

DEMAND FOR AUTONOMY AND STATEHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAM

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Article History

Received: 25.10.2018
Accepted: 05.11.2018
Published: 17.11.2018



Abstract: The subject taken up for discussion here is the continuous demand for autonomy and statehood in contemporary Assam. Assam is inhabited by a multiplicity of ethno linguistic groups, both tribal and non tribal, has witnessed many separatist movements regarding ethnicity and autonomy. This resulted in the formation of new states carved out from the hill areas of the earlier composite state of Assam. As a process of change in development results in serious dislocation in the society and raising these issues continuously. The expansion of ethnic identity has captured political institutions and social movements. In the present context, the *Bodos, Karbis, Koch Rajbongshis* and *Dimasas* have given impetus to separate statehood and the Bodos have continuously focused on their demands. Among these the paper will focus only on the Bodo movement for separate statehood.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Statehood, Contemporary Assam*

INTRODUCTION

India's northeastern state, Assam, populated by communities with strong primordial values emanating from their semi-tribal and semi-feudal bases, has been experiencing ethnic assertion and ethnic polarization for quite some time and they have been engaged with various kinds of means to acquire their goals. The issue of language and autonomy has also very essential connotation to these conflicts. The imposed policy of isolation and deliberate intention to encourage continuation of tradition helped maintaining separate entity through existing ethno-lingual diversities within varied environmental conditions through the hills were incorporated in the province of Assam. At the same time, the impetuous administrative divisions compartmentalized different major ethnic sub-groups which strengthened their sense of independence.

In the context of north east, ethnicity not only remains an important part of the reality but it also happens to be the source of a series of major problems faced by the State. Many insurgent situations, separatist demands articulated in terms of autonomy, controversies over ethnicity and identity issues are

rooted in the failure of the state to fulfill the ethnic aspirations of the competing ethnic communities. The severe reality within the Indian state is that also the Indian politics and civil society are characterized by an increasing level of violence. Increasingly, ethnic groups and social classes are negotiating with the state under the dialect of violence as a means of articulating their demands. The rise of these phenomenons is largely an outcome of socio political and economic processes.

Ethnicity is a sense of identity or a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. Ethnicity has been variously expressed as assertion of cultures, communal upsurges, and revivalism of religions, voices of marginalized peoples, regions and nationalities. At the present juncture of world history ethnicity takes on both dominating and liberating forms. (Upadhyay, 2002). Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self consciousness, a claim to status and recognition either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups. (Brass, 1991)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The region prior to independence was divided into Assam consisting of Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, North Cachar and Mikir Hills, The Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills; the North Eastern Frontier Tracts and the territories of Manipur and Tripura. At the commencement of the constitution, the present States of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram constituted a district each of Assam, whereas Arunachal Pradesh, (then NEFA), consisted of several 'frontier tracts' administered by the Governor of Assam and was, therefore, deemed to be a part of that State. The States of Manipur and Tripura were princely States which, after merger with India in 1948, became part-c States, the earlier name for union Territories.

These changes have occurred gradually from the period of 1826. British colonialism annexed and brought under the province of Assam a large number of contiguous hills inhabited by various autochthon tribes mainly for convenience of colonial administration. After annexation of Assam valley in 1826, British colonialism annexed Cachar plains in 1830, Khasi hills in 1833, Jaintia plains in 1835, area under present Karbi Anglong and North Cachar in 1838 and 1854 respectively, Naga Hills during 1866-1904, Garo hills in 1872-1873 and Lusai hills in 1890. (Sarmah, 2002). Map was redrawn after a couple of decades of independence with the North-Eastern Areas Reorganization Act, 1971, and the region has undergone many changes and created seven states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland which granted Statehood under the State of Nagaland Act, 1962. Initially the concept remained a geographical one; it was politically formulized in 1972 when the North East Council (NEC) was formed through a president of India order. Thus, over the years, this geographical entity, the social setting, economy, politics and aspirations of the ethnic groups of the region were bunched together into one unit. (Shimray, 2004). In 2002, Sikkim became a part of the North Eastern Council (NEC), becoming the eighth member of the NEC under the Department of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER).

