socio-political organization of the Bodos, was

formed in 1932. However, this organization sought to fulfill the interests of the middle class alone, as reflected in its demands like reservation of jobs, reservation of seats in the Assam Legislative Council and so on. Not being a mass organization, the Tribal League played no role in mobilizing the masses on issues of poverty and socio-economic backwardness. It was also apathetic to the plight of the Bodo peasantry who were displaced from their lands on a massive scale due to immigration from East Bengal. These developments further alienated the Tribal League from the masses and after India's independence in 1947, all its leaders joined the Congress en masse.

During 1952-1967, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the most important literary organization of the Bodos, played a significant role in the assertion of Bodo identity and the issues of language and script were integral to such assertion. This period was marked by the articulation of demands like introduction of Bodo language in the Bodo-dominated areas and the replacement of the Assamese script by the Roman script. This phase of identity assertion was marked by the active involvement of the masses unlike in the previous phase. However, a major limitation of the politics of identity assertion during this phase was that the middle class leadership hardly made any radical demands for the improvement of the lot of the common man.

On January 13, 1967, Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi made an important declaration regarding the reorganization of Assam on a federal basis. This enhanced the prospects for the fulfillment of the political aspirations of the Bodo middle class which was reflected in the demand for a union territory to be called "Udayachal" for the plains tribes of Assam. A new political organization, viz., Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed to spearhead this territorial demand. The PTCA was, in essence, a Bodo political party although its name suggested a common political platform for all plains tribes of Assam. In this context, it has been argued by some scholars that the initiative to construct a pan-tribal identity of the plains-tribes of Assam always came from the Bodo middle class leadership which was not only more organized, but was also likely to play a key role in any future power alignments. It appears that the Bodo political assertion during this period was accompanied by the emergence of a mass movement around the issue of territorial autonomy.

Territoriality continued to dominate the political agenda of the Bodo middle class in the next phase of identity assertion as well. The prevailing trends signalled towards the emergence and consolidation of the Bodo regional identity which manifested itself in the demand for a separate Bodoland State. The leadership during this phase was assumed by a student organization, viz., All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). Unlike the earlier phases, this phase saw a resort to violence by the armed wing of the ABSU, especially on those who were perceived to be pro-PTCA. However, the ABSU-led movement lost popularity due to the lack of meaningful socio-economic programmes in its agenda which would have improved the lot of the Bodo peasantry, an active component of the movement. The most significant parallel

political development during this period was the articulation of the demand for sovereignty by an underground militant outfit, viz., Bodo Security Force (BdSF). In its anxiety to prevent the movement from being hijacked by militants, the ABSU became a signatory to the Bodo Accord on February 20, 1993, which led to the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC). Meanwhile the ABSU floated Bodo People's Party (BPP) to capture power in the BAC. But an intense struggle for power and internal squabbling among the Bodo leadership for primacy within the BAC reduced the Bodo Accord to a political farce.

IV. AUTONOMY TO SECESSION - THE NEW FACE OF BODO STRUGGLE

The present, contemporary phase of identity assertion by the Bodos is marked by almost total marginalization of the Bodo regional identity by the secessionist agenda of a number of militant outfits which has not only radically transformed the character and substance of the Bodo movement from autonomy to secession in terms of goal, but also the methods of achieving it, marked by a preference for extortion, murder, kidnappings and ambushes over bandhs, road blockades etc. It shows a departure from mass movement to armed struggle. Two significant dimensions of the Bodo secessionist syndrome are: firstly, rapport between the pro-sovereignty groups and other major underground militant outfits of the North East like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN); secondly, the alleged moves by the Government of Assam to encourage the floating of new militant groups to counter the influence of existing ones. Thus, the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) is believed to be a product of such clandestine manoeuvres and has been a beneficiary of state patronage [Baruah, 2005]. Of course, this is not a unique phenomenon as similar patronage by the Union Government led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi was responsible for the rise of Bhindranwale in Punjab politics who later turned out to be a Frankenstein's monster. Meanwhile, the BdSF was rechristened as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and a fierce struggle for supremacy ensued between the BLTF and the NDFB. However, in July, 1999, the BLT declared unilateral ceasefire in response to the Government of India's proposal for holding peace talks. The outfit gave up its demand for a separate Bodoland state and reconciled itself to politico-administrative arrangements for autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. This led to the signing of a Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) for the creation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) on February 10, 2003. The BTC was created as an autonomous self-governing body within the State of Assam under the Sixth Schedule in order to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspirations, protect socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos and to speed up the infrastructure development in the BTC area. On the other hand, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has been persistently advocating a sovereign

