

## **IDENTITY POLITICS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE OF THE BODOS OF ASSAM**

**Lohit Ch. Baishya**

**Ph.D. Research Scholar,**

**Dept. of Political science**

**Assam University, Diphu Campus**

**Dr. K. C. Das**

**Associate Professor & Head**

**Dept. of Political science**

**Assam University, Diphu Campus**

### **Abstract**

Assam is the land of habitant of different ethnic communities like Karbis, Missings, Bodos, Garos, Aadibasis, Dimasas, Kochs, Rajbongshis and many other. Among them Bodos are one of the major ethnic community and regarded as the Scheduled Tribes (Plains) in Assam. They have a strong historical background and also called the early settlers of Assam. The Bodos are struggling for their identity and for that they demand a separate and independent state. The demands of the Bodos are partially achieved with the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993 and Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) in 2003. But the movement for the creation of a separate state is still going on and on other hand the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has also been struggling for an independent or sovereign state.

On the basis of the Bodo identity demand, the paper seeks to examine the historical background of the Bodos, their socio-economic development and changing political scenario.

**Key Words:** Identity, Socio-Economic Development, Demand, Movement, Separate State.

### **Introduction:**

The demand for autonomy or a separate state is one of the important issues of our country. Particularly, in North-East India many ethnic groups are demanding autonomy or separation for various reasons. Basically the demand for autonomy is regional, territorial and independent in nature. It is also said that in most of the states in North-East India, ethnicity has become an important source for the demand for autonomy or statehood. The word “ethnicity” refers to the group of people or community with same culture, traditions, customs, identities etc. In relation to

the ethnic identity almost all the ethnic groups demand for autonomy or separate homeland for the protection of their history, culture and language. To protect the ethnic identity, the group or community demand for autonomy or statehood within the Indian Union, sometimes beyond that also for a sovereign state. In this regard some ethnic groups use democratic methods, while some others use militant or violent means to achieve their goal for an autonomous state or a separate state.

Assam is the land of diverse ethnic communities like Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Aadibasis, Misings, Garos, Kochs, Rajbonshis etc. The Bodos are the major tribal community in Assam and also called the early settlers in this region. There were many kings belonged to this community who ruled this region for centuries. It is also said that the Bodos have a strong historical background. Presently, the people of this community reside in many parts of India and also in neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, etc. According to the Census Report 2001, the total scheduled tribes population in Assam was 33,08,570 which constituted by 12.41% of the total population in the State. Among the total scheduled tribes population in Assam, where a major portion is captured by the people of the Bodo community.

**Objective and Methodology:** The main objectives of the study are:

- (i) to study the historical background of the Bodos of Assam;
- (ii) to deal with the socio-economic development of the Bodos of Assam; and
- (iii) to explore the changing political scenario of the Bodos on the demand for a separate state.

The present paper is based mainly on secondary sources and in preparing the paper an analytical method has been followed.

### **Meaning of the Term:**

Generally, the 'Bodos' are known as 'Bodo' or 'Boro' which is derived from the word "Bod" which indicates homeland. Almost all the communities in Assam pronounced as 'Boro'. On the other hand, the organisations which related to the Bodo identity and consciousness movement for Bodo autonomy used the term 'Bodo' in the name of their organisations. For instance, the organisation like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1952), All Bodo Students' Union, 1967, (ABSU), use the term 'Bodo'. The Department of Bodo of Gauhati University also use the term 'Bodo'. Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma.[1]

About the term Kachari, Sir E.A. Gait said "the word Kachari is derived from Sanskrit word meaning a 'broadening region'. The district of Cachar may have got the name directly from this word, or it might have been so called after its principal tribe".[2]

In the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the people of this community popularly called as 'Boro' and in the North Cachar Hills and Dhansiri areas of Karbi-Anglong district called as 'Dimasa'.

### **Origin of the Bodo People:**

About the origin of the Bodo people, no authentic documents have been found and many authors give their opinion according to their own end.

In this regard, it may be said that originally the Bodo belonged to the Kiratas who was resided in the Himalayan borders. "The Vajasenaya Samahita and the Atharva Veda describe the kiratas as a race of people residing in caves. The great epic Mahabhatata mentions several principalities

all along the border land of the Himalayas ruled by the Kiratas".[3] So, it is said that Kiratas were origin from the land of Himalaya. According to Mahabharata, Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisha joined the battle of Kurukshetra with a strong army of Kirata and Cina souldiers.[4]

It may also be mentioned that the Bodos are known by different names in different parts of Assam. But in the Brahmaputra Valley they are popularly known as 'Boro'.