The administrative arrangement in the British Province was keeping changes till the end of colonialism in India. In 1853, district administration was introduced in the province and in 1874 Assam was placed under a chief commissioner and taken away from the Lt. Governor of Bengal. This Act was entitled as Scheduled District Act, 1874. Finally, in 1921 it became a Governor's province as per the

provisions of the Government of India Act, 1919. This Act of 1919 under its section 52A(2) declared the hill areas- the Garo hills, Khasi and Jaintia hills, Mikir hills, North Cachher hills, Naga hills, Lusai hills districts, the Sadiya frontier tracts, Balipara frontier tract, Lakhimpur frontier tract in the province of Assam as backward tracts. The Government of India Act 1935 gave up the terminology of the backward tracts and instead described these areas either as excluded areas or partially excluded areas. (Hansaria, 2005)

SIXTH SCHEDULE TO THE CONSTITUTION

After that the question of Sixth Schedule has emerged to providing a constitutional set up for the tribal areas of north east and was debated in the Constituent Assembly. Bordoloi Sub committee was formed and it suggested for formation of Autonomous District Councils which was passed by the Constituent Assembly with certain modifications and it constitutes the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution. Article 244(2) of the constitution provides the provisions of the Sixth Schedule which shall apply to the administration of the tribal areas in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. On its recommendation the Sixth Schedule was incorporated into the Constitution of India which provided mainly administrative autonomy to the hill people of the region to preserve their unique culture or to maintain the multi-color culture of the nation as a whole. Most probably it was the best politico-administrative strategy to be adopted by the country working towards 'unity in diversity' without destroying the multi-color culture of the nation and also there was another assumption that it will divide the province and communities through ethnic and linguistic lines.

The sixth schedule provided for special arrangement for the tribes by establishing autonomous administration in these areas and through this the tribal people may continue to follow their traditional way of life according to their wishes. They were given power for making laws, administration of justice to assess and collect land revenue on land and buildings. However, the provisions of autonomy made in the sixth schedule never satisfy political leaders of Naga Hills and consequently Naga Hills experienced unprecedented political turmoil since independence. Interestingly enough, within sixty years of independence of India different social groups have started searching for 'Diversity in Unity'. Hiren Gohain writes that the Assamese were willing enough to accommodate indigenous tribal groups among themselves, but denied the privilege to immigrant Muslims who arrived on the scene roughly one hundred years ago. But the tribal were no longer keen to join the Assamese mainstream; they wished to preserve their separate identity. Disputes on semantics are likely to deprive the people of the state of a much-needed buffer against big-nation chauvinists.

STATE REORGANISATION

The state Reorganization Commission was set up in 1956 and the first phase of reorganization of states began. The newly installed federal institutional structure began to be evaluated within the larger social and political compulsion arising out of the cultural-linguistic remapping of the society. As a result of the federal design began to be recast needs of cultural heterogeneity, social mobility, geopolitical contiguity, linguistic homogeneity and administrative bureaucratic rationality of the state immediately after independence. Ambedkar (chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution), unlike Nehru supported the demand for reorganization of the states on the linguistic basis.

The first Prime Minister of independent India, Nehru had to initiate the twin processes of state and nation formation in post partitioned India. Institutional and political embedding of culture was more in terms of its relational attributes identified as language, region, history or social spheres of various groups and collectives establishing some kind of inter-individual and inter-group relationship.(Pai, 2011). But this act has not done anything in the context of North East.

