TRIBAL DISCONTENTS IN ASSAM- A BRIEF STUDY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC MOVEMENT BY BODO TRIBE

Bapukan Saikia
Research scholar
Department of Political Science
Assam University, Silchar
Assam, India
Abstract

After globalization the sense of ethnicity is rising. Ethnicity emerged as a political movement and ethnic identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has become a strong force to attain socio-political and economic gains by the groups. Autonomy has become one of the major concerns of our social and political existence. In Northeast India, there are many demands for separate states by different groups. Assam is specially known for its diversity. It has different national, ethnic, religious and tribal group living together in this region for centuries. While some of these tribes are entirely assimilated into the Assamese culture, there are others who are determined to maintain their unique identity. Now, once again, the threat of further reduction of the size and reorganisation has sharpened in the wake of new movements launched by various tribal groups both in the plains and the hills after the Asam Gana Parishad has come to power. Bodo movement of Assam started as a socio cultural movement but later on emerged as the socio economic movement of the Bodo tribe.

Keywords: Autonomy, Ethnicity, Identity, Movement, Re-organisation.
Introduction:

Today, social movements are increasingly beginning to influence the direction of society and history. What is important for us to note here is that a social movement is no longer regarded merely as movement or social or political action of a group or collectivity, or as simple protest or dissent action, but is increasingly being viewed as an active agent and motivator of social change and transformation.\(^1\) After globalization the sense of ethnicity is rising. Ethnicity emerged as a political movement and ethnic identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has become a strong force to attain socio-political and economic gains by the groups. Apurba Baruah, also writing on the same problem, places it within the broad framework of movements for identity: “The movements of various communities to assert and protect their, what is commonly called, ‘ethnic’ identity, are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India’s North East”\(^2\) (A. Baruah 2005: 17). Autonomy has become one of the major concerns of our social and political existence. In Northeast India, there are many demands for separate states by different groups. Assam is specially known for its diversity. It has different national, ethnic, religious and tribal group living together in this region for centuries. While some of these tribes are entirely assimilated into the Assamese culture, there are others who are determined to maintain their unique identity.

Since independence, Assam has been experiencing several movements; peaceful, violent and a combination of both. As a result of these movements, Assam has experienced reorganisations several times leading to the drastic reduction in size. Now, once again, the threat of further reduction of the size and reorganisation has sharpened in the wake of new movements launched

\(^1\) Hussain, Monirul (1993) The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity, MANAK PUBLICATIONS PVT. LTD.
by various tribal groups both in the plains and the hills after the Asam Gana Parishad has come to power.²

**Objective of the study:**

The main objectives of this paper are-

I. To study the reason behind tribal discontents in Assam.

II. To study the causes of Bodo movement.

**Methodology of the study:**

All the data and information used in this paper is collected from the secondary sources like various papers published in Journals, reports, books etc.

**Tribal movements in Assam:**

Assam is one of the most backward states of the Indian Union. The state society is severely affected by insurgency, economic backwardness ethnic movements and unabated foreign influx. Democracy is also severely injured here due to gross negligence of the center and inefficiency of the state government.

At the advent of independence, the Asamiyas became the single largest group both numerically and politically in Assam. On the other hand, as a result of independence, the Bengalis lost their


size in numbers while the Muslims lost their political relevance and suffered frustration. The
tribal groups both in the hills and in the plains remaind backward. Besides, the non-caste groups
like Ahoms and the Koch-Rajbongshis also remaind backward. In such circumstances, the
middle class emerged as a most single dominant class in Assam. It would be important to note
that this newly emerged Asamiyas middle class composed of caste Hindu Asamiyas was not a
ruling class during colonial period; but it become the most dominant class in Assam by
consolidating its position over other ethnic group, it was able to exert its uninterrupted hegemony
over the society of Assam.\(^3\)

The autonomy movement by the tribals in Assam is not the product of a single factor. It is, rather
an outcome of different factor. Some of these are-

**Historical Factor:** Historically the tribals are the earliest community to migrate to this land.
Therefore, tribals regarded themselves as the aborigin of Assam and the other communities
have no right to prevent the tribals from getting autonomy.

**Economic Factor:** Economically the tribal people are the backward people. Agriculture is
still a primary sector for the tribals. But there is no such remarkable effort on the part of the
government for the development of the tribal people.

