

THE BODOS

EMERGENCE AND ASSERTION
OF AN ETHNIC MINORITY



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SUJIT CHOUDHURY

The term Bodo has been used by the older generation of scholars to denote the earliest Indo-Mongoloid migrants to eastern India who subsequently spread over different regions of Bengal, Assam and Tripura. But recent developments make it imperative to redefine the term Bodo and its wider denotation deserves to be abandoned in recognition of the emerging socio-political vocabulary; the Bodo means the plain tribes of western and northern Assam known earlier as the Bodo-Kacharis. In this monograph also the term Bodo is used in this new sense, meaning the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley. Only that aspect of Bodo history has been considered in this study which can be traced on the basis of evidences, direct or indirect, and at the same time which is capable of throwing some light on the complex process of formation of the Assamese nationality *vis-à-vis* the evolution of Bodo society. This monograph is an attempt to trace different phases of history through which the Bodos emerged as the most dominant ethnic minority of Assam.

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Introduction

The term 'Bodo' is being used in more than one sense in academic discourses as well as in political deliberations and it is imperative to spell out at the very outset the precise meaning in which the term has been used in this study.

The older generation of scholars used the term 'Bodo' to denote the earliest Indo-Mongoloid migrants to eastern India who subsequently spread over different regions of Bengal, Assam and Tripura. Grierson identifies the Bodos as a section of the Assam-Burma group of the Tibet-Burman speakers belonging to the Sino-Tibetan speech family.¹ S.K. Chatterjee subscribes to the same view. According to him these people migrated to eastern India in the second millennium B.C. and a large portion of them was absorbed within societies of plains-man at quite an early state.² Isolation caused fragmentation of the original stock and ultimately the branches assumed independent tribal identities like the Tipra, the Bodo-Kachari, the Rabha, the Dimsasa, the Chutiya etc. Rev. Sydney Endle, in his monograph, *The Kacharis*, used 'the Kachari' in the same wider sense incorporating all these branches.

In present day socio-political terminology 'the Bodo' means the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley known earlier as 'the Bodo-Kachari'. The media at the regional and national level; officials at the Centre and the state political parties of all hues and the people in general have accepted what may be termed as the contraction of the original denotation. In the light of this situation, in this study also the term 'Bodo' has been used in the new sense, meaning the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Rev. Endle identifies trans-Himalayan region between Tibet and China as the original home of the Bodos.⁶ S.K. Chatterjee is more specific when he suggests that 'the north-western China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-Tsze Kiang rivers was the early home of the Proto-Bodos who migrated to eastern India in waves

between the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium A.D. There are also other theories which we need not go into since the determination of the original home of the Bodos does not have any direct bearing on our study.⁸ However, for our purpose, it is necessary to remember that scholars like Edward Gait,⁹ J.D. Anderson¹⁰ and K.L. Barua¹¹ hold the Bodos as the autochthons of the Brahmaputra Valley. At present, they are concentrated mainly in the districts of Kamrupa, Goalpara, Darrang and Nagaon of the Brahmaputra Valley. According to the Census of 1971 the Bodo population of Assam was 6,10,450 in 1971.¹² Amalendu Guha, on the basis of the Census of 1881 thinks that in the late nineteenth century the Bodos formed one third of the indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley.¹³ The Bodos of today speak a language of Tibeto-Burman origin, have an indigenous religion called 'Bathau' religion and lead a distinct way of life.

II

During the early decades following independence a general feeling was current in the Brahmaputra Valley that the Bodos were gradually coming closer to the mainstream of the Assamese society and the possibility of their assimilation with the Assamese nationality was projected as an inevitable historical destiny.¹⁴ The Census of 1961 depicts 93.63 per cent Bodos as Hindus and this gave the illusion that the Bodos had already become a part of the local Hindu milieu. Also, the Census of 1951 and 1961 show an unusual decline in the growth rate of the Bodos. This was ascribed to willingness of the Bodos to register themselves as Assamese speakers. It was also argued that the adaptation of language was nothing but the natural corollary to the process of social absorption that had preceded the linguistic assimilation.¹⁵

The developments of the last three decades have proved beyond all doubt that these speculations were wishful thinking. As early as 1967 the Plain Tribals' Council of Assam in its memorandum submitted to the President of India made it clear that the Bodos were neither eager to involve themselves in the process of Hinduisation nor in the process of Assamisation. The memorandum inter alia, says:

Language spoken by the Bodo group of plain tribals belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group and widely differs from the Assamese language which is one of the modern Indo-Aryan languages. Though few of them speak partly Assamese, most of them speak their mother tongue and the village folk, particularly the women folk, do not at all understand the Assamese language.¹⁶

The Bodo group of the plain tribals of Assam practices different religions: some of them are Hindus, some Christians while some others profess tribal religion. The caste system and untouchability are foreign to them.