independent state of Bodoland. It believes that it was the British and not India who invaded and conquered the Bodo Kingdom and therefore, Bodos have the right to freedom after the British left India. However, since the question of sovereignty is not negotiable within the framework of the Constitution of India, the NDFB has resorted to extra-constitutional/extremist methods in pursuit of its goal of independence. It has been carrying out three categories of extremist activities, viz. (1) violence against the establishment; (2) violence against non-Bodo communities (ethnic cleansing) and (3) violence against rival Bodo groups (fratricidal clashes) due to ideological differences [Snehamoy Chakladar, 2004].

4.1. Transformation of Bodo Identity and the Role of the Middle Class

A critical look into the different stages of identity assertion of the Bodos reveals some interesting trends. The middle class which has been instrumental in articulating demands of the Bodos in these various phases seem to have played an important role in transforming the Bodo identity. Since the issues of language and script were integral to identity assertion of the Bodos in the initial phase, the middle class was apparently articulating the Bodo ethno-linguistic identity as distinct from the larger Assamese linguistic identity. The subsequent phases which focused more on territorial autonomy signaled towards the emergence of a distinct Bodo regional identity. The demand for a territorial unit of all plains tribes of Assam was supposed to be an inclusive political arrangement, but the Bodos, being numerically larger and its middle class leadership being more organized than its counterparts among other tribal groups, were likely to assume a predominant role within such an arrangement. This was followed by a more aggressive assertion of Bodo exclusivity which centered on the demand for a separate Bodoland, thereby indicating the transformation of Bodo ethnic, linguistic and regional identity into a distinct national identity. The advocacy by militant outfits of a sovereign independent Bodoland as a homeland for safeguarding the political, cultural and economic interests of the Bodos is nothing but an endorsement and reassertion of the Bodo national identity. In reality, however, the middle class is likely to pursue its own class interests in the proposed homeland of its own.

V. RESULTS

The study shows that the middle class has indeed played an important role in the consolidation of Bodo national identity as distinct from Assamese identity. However, it appears that the Bodo middle class will actually seek to protect its own interests in the proposed homeland instead of safeguarding the rights and interests of the masses. The bitter struggle for power among different sections of the middle class within the existing autonomous arrangements will bear testimony to this phenomenon. The deviation of the Bodo movement from autonomy to secession necessitates a critical relook into the

role of the Indian State. Indeed, the response of the state is a major determinant that has shaped and transformed the nature of the Bodo struggle for self-determination.

VI. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

For a deeper understanding of the Bodo identity assertion, it is necessary to relate this assertion with the nationality question in India. The Indian State has always viewed this issue as a problem of all-India national integration and has considered nationality aspirations as anti-national. This has further alienated smaller nationalities like the Bodos of Assam. Ironically, the Assam movement against foreign nationals had initially drawn the Bodos and other plains tribes under its banner, but it failed to accommodate the aspirations of these nationalities. Moreover, the Assamese middle class hegemony generated a sense of insecurity among the Bodo middle class and pushed it towards a path of self-determination for consolidation of the Bodo national identity [Susmita Sen Gupta, 2014]. It may be argued in this context that unless the Indian state appreciates nationality aspirations within a framework of mutual understanding and trust and respect for other groups residing in the same region, there will be a sense of discontent among smaller nationalities, inciting some aggressive sections to reject the existing arrangements and explore new political frontiers.

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