In July 1960, a sixteen point agreement was arrived at between the Naga Peoples Convention and the Government of India where under it was agreed that the Naga Hills Tuensang area, which was then a part-B tribal area within the state of Assam, should be formed in a separate state as to be known as Nagaland. After the creation of Nagaland the demand of separate Hill states has grown gradually. The State reorganization commission after having considered all necessary arguments, refused to recommend the demand for a separate hill states, but Nehru's views were contrary to those of the State reorganization commission. During the meeting between Nehru and APHLC (All Party Hill Leaders Conference) the general agreement was on the largest measure of autonomy, maximum autonomy. In 1967 the Union home ministry issued a statement which proposed having equal status not subordinate to one another. There was a great resentment from the plain area people over this proposal; the APHLC however welcomed it.

A new development in the Assam Reorganization came by the formation of a new Committee headed by Ashok Mehta to find out a solution of the problem. The assessment of the Mehta Committee recommendation indicates that it favors the balanced solution; while conceding the maximum possible autonomy to the hill areas, it has not opposed the autonomous statehood. Though Mehta Committee recommendations were welcomed by the Assam Government as a solution, the central government hesitates to implement it due to the opposition from the APHLC (Singh, 2013). State wide resentment was displayed during that period. Assamese people were not convinced with central government and APHLC decision. After huge discussion and debate the central government took the final decision. The Lok Sabha passed the constitution (22nd amendment) bill on April 15, 1969, to pave the way for the reorganization of Assam with the creation of an autonomous hill state.

It has become rather common for a fairly large number of social scientists, journalists and politicians to maintain that the composite state of Assam disintegrated because of linguistic chauvinism of the *Asomiyas*. At the political level, All party Hill leaders Conference, a party claiming to represent the interest of some hill tribes of the erstwhile composite Assam, blames the official Language Act of 1961 for the disintegration of composite Assam, blames the Official Language Act of 1961 for the disintegration of the composite State. But A K Baruah describes that the adoption of *Asomiya* as the official language might have provided an occasion for some such communities, particularly when an educated elite has emerged which could develop a nationality consciousness among such communities. It is evident from the history of the inter community relations of the region that when educated elites of various communities find themselves competing with elites of other communities for resources they use issues related to ethnic and national identity to their advantage.(Baruah A. K., 2013)

PLAIN TRIBES IN ASSAM

But the plain tribes in Assam inhabits unevenly in different districts of Assam, the process of tribal identity construction, which begun in the socio political milieu of colonial Assam, culminated in the formation of the tribal league in 1933 to provide an organized political platform for all the plain tribes of Assam. But nearly after 20 years of independence the plain tribes of Assam regretted with the fact that they neither enjoyed the constitutional privileges under the 5th schedule nor the autonomous self rule under the 6th schedule and also government of Assam was not interested to giving adequate protection to them. Consequently, in 1967 articulated the demand for political autonomy by constituting Plain Tribal Council of Assam, the first organization after independence. But in 1977, rift among the leaders of PTCA, resulted a split in PTCA. In the meantime the All Bodo Student Union, who has been playing a very active role in PTCA since 1967, articulated a demand for full fledged statehood and gives the nomenclature Bodoland. One of the essential factors, which scholars have often pointed out, that contributed in the surfacing of the Bodo Movement, is the emergence of the Bodo middle class (Sharma A. C., 1998) in the first quarter of the twentieth century, mainly in western Assam.

BODO DEMANDS FOR BODOLAND

The Bodos belong to the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group and are the most numerous of the plains tribes of Assam. The term Bodo is also used to denote a large number of tribes-the Garos of Meghalaya, Tippera of Tripura, and Boro Kachari, Koch, Rabha, Lalung, Dimasa, Hajong, Chutia, Deuri, and Moran of Assam and other parts of the Northeast (Brahma, 1983). A document of the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), the most influential organization campaigning for a separate Bodo homeland, gives an estimate of number of the Bodos. The task is difficult. ABSU uses the term "Bodo" includes those who speak or are supposed to have once spoken languages defined by linguists as belonging to the Bodo group. (Baruah S, 1999). They distinguish these people into four categories and now some categories are excluded because they have completely forgotten the Bodo language and adopted Assamese language. The Bodos constitute a significant proportion in the plain districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur.