#### **Migration:**

Immigration is an universal process of all human beings. It is a natural phenomenon for all creatures for survival. So, the migration of the Bodo people as written by Dr. S.K. Chatterjee "different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people which had their nidus near the headwaters of the yang-tsze-kiang and the Hoang-ho rivers, to the west of China pushed south and west, probably from 2000 B.C. onwards and these tribes infiltrated into India mostly along the western course of the Brahamaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of the Brahamaputra fairly early and to have extended into the North and East Bengal and into North Bihar".[5]

"The state of Assam or the then Kamrupa had to meet all the tribal movements from the east and specially the advent of the Tibeto-Chinese speaking Mongoloids (Bodos). Thus the Kirata people of Assam or the Bodos, who are widely scattered all over the states are still unassimilated among the Aryan speaking people of the state".[6]

On the basis of the above discussion it can be that the Bodos have a long historical background and they are the dominant early settlers of Assam.

#### **Socio-Economic and Political Development:**

To develop the identity consciousness among the Bodos, Kalicharan Brahma played a remarkable role who was born at Kajigaon on 18 April, 1860. At that time the economic condition of the Bodo people was poor and they were underdeveloped. He believed that the main causes behind this condition were division of the Bodos on the basis of religion. He tried to unite the Bodo people under one religion and that was "Brahma Religion". By his own initiatives first Bodo magazine '*Bibar*' was published in 1924. During that time '*Bibar*' took an active part to focus the socio-economic conditions and identity consciousness of the Bodos. In respect of politics, Kalicharan Brahma submitted a memorandum on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1929 before the Simon Commission at *Shillong* on various demands and issues of the Bodos.

To develop the identity consciousness of the tribal people particularly the plains tribals, the Tribal League played the most important role. The Tribal League was formed in the year 1933. The main objective of the Tribal League was to create political consciousness among the plains tribal people of Assam. With the constant pressure and demand of the Tribal league, the Government of India Act, 1935 reserved four seats for the plains tribals of Assam during the colonial period.

In 1937 General Elections, the Tribal League contested for four reserved seats according to the Government of India Act 1935. Accordingly, Karka Chandra Dole, Rabichandra Kachari, Rupnath Brahma and Dhirsingh Deori were elected to the Provincial Legislative Assembly in that election. The Tribal League extended their support to the Muslim League Government, 1937. But the Muslim League Government completed only one year term and dissolved in the year 1938.

After that the Provincial Congress formed the Government on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1938 with the support of the Tribal League under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi. Before the formation of the Government, an agreement was signed between the Congress and the Tribal League on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1939 on ten important issues relating to the tribal people.

But the Bordoloi Government also could not continue for its full term and dissolved before the full term. When the Congress ministry resigned in response to the call of Congress Working Committee for launching civil resistance against British Rule in the year 1940 Muhammad Saadullah also entered into an agreement with the Tribal League on 16.3.40.[7] In that government the Tribal League demanded to protection of the tribal land. The Tribal League, particularly Bhimbor Deuri and Rupnath Brahma also demanded to prevent the transfer of Tribal land to the non-tribals. On the basis of the demand the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 was amended in 1947 and added Chapter X. "Under the provision of Section 160(1) of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Amendment Act 1947, constitution of compact areas in regions predominantly people by classes of people notified under Section 160(2) of the above act (to be referred as protected classes henceforth) into Belts and Blocks. While Belts were constituted with larger areas, the Blocks had smaller areas considering with boundaries of the Mauzas".[8] In accordance with the above section altogether 35 Belts and Blocks (11 Belts and 24 Blocks) were created in Assam till 1964.[9]

The Tribal League did not play the role as a political party in Assam for long time. Later on, consequent to internal feud some leaders like Jadav Chandra Khaklary, Rupnath Brahma and Jogendranath Hazarika joined the Congress party and some others joined the Socialist Party.[10] In the year 1953, the Tribal League changed the name as All Assam Tribal Sangha in the Baropujia Annual Session of the Tribal League in 1953. The All Assam Tribal Sangha has still been continuing their activities in the socio-economic field of Assam. However, the Sangha has been recognised by the Assam Government as a competent body to scrutinize and issue the much-needed Scheduled Tribe Certificate to the genuine tribal claimants.[11]