This memorandum marks the beginning of the demand for autonomy of the Bodos, though the quantum of autonomy to be enjoyed was kept undefined in 1967. In 1985, United Tribal Nationals' Liberation Front made a specific demand for creation of a union territory for the Bodos. In 1987, All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) entered the scene with the same demand but its assertion has been more vigorous and at times violent. ABSU, in its memorandum submitted to the Centre on November 10, 1987, expresses its bitter feelings in the following words:

The Assamese people are following the policy of expansionism and imperialism to capture and dominate all corners of Assam including the tribal areas. In fact, they have a plot to conquer all tribal areas and dominate them everywhere under their feet. That is why they are deeprooting Assamese colonialism in tribal areas. The Assamese people do not want to agree or recognize the existence and pre-dominance of tribal people in their majority areas too. The process of engulfment and silent aggression over the tribals by the Assamese people is still continuing.

The Assamese people have no political toleration. They cannot tolerate the existence of tribal communities and other democratic organizations who oppose the policies Assamisation and Assimilation.

The Assamese people, the Assam government and the administration consider the Bodos as the number one enemy for demanding a separate state.

From these lengthy extracts the reader may have a glimpse of the Bodo mind as it has been moulded since the sixties of the last century. Whether these allegations are based on genuine grounds or not is a different question but the fact remains that these are the manifestations of the Bodo's perception of the present day situation. It is clear that the process which the Assamese intellectuals once visualized as the formation of a composite and greater Assamese nationality has been halted with no sign of redemption.

III

The state of Assam is known for different varieties of ethnic tension and most of the hill tribes whose territories were incorporated within the political boundary of Assam in 1947 have opted out of state to form their own autonomous units. Thus, apparently, the aspiration of the Bodos may give the idea that it is nothing but a belated endeavour of another tribe to join the rank of their more fortunate counterparts. But the situation is not that simple, because, as pointed out by Homen Bargohain, the Bodo phenomenon is essentially linked with the process of formation of the Assamese nationality and their position cannot be treated at par with the hill tribes of the erstwhile composite Assam.¹⁷

It is to be noted that in one significant aspect, the Bodos differ not only from the hill tribes of Assam, but also from most of the tribals of the country. Tribal habitations of the country are generally confined to the hills or to the forest zones and this remoteness normally accounts for the isolation of the tribes from the mainstream population of different regions. The case is not the same with the Bodos. The major chunk of the Bodo population lives in the plains of the Brahma-putra Valley and that is why they are designated as 'plains tribe'. In other words, the Bodos share the heartland of Assam with the Assamese. As the Bodos are the autochthons of the region, it can be assumed and the assumption is backed by evidences that they have been living side by side with the mainstream population since the germination of the Assamese nationality. Evidently, in spite of this age-old and continuous association with the Assamese, who form the majority as well as the most advanced section of the population, the Bodos are not assimilated within its fold. The significance of this phenomenon can be understood better if we keep in mind that the Assamese is perhaps the lone major linguistic community of the country whose heartland itself is dotted with innumerable tribal pockets. In these diasporas the Bodos and other minor plains tribes live with their distinct culture, way of life and language depriving thereby the Assamese majority of a unilingual and unicultural geographical territory. Amalendu Guha says that

the Assamese nationality is still halfway in the process of its formation.¹⁸ No doubt the exclusion of the Bodos is one of the symptoms of this incomplete formation.

We cannot find a simple answer to the question as to why the Bodos were not incorporated within the Assamese society through the normal course of history. As we shall see later, historians are unanimous in their assertion that there was a prolonged phase in the early history of the country when mobility from tribe to caste based mainstream society was in operation in a slow but steady and decisive manner. Apparently, the Bodos, because of their uninterrupted proximity to the mainstream society, were potentially suitable for such absorption. But this did not happen, and thus, in a sense, history failed them.

IV

Whether history as a general rule repeats itself or not is a debatable proposition, but in the case of Assam this early failure is not a singular phenomenon; in fact the processes of assimilation and absorption have suffered successive setbacks throughout the course of history. The Bodo phenomenon is essentially linked with this failure and hence, though the assertion of the Bodos is a recent development, their existence as a distinct ethnic group has a history of more than two thousand years. It is almost impossible to trace and reconstruct the history of a people who do not have a written tradition and whose participation in the mainstream history is only marginal. On the other hand, it is well nigh impossible to comprehend the Bodo phenomenon if the tribes' peculiar isolation is not assessed and analyzed in the context and perspective of history.

Reconciliation between this objective deterrent and subjective need is hard to achieve. This study thus opts for the safest course open, i.e., to deal with only that aspect of the Bodo history which can be traced on the basis of evidences, direct or indirect, and at the same time which is capable of throwing some light on the complex process of formation of the Assamese nationality *vis-à-vis* the evolution of the Bodo society. There are constraints and hindrances in attaining this limited objective as well, but we depend on the

assertion of E.H. Carr that 'the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present' and hope to draw from the present circumstances, relevant facts and data which are capable of enlightening us on the darker phase of the past.

