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CONTENDING PULLS OF NATIONALISM: EXPLORING BODO NATIONALISM IN ASSAM

Jeuty Thakur

Ph. D Research Scholar

Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi, India

Abstract:

In an era of globalisation, ideas of identity, nation and nationalism continue to hold immense significance. In India as well across the world, we find nationalism increasingly becoming a mainstay of socio-political discourses and everyday conversations.

This paper intends to argue how nationalism as an idea needs to be inclusive and accommodating in order to adequately represent the various identities that constitute its formation. This becomes increasingly important in a world where we can see resurgence of ethnic movements which attempt to claim lost and unrecognised identity and space. To make the argument, the paper takes the example of the rise of the Bodo movement in Assam which developed as a result of the failure of the wider Assamese identity to accommodate and represent the Bodo identity sufficiently. The Assamese identity, in search of its own socio-political rights, became hegemonic and excluded the other communities that were a part of its formation. Assam also is an apt example of how various identity assertions keep arising in search for rights and recognition in a multi-ethnic state. The author argues that identity is a fluid concept and only a nationalism that includes all sections of its population in its imagination can help facilitate a harmonious coexistence.

Keywords: Nationalism; Identity; Assam; Bodo Nationalism.

Introduction

In the postmodern world of the 21st century, we live in a realm of paradoxical realities. While on one hand, the world is now called a global village, on the other hand, nations continue to remain the most dominant authority worldwide. While globalisation is said to have made the ideas of borders and identities fluid, the recent times have also shown resurgence in the significance of borders, nations, nationalism and identities.

In this paper, an attempt is being made to look at the complexities of identity and how a strong, hegemonic form of nationalism can alienate other identities that are also part of the larger identity formation. To elucidate the argument, we would explore the rise and development of Bodo nationalism in Assam and discuss the various factors that led to its identity formation over the course of history. The paper also looks at the Bodo movement and the various attempts to resolve the conflict over time by the government and the organisations involved.

Understanding Nationalism Today

Many thinkers and social scientists have defined nation and nationalism as an artefact of modernity, as an ideology which developed with the emergence of the modern world. Eric. J. Hobsbawm argues that the nation is “not a primary or unchanging social entity. It belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period. It is a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the ‘nation-state’” (Hobsbawm 1990: 9-10). Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation as ‘an imagined political community’. He further says that a nation is:

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations... It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical, dynastic realm... Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived and a deep, horizontal comradeship (1991: 6-7).

Identity is a fluid concept which is in a constant process of making and unmaking. In a society where many identities coexist, a nationalism that prioritises certain identities at the cost of the others eventually ends up distancing the many other communities that exist within the same socio-political formation. In contemporary India, the idea of nationalism has gained renewed currency. A whole discourse has developed around what is nationalism and who is a national and an anti-national. Standing up in movie halls for the



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National anthem, cheering for the national cricket team and supporting the ruling government of the day are considered visible proofs of true nationalism. In such an environment, it becomes necessary to reiterate the importance of a nationalism that is inclusive and accommodating in its imagination and takes all sections of the society together with it. Such an encompassing idea of nationalism becomes important in a nation where different identities coexist. From the Aryans to the Dravidians to the Mongoloids, India is a beautiful conglomeration of many communities that make it the unique subcontinent that it is.

The north eastern state of Assam in India is a multi-ethnic society, home to many indigenous communities and people who have migrated to the region at different periods in history. A nationalism that is not inclusive in its imagination and ideological articulations runs the risk of alienating the other identities that constitute its formation. To give an example of a hegemonic, aggressive form of nationalist discourse, I would like to bring in the Assam Movement (1979-1985) which eventually led to the alienation of the other identities that were initially a part of the movement. The Assam Movement was a six-year long agitation in Assam which was primarily focused on the issue of illegal immigration. Migration has been a long-term concern in the state and the protest against illegal immigration had brought together many different communities in Assam. However, over a period of the agitation and even after the protestors formed the government, it was increasingly noticed how the members of the Hindu-Assamese identity had hijacked the movement and the whole narrative only to their own benefit, thus distancing many indigenous communities, including the Bodos. While speaking to many Bodos, they expressed how many of them who had wholeheartedly participated in the Assam Movement and called themselves Assamese as well as Bodos, slowly distanced themselves from the larger Assamese identity. It was in fact the big brother attitude of Assamese leaders that led to this unfortunate distancing. The Assamese identity, in its struggle to protect to safeguard its own culture and socio-political rights, became so exclusive that other communities were no longer adequately accommodated in its formation.