The movement for a separate Bodo state had its origins in the economic and socio cultural aspirations of the Bodo people, who first raised the demand for a separate homeland while still under British rule. However, it was only in the 1930s that they began to organize themselves. The process of the reorganization of the state of Assam in the post independence era began in 1963 when the Nagaland state was formed (George, 1994). The first demand for a separate state for the plain tribes of Assam then the proposed name was "Udayachal"- was made by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam in 1967. First in 1967 they placed their demand for an Autonomous Region to the then President of India Zakir Hussain, by putting forward a memorandum considering the issues of alienation, land alienation, unemployment, exploitation and preservation of tribal language, culture, customs and traditions. Later on, in 1973 the demand for an Autonomous Region by the PTCA was replaced by the demand for a Union Territory. In 1979 split of PTCA that is PTCA (progressive) came into being. Gradually the Bodo movement in Assam began to lose its relevance. Meanwhile, the United Tribal Nationalist

Liberation Front (UTNLF) was formed but unfortunately the party also had split into two groups (Majumdar, 2016).

But it was only in 1987, during the first AGP Government, the younger Bodo leaders (All Bodo Students Union) began successfully to mobilize large number in support of a demand for a separate state. Since 1987 the demand has been for a separate state to be called “Bodoland” because the newer generation of the Bodo activist did not want to use the Sanskritik Udayachal (Baruah S. , 1999). The ABSU under the leadership of late Upendra Nath Brahma who coined the slogan “divide Assam fifty fifty” decided to achieve a separate state by 1990s (Majumdar, 2016). This new generation of Bodo leaders believes that Bodo demands for greater public recognition of Bodo language and culture and for greater economic and educational opportunities for Bodos can best be met by a separate state. The 92 point charters of the ABSU- the most important of the organizations campaigning for Bodoland- lists the Bodo grievances. Like the Assam Movement, Bodo campaigns also show the power of cultural and historical symbols and of societal networks in being able to mobilize large numbers of people behind a political demand (Baruah S., 1999). Thus, after a long period of struggle, an accord was signed between the government of Assam and Bodo activists in February 1993 made a commitment to forming an elected body called the Bodoland Autonomous Council within the state of Assam, leaving open the question of its precise territorial jurisdiction. It was formed without any demarcated boundary and more importantly, comprise of mainly the non Bodo population. However, the BAC due to various reasons was unable to fulfill the expectation of the Bodo people and thus reinvigorated the demand for a separate state.

On 19th March 1996 the ABSU under the leadership of President Swambla Basumatary submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister P.V Narashimha Rao for accomplishing the task of creating a separate state for fulfilling their purposes. As a result the memorandum of settlement was signed in 10th February, 2003 in the tripartite talks between the government of India, government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tiger regarding the formation of an autonomous self governing body, namely Bodoland Territorial Council came into being under the sixth schedule of the constitution in the year of 2003(Majumdar, 2016). The BTC was provided the constitutional protection for developing the economic, educational condition and preserving their distinct linguistic and ethnic identity. But like the BAC the BTC was also unable to fulfill their prevailing conditions. The Bodoland Army and BLTF are not the only organizations engaged in political violence in recent years. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has been another organization associated with act of political violence. The most disturbing aspect of the political violence around the question of a Bodo Homeland is a pattern of violence that sometimes looks like an ethnic cleansing campaign (Baruah S., 1999).