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) played important role in developing the identity consciousness of the Bodos.. The BSS was born on 16 November, 1952 under the leadership of Joy Bhadra Hagjer, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Promod Chandra Boro, Dharanidhar Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma, Modaram Brahma and many others. The first president of the of Bodo Sahitya Sabha was Joy Bhadra Hagjer and first secretary was Sonaram Thaosan. The BSS has been working mainly for the promotion of the Bodo Language and identity like the Assam Sahitya Sabha. The basic aims and objectives of the BSS are --- to impart education through the Mother tongue, to introduce the Bodo language a medium of instruction, to preseve the Bodo Culture etc. Now Bodo has been introduced as MIL, Major and Elective Subject in Degree level under Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University and also as an Advanced Subject in XI & XII standard under Assam Higher Secondary Education Council. For an active initiative of the BSS, Bodo language was recognised by the Government of Assam as an Associate Official Language of the State and also recognised language under the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule of Indian Constitution.

### **Changing Scenario:**

On 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1967 the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was born under the leadership of Samar Brahma Choudhury and Charan Narzary in the political field of Assam. The founder president of the PTCA was Birusan Dole and Charan Narzary was the founder Secretary.

The year 1967 was the most important in the political history of Assam. Because the announcement of the then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi where she announced that Assam will be re-organised on federal basis on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1967, the PTCA started their movement for a separate state for the tribals. The PTCA demanded for the creation of Union Territory in the name of “udayachal”. The demand for “udayachal” got a massive support from the Bodo people where they were predominant.

The second meeting of the PTCA was held at *Edenbari* (Darrang district), on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1967 and took many decisions. The meeting also decided to publish a weekly news magazine in the name and style of the “*Janajati*” as an organ of the PTCA for inspiring the people politically, socially, and economically.[12] The territory of UDAYACHAL is sought to be created by clubbing the predominantly Plains Tribal area of northern tracts of the river Brahmaputra along the foot hills of Bhutan and Arunachal.[13] When the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi came to Assam on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1983, the leaders of the PTCA met her and demanded the creation of the “*Udayachal*”.

After the meeting, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi advised the leaders of the PTCA to prepare and submit the geographical justification of their demand. Accordingly a team of the PTCA led by Samar Brahma Chaudhury, Charan Narzary and few other leaders submitted necessary papers to the Prime Minister relating to the geographical feasibility of their demand for the creation of *Udayachal* on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1983. Copy of documents was submitted to the Special Home Secretary, Mr. P. P. Nayer and the Cabinet Secretary, Government of India, Mr. Krishna Swamy Rao Saheb.[14]

In relation to the demand for Udayachal, a delegation team of the PTCA met the then Prime Minister, Rajib Gandhi on 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1986 and urged to solve their demand. On 27.09.86, a four member PTCA delegation led by Shri Samar Brahma Choudhury, M.P, met the union Home Minister, Shri Buta Sing, and reiterated the urgent need to create the proposed union territory of Udayachal.[15] On the basis of the discussion, then Home Minister called for a tripartite talk between the Central Government, State Government and the leaders of the PTCA on the demand for the creation of union Territory.

In the following year 1977 PTCA had changed their demand from ‘Union Territory’ to ‘Autonomous Region’. After they change of their demand from ‘Union Territory’ to ‘Autonomous Region’ a section of the PTCA workers did not support that demand and ultimately this was a split of the party and formed a new political party named as Plains Tribal Council of Assam (Progressive) (PTCA-P) on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1978 under the leadership of Binoy Kumar Basumatari. The main demand of the PTCA-P was the creation of a ‘*Missing Bodoland*’. For the creation of a ‘*Missing Bodoland*’ the PTCA-P submitted a memorandum to then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1980.

To create regional autonomy for the Bodos another political Party was emerged in the month of April, 1984 named as United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF). The UTNLF demanded Union Territory which was known as ‘Tribal Land’. For that the party submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister, Rajib Gandhi on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1986. But the UTNLF also did not survive for long time and a portion of the party workers formed another party which was known as the United Bodo Nationalist Liberation Front (UBNLF).