Introducing the Bodos

The Bodos are an indigenous community and one of the earliest known autochthons of Assam belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. They are the largest plains tribes of Assam, comprising 40.9 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe population of Assam (Goswami 2014: 19-20). They exercised sovereignty and ruled over Assam until around 1825 A.D., and today are settled in the northern areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, mainly in Kokrajhar, Darrang, Goalpara and Kamrup districts. They are mainly a patriarchal society, and follow Bathauism, a form of animism, although over time some have accepted Christianity and others have embraced Hinduism. The Bodos are mostly farmers and land is their major economic resource. Earlier, jhumming (shifting cultivation) was the norm but today they practice settled cultivation, with both men and women working in the fields (George 1994: 879). The Bodos were also involved in the national freedom struggle since 1919 (Banerjee & Roy, 2010: 12).

The Development of Bodo Nationalism

The development and assertion of Bodo nationalism is related to questions of socio-cultural, economic and political significance. Bodo demands for community rights were expressed as early as 1929 when a memorandum was submitted to the Simon Commission at Shillong, urging upon the government for the protection of the ethnic and political rights of the Bodos (Banerjee & Roy 2010: 120). After independence in 1947, the trajectory of Bodo nationalism charted a distinct course of development. A major disappointment occurred for the Bodos in 1948 when the Bordoloi Committee mandated by the Constituent Assembly decided that, unlike the Nagas and other hill tribes, communities like the Bodos did not need any special protection as they were part of the larger Assamese identity. This decision left the Bodos without any special rights and privileges to protect their culture and identity (Hazarika 1994:154). According to Misra, the denial of the Sixth Scheduled status for the Bodos, which would have given them constitutional protection when they needed it most to protect their land and identity, is one of the main reasons for their alienation (Misra 2012).

Like all communities, language has been one of the major symbols of identity assertion for the Bodos. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a literary organisation was formed on 16th November, 1952 at Kokrajhar. The first major step that the Bodo Sahitya Sabha took was its movement demanding introduction of Bodo language as medium of instruction in the schools in the Bodo majority areas in Assam. Though the main activities of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha were to develop and promote Bodo language and literature, later on it also participated in agitational politics (Roy 1995: 58-59). The Bodos protested vehemently against the Official Languages Act of 1960, which sought to impose the Assamese language upon all communities of Assam. They accused the government of conducting a deliberate policy of Assamisation through an imposition of Assamese language and culture upon the tribals undemocratically and argued that such a move violates the pluralism of multi-ethnic Assam (Dutta 1993: 222-225). The All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed on 15th February, 1967 and it has ever since remained a frontrunner in all agitational movements undertaken by the Bodos (Roy 1995: 59). In 1974, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched an agitation demanding the adoption of the Roman script for the Bodo language (Prabhakara 1974). Many Bodos, especially of the younger generation, now speak only Bodo and prefer not to speak in Assamese. There



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is also a growing preference for Bodo names for people and places. Not being able to communicate in the same language has obviously become a powerful marker by which Bodos today differentiate themselves from the ethnic Assamese (Baruah 1999: 185-86).

A memorandum of the ABSU¹ articulates the Bodo position crisply. Taking on the argument often made in support of Assamese that it essential to have Assamese as a link language in the interest of Assam's integrity, the memorandum asks, 'Why don't the Assamese people read, speak and accept Bodo as a link language in the interest of the integrity of Assam? After all, the language of the Bodos is the most aboriginal and widespread in Assam' (cf. Baruah 1999: 186). Dress is another social marker through which the Bodos assert their identity; the women wear the dokhona instead of the Assamese mekhela-chador or the Indian sari and the men use the traditional Bodo scarf, the Arunai (ibid.: 187-88).

In 1967, the Bodo leadership formed a political party called the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) which made the first demand for a separate state called Udayachal to be carved out of Assam. They argued that a large section of the Bodo peasants had been squeezed out of their land and they also resented the process of Assamisation which, in a way, diluted their own identity and cultural heritage. Moreover, Bodo-inhabited areas had been badly neglected during the successive Congress governments and the growth of literacy and education among the plains tribes was negligible. The handful of Bodo youth who received higher education had great difficulty in getting good jobs where the competition with the politically powerful caste-Hindu Assamese left them feeling frustrated and discriminated against (Gohain 1989: 1377).