Hence the inability of the two consecutive Autonomous councils had made the all Bodo Students Union, the Bodo Peoples Party and the Bodo Liberation Tiger to reiterate their earlier demand for a separate state within the federal structure of India. But interestingly, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland had rejected the second Bodo Accord and at the same time demanded for a sovereign state instead of any separate statehood. The BTAD is now being administered by the Bodo People's Front (BPF), led largely by former cadres of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) a dreaded ruthless militant group that once blazed its name with massacres and acts of extreme terror. It is opposed by the Bodo Progressive People's Front (BPPF), composed of veterans of the political

movement for Bodoland and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), which has been instrumental in putting in Parliament a couple of Bodo leaders. Both are in tactical alliance with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), an armed outfit of militants who demand outright secession from India but are at present sheltered under a ceasefire in designated camps to the dismay of the BLT.

The well known fact is that Constitution of India provides some safeguards to the tribal population of India through the fifth and sixth schedule under the article 244 of the part X of the constitution. But the plain tribes of Assam were not being considered under constitutional safeguard. The legacy of New Delhi's northeast policy, which privileged separate states, is a major factor in creating this impasse over Bodoland. The ease with which the Indian constitution allows the making and breaking of states contribute to creating the context for this violence. And at the same time state level political arena is so manifestly powerless, ideas about alternatives that would give indigenous northeasterners more power over their destiny win more adherents (Baruah S., 1999).

So far as the attitude of the Assam government was concerned, it was apprehended by the plain tribes that behavior of Assam government towards them basically rigid as well as arbitrary in nature. The government had never taken any initiative of its own in order to redress their grievances instead there had always been a tendency to suppress the rising dissenting voices of the agitators even in some cases by using force. In other words, the Bodo people always considered the Assamese people as well as the Assam government responsible for their deteriorated and miserable condition. Indeed, collective imagination of homeland often clashes with the collective imagination of a homeland of another. From the report of March 13, 2017, Assam Tribune, the indefinite hunger strike resorted by the ABSU and on the fourth day of their hunger strikes, said they would not accept any medical aid until a formal assurance for a comprehensive political dialogue is given. They tell the government that if 100 hours or any number of hunger strikes is not responded positively, then national highway and railway lines passing through Bodoland will be blocked for equal number of hours said NDFB (P) president Dhiren Boro. As per a press note released by ABSU in Kokrajhar on March 14, while the health of hundreds of activists deteriorated, on repeated appeal by the district administrator, many of them have been shifted to RNB civil Hospital.

CONCLUSION

Present demand for separate state is political and economic rather than social and cultural and the issue of Bodoland is also one of them. One of the objects behind creating more states is better governance and socio economic development. The perception of development, development of the underdeveloped or retarded development has transcended the linguistic cohesion. But much more of the size of the state we have to focus on quality of governance and administration and the most important is human capability.

Changing mode of electoral representation is another dimension for such kind of demand. We have created distinct political class and they are not accountable to the people emerged as a very influential class. They could accommodate all the resources for their own interest without responding to the common tribal people. However, once the government wants to resolve the perpetual problem by forming autonomous self governing bodies like BAC and BTC must with an aim to providing

maximum autonomy to them. State has to play a very important role for the development of these people and for their autonomy. In this context, Ranabir Samaddar's argument for the 'right size, right territory and right people' is very important for the reorganization process.

The genesis of ethnic nationalism in Assam is the outcome not merely of the failure of the federal polity, but also the inability of the Indian State to provide genuine political and constitutional solutions to these vexed problems. Autonomy exercised by an ethnic community in an ethnically plural context especially calls for a kind of conciliatory accommodation that is contrary to the militant mentality. This is what makes the institutional problem of sustaining autonomy so complex and challenging in Assam. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a framework of democratic and federal centre with provision for adequate autonomy and decentralization and to allow the ethnic minorities with opportunities of participation in the regional and national.

Government policies are also not adequate to accommodate these vexed issues. Government makes policies aimed to general and specific issues. General policies should aim towards the country as a whole and specific policies should target specific ethnic issues and groups. Government has to look at how issues has changed and evolved over time and has to interact with these and should include in policy settings, policy parameters and considering policy areas. Apart from these, we need a strong constitutional base.

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