Like various other Bodo organisations, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) has also been working for Bodo identity consciousness and separate statehood till date. To achieve a separate state of Bodoland, the ABSU submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi on 9<sup>th</sup> November, 1972. Similarly another memorandum was submitted to the then Prime Minister, Rajib Gandhi on 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1985 for creation of a separate state. During the period of Assam Movement (1979-1985) led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the ABSU also demanded to solve the foreigners problem of Assam.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the ABSU was held on 29, 30, 31 May, 1986 at Rowta Chariali in Darang district.[16]The Rowta Annual Conference of the ABSU elected Upendra Nath Brahma as the President of the ABSU. Under the strong dedication and leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma, the ABSU prepared a 92 points Charter of Demand on various issues of the Bodos and it was submitted to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1987. The ABSU demanded that the Bodo should be declared as the Associate Official Language in Kokrajhar District and Udalguri sub-division that was mentioned in the charter of demands. During that time the ABSU opposed the Government's decision of compulsory imposition of Assamese language in the non-Assamese medium schools. At that time the ABSU was opposed the demand of the AASU for the amendment of Articles 330 and 347 of the Indian Constitution.

On 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1987 ABSU arranged a huge mass rally in Guwahati for the demand of a separate state and participants of the rally shouted the slogan of "divide Assam fifty-fifty". Regarding the separate state issue, the ABSU published a book named "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty" where they answered more than 53 questions in supporting of their demands.

Due to the long run movement and submission of various memorandums to the Government, a talk was called by the Government to solve the Bodo problem. On the basis of the meeting, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the ABSU, the BPAC on the one hand and the Central and State Government on the other on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1993. At the same time the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was passed in the Assam Legislative Assembly which created the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC).

Though the BAC was formed in the year 1993 a section of Bodo people did not support such type of council. In the year 1996 a militant organisation was formed in the name of Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) for the creation of separate state within the Indian Union. The BLTF used militant and violent activities attacking the Government and the non-Government officials, police personals and also civilians. After a long struggle run by the BLTF, the Government took initiative to hold further talks with them and as a result, the Central Government and the Government of Assam signed a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the leaders of BLTF on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2003. After the signing of the MoS an autonomous council was created named the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) within the state of Assam which included four districts -- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri.

### **Conclusion:**

The Bodos are one of the major tribes in Assam and particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. They have a long historical background and ruled this region for many centuries. The Bodos had rich cultural heritage. The Bodo movement in Assam has its own historical background. It started in the form of language and script movement and as an outcome of the movement the Bodoland Autonomous Council was formed in 1993. The PTCA

put forwarded the demand for the creation of the UDAYACHAL for the plain tribal communities of Assam for the first time. It should also be mentioned here that the Bodo people of Assam advanced with their autonomous movement along with other tribal communities of Assam. But later on it was seen that the movement became the movement of the Bodos of Assam. Gradually both men and women of this community became more conscious of their demand for a separate state. It may be noted that even after the formation of BTAD in the Bodo dominating areas of Assam their movement for a separate state or independent state is going on even today.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **References:**

- 
- [1] Brahma, Dr. Kameswar,: A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos (With special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District), Calcutta, Puthi Pustak, 1992, p.1.
- [2] Gait, E.A.: A History of Assam, Reprint, ed, Guwahati, EBH Publishers (India), 2016, p.299.
- [3] Brahma, Dr. Kameswar, op. cit. p.6.
- [4] Brahma, Dr. Kameswar, op. cit. p.6.
- [5] Chatterjee, S.K.: The place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, 1954, p.9 in Brahma, Dr. Kameswar,: A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos (With special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District), Calcutta, Puthi Pustak, 1992, p.9, 10.
- [6] Brahma, Dr. Kameswar, op. cit. p.10.
- [7] Bhuyan, B. C., Political Development of the North East, New Delhi, Onsons Publication, 2006, p. 109.
- [8] Bordoloi, Dr. B. N., Report on the Survey of Alienation of Tribal Land in Assam, Guwahati, Bahniman Printers, p. 11.
- [9] Ibid p. 11.

[10] Sonowal, khema, Why Bodo Movement?, Guwahati, EBH Publishers (India), 2013, p. 47.

[11] Ibid p. 47.

[12] Narzary, Charan, Dream for Udayachal and the History of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA, 1967-93), Kokrajhar-Guwahati, N. L. Publications, 2011, p. 43.

[13] Bhuyan, B. C., op. cit, p. 104

[14] Narzary, Charan, op. cit, p.100.

[15] Narzary, Charan, op. cit, p.173.

[16] Narzary, Charan, op, cit. p. 149.