**Six schedule of the constitution:** During the time of framing of the constitution the six
schedule of the constitution was framed to provide autonomy for the tribes of North-east.
This also responsible for the emergence of different tribal autonomy movement.

**Emergence of a pretty middle class in tribal societies:** This class realized that unless and
until the tribals are provided with greater autonomy within a separate political arrangement, it
would be difficult to upgrade the tribal people.

**Sense of Relative Deprivation:** The tribal people think that they are not equal with the
advanced Assamese people in the field of economic, educational, cultural, job opportunity,
politics and this sense of relative deprivation among the tribals also induced them to start autonomy movement.4

In the formation of a new Northeastern region, the Indian government gave priority to the issues like- language, caste, religion, ethnic and historical backgrounds. In this process, four states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram) were separated from Assam one after another.

Bodo movement:

Assam has experienced various mass-movements which changed its ethnographic profile. Bodo movement of Assam started as a socio cultural movement but later on emerged as the socio economic movement of the Bodo tribe. The Bodos demanded a separate state independent of Assam called Udayachal.

In due course of time this movement has been developed to become socio-political movement demanding separation from Indian union. To materialize this demand, a political party namely Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed on 27th February 1967. The chief objective of this party was to demand a union territory called Udayachal to be carved out of Assam. But this demand has never been materialized as PTCA became a coalition partner in the 1978 Janata party government. The Bodoland movement has started in the real sense on 2nd March, 1987, under the leadership of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). But the state government did not accept their demand for a separate state. Consequently they resort to violent activities including abduction, bombing and killing and became a strong anti government force.

To assert their demand for greater autonomy they formed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) on November 25, 1994. Again on June 1996 Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) is formed. The granting of six schedule status to the Bodo areas enable the Bodos to exercise their rights over land. It also ensures the protection of their tradition and ethnic

4 Konwar, Narayan, Society and Politics in Assam, Bookland, 2006, pp. 94-101

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identity as well as grant them the right to self government. Eventually the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has been established as per the memorandum of settlement of February 10, 2003. BTAD consists of four districts namely Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, and Chirang with Kokrajhar as its headquarter.

**Causes of the Bodo Movement:**

The Bodo movement is not a product of single factor. There are several causes of Bodo Movement. These are as follows-

- The Bodos were against the policy of assimilation with Assamese identity. They wanted to preserve their distinct language and culture. They wanted due recognition of their distinct identity. But the state government had failed to accommodate the Bodos properly.

- The separatist movements in Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram etc. also inspire the Bodos to demand for a separate state based on their right of self determination and distinct identity.

- Again, the Bodos were economically deprived for a long period of time. They were not so developed as a community. But the problem started when they had to live with a comparatively advanced group of people under a common political system. They are not able to march together. As a result they lagged behind. Moreover, the economic exploitation by the non-tribal also gave momentum to the movement.

- The then chief minister Sir Muhammad Sadulla introduced a new development scheme in Assam according to which the waste lands were to be divided into blocks and allotted to different communities including the immigrants. Consequently, the local people started occupying the lands allotted to the tribals through tribal belts. It has given impetus to the movement.

- The Assam government, which according to the Bodos was not the government of people of Assam but the government of Assamese people, was very repressive upon the tribal people. The then ruling party AGP was elected out of Assamese chauvinist
way. The Bodos took it as a threat to their identity. Their demands for justice and constitutional and legitimate rights met with brutal police atrocities and tortures.⁵

Conclusion:

The root of this movement for an autonomous state lies in the severe economic backwardness of the tribal areas in an economically backward Indian state. The tribals of Assam are economically the most backward segment of the state. The movement for an autonomous state fundamentally reflects their economic and political frustration.⁶

It is perhaps due to the feeling of alienation among the tribals that we find ourselves today in the present atmosphere of violence and extremism as the tribals are today refusing to let themselves be taken for granted. The autonomous districts in Assam, formed under the auspices of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, are a showpiece for the State’s capacity to address indigenous ethnic aspirations in the Northeast. A solution can only be feasible if the Central and State governments take a pro-active and sincere approach towards solving the genuine problem faced by the tribals of the State. Giving the groups their due share in the development of the state, and recognition to their culture, traditions, language etc is an urgent need. Nation building is not possible without recognizing the specificities of each component.

⁵ “Government and Politics in North-East India”, Paper-xii, Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University
Bibliography:

- Government and Politics in North-East India”, Paper-xii, Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University