The vigorous assertion of the Bodos is a recent development and as such there is no paucity of data for dealing with the present day Bodo problem. Here we are confronted with a different kind of problem which may be termed as a problem of methodology. The problem of the Bodos is a complex and hazardous one and a scientific investigation into it becomes difficult because:

1. The overall milieu, of which the Bodo society is a constituent, itself represents a confusing picture. The different ethnic groups, big and small, with which the Bodo transacts are all living under a perpetual shade of uncertainty and instability. This is true even of the Assamese society supposed to be the ruling dominant majority of the state. So there are innumerable variables emerging now and then and dying out in the same fashion.
2. External factors apart, the Bodo society even within itself has become a complex one. There are different layers of material and psychological factors operating simultaneously within the community. Tribal traits exist at the grassroot level but the core group that speaks on behalf of the community is quite articulate and individualistic. Perception of community interest thus differs. Inter-generational as well as intra-generational gaps are there giving rise to value conflicts.
3. On the other hand, the Assamese society, whose dominance the Bodo resents, is also not a homogenous one. It is divided into segments and each segment approaches the Bodo problem from its own sectarian interest which may not be in conformity with the interest of the core Assamese society and at times such sectarian stance may even endanger the interest of the majority segments of the Assamese society. Such role-conflicts and role-adjustments of very temporary nature make identification and classification of friends and foes-difficult.
4. On the whole, the socio-political situation of Assam does not manifest a 'unity' and discordant or incompatible role-

expectations always add tension to a scenario that is already fragmented.

It is apparent that available frameworks with their rigid formulations are not capable of getting at the bottom of this complex reality. Not that the situation is unique. Social scientists are always confronted with this problem while dealing with Indian society. Bernard S. Cohn is forthright when he says:

The comments I have made on the problem of conceptualization of Indian society, which derive from the categories of foreign observers and administrators, point not just to the need for new source materials but for new ways of handling the source materials ... Social science is not a unitary methodology nor it is easily packagable. Social science can sensitize the historian to new problem, free him somewhat from a narrative framework in the writing of history. It can also equip him with tools of analysis. But in order to rise above a simplistic obsession with one technique or another, or one school or another of analysis, he must to some extent experience through direct participation in research the limits as well as advantages of his chosen aspect of social science ... The social scientists have thus far been hampered by their assumption that the course of change in the world would follow western experience and have not dealt with change as a phenomenon which takes place through time.¹⁹

F.G. Bailey, while dealing with social situation of rural Orissa, finds the situation more confusing and ultimately decides to break the barrier of broad disciplines of social sciences. His monograph concludes with the following:

The chief parts of this book appear to be integrated with one another in a far from satisfactory way. The first resembles social anthropology, the second looks like political sciences, and the third part might have been written by a somewhat hasty historian with sociological leanings.²⁰

Notwithstanding this humble admission, the success Bailey achieved in the treatment of his subject is spectacular. However, what is important for us is that Bailey justifies his failure to stick to a rigid framework because "Orissa is not a unity". What is true to rural Orissa is more true to Assamese as we have already seen. So, a particular framework with stereotype hypothesis and formulation may not be helpful in dealing with the subject we are concerned with here. We think it preferable under the circumstances to keep an open mind so that rigidity of the framework does not stand in the way of appreciation of the reality.

NOTES

1. C.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, Part II, pp. 1-17, Reprint, New Delhi, 1967.
2. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana Kriti*, Calcutta, 1950, p. 28, "But at the present moment, except where some islands of Bodo speech still remain, the Kirata Bodos have merged into the Bengali and Assamese speaking masses, Hindu as well as Musalman, in the area".
3. Rev. Sydney Endle, *The Kacharis*, Reprint, New Delhi, 1975, p. 5.
4. Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, p. 27
5. R.N. Mosehary, an ideologue of the Bodo-Kacharis, suggests in 1983 the use of the term 'Bodo' to mean the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley and thereby retention of the generic term 'Bodo' with its old earlier denotation. See 'The Boros: Their Origin, Migration and Settlement in Assam' by R.N. Mosahary in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Fourth Session, 1983, published from Shillong, 1984. However, it is apparent that his suggestion, backed by some sound arguments, was not accepted by the Bodo Kachari leadership.
6. Rev. Endle, *op.cit.*, p. 3.
7. Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-27
8. See C.C. Sanyal, *The Meches and the Totos of North Bengal*, North Bengal University, Siliguri, 1973, p. 2, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. XIX, 1908, p. 224.
9. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 229.
10. Introduction of S. Endle's monograph *The Kacharis* by J.D. Anderson.
11. K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamrupa, Gauhati*, 1966, p. 14.
12. The accuracy of this figure is being contested by different Bodo organizations.
13. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 21.
14. Most of the newspapers of the Brahmaputra Valley foresaw such destiny of the plain tribals of Assam in the fifties, also see *Assam Assembly Proceedings*, 1948, pp. 518-82.
15. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in its memorandum submitted to the State's Reorganization Commission in 1955 put forward this argument.
16. The memorandum submitted to the President of India by the Plain Tribals' Council of Assam, dated Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967.
17. Homen Borgohain, Bahiragata Samsya, *Weekly Nagarik (Assamese)*, July 5, 1973.
18. *Proceedings of North East Indian History Association*, 1989, p. 7.
19. Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 197-98.
20. F. G. Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, Delhi, 1968, p. 221.