However, it was the Assam movement which drastically increased the sense of alienation of the Bodos from the Assamese and drove them to launch a movement demanding a separate state called Bodoland in 1987. Assamese chauvinism and the big-brother attitude towards the tribes were hugely responsible for this distancing. The Bodos resented the supercilious and arrogant attitude of the Assamese bureaucrats and politicians who had a 'we know better than you' attitude and treated the tribes with disdain (Hazarika 1994: 152). M. S. Prabhakara is particularly sensitive to the unequal terms on which the Bodos were historically assimilated into the Assamese formation. It is this inequality that has led Bodo activists today to repudiate the process and to assert the distinctiveness and equality of the Bodos vis-a-vis the Assamese. Prabhakara wrote that it is doubtful that Bodos were really considered a part of Assamese society 'while they remained Bodos'. Their acceptance into Assamese society was dependent on their acceptance of Hinduism, which also meant, in course of a few generations, the loss of native speech and the adoption of the Assamese language (Prabhakara 1974 cf. Baruah 1999). Those who stayed outside the Hindu caste order remained "Kacharis, a term which, at least in private conversations among caste-Hindu Assamese, continues to have its traditional pejorative connotation" (ibid.). Although the Bodos had initially supported the Assam movement, gradually they started distancing themselves from the movement due to its hegemonic Assamese leadership. The final rift occurred with the signing of the Assam Accord and the Bodo leaders objected to two important clauses in the Accord. Clause 6 of the Accord promised to safeguard the cultural identity of the 'Assamese people'. The Bodos were apprehensive that such a clause will lead to the hegemonic imposition of the Assamese identity on Bodos. Similarly, clause 10 which promised evictions from protected public land, was objected to by the Bodos as it might lead to the eviction of some Bodos as well (Baruah 1999; Roy 1995). Moreover, the non-inclusion of the Bodos and other communities in the process of the formation of the Assam Accord led to deep resentment among the Bodos. According to Baruah, the student leaders of the Assam movement, who became the leaders of the AGP, got caught in their own rhetoric and failed to recognise that Assameseness itself is a contested formation. In failing to select sufficiently inclusionary historical and cultural symbols, and in being insufficiently sensitive to the human impact of their policy demands – as applied to 'foreigners' and 'indigenous' peoples alike – contributed to the demands of separation among the Bodos (Baruah 1999: 175).

The Bodo Movement

The Bodo movement took place in two phases: the first phase lasted between 1987 and 1993, when a settlement was proposed by the Assam government in the form of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Act; and the second phase started with the failure of the initial settlement in 1993, lasting till 2003 (Goswami 2014: 7-8). On 2nd March, 1987, the ABSU, under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma² launched a movement demand the creation of a full-fledged state of Bodoland. They demanded that the territory of Assam be divided into half, with the north bank of the Brahmaputra being given to the Bodos as their exclusive homeland. Their rallying cry at this stage of the movement was 'Divide Assam fifty-fifty' (Goswami 2014: 7-8). The two strategically located Bodo-inhabited districts – Kokrajhar and Darrang – became the nerve centres of the movement. When ABSU launched the movement, it released a list of 92 demands, but over time these essentially centred around three major political issues: formation of a separate state on the northern bank of Brahmaputra; establishment of autonomous district councils in the tribal dominant areas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra; and incorporation of the Bodos of Karbi Anglong in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (George 1994: 880).

¹ ABSU. 1987. Why Separate State? Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students Union.

² Upendranath Brahma was popularly known as *Bodofa*, i.e, father of the Bodos.



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Despite its stated non-violent nature, the movement turned violent at places against the Assamese and other non-Bodo communities (Goswami 2014: 8-9). Most phases were marked by prolonged periods of bandhs, disrupting the rail and road links of Assam and the rest of the north-eastern region. There was loss of property worth millions of rupees and normal life in these hitherto peaceful areas was severely hit (George 1994: 883). Many authors have observed the remarkable similarities between the Assam movement and the Bodo movement in terms of the techniques of political mobilisation. According to Monirul Hussain, sociologically speaking, the leadership of the Assam movement had become their reference group (Hussain 1987: 1332). The former AASU leaders were now ironically at the receiving end of the Bodo agitation as they held positions of power in the AGP government. The government came down heavily on the agitators, ruling out any need to form a separate Bodoland state to ameliorate the grievances of the plain's tribes. It also sought to drive a wedge between the Bodos and other tribes by avowing the need to protect the interests of all tribals in the state, the Bodo-dominant movement notwithstanding (George 1994: 884).

The Bodo Accord: Various Political Attempts of Reconciliation

The six-year long Bodo agitation formally came to an end on February 20, 1993 when the Bodo Accord was signed between the Assam government and the movement leaders. The Accord provides for a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), which falls well short of the demand for a full-fledged state (George, 1994:887). According to Prabhakara, the powers and potentialities of the envisaged BAC fell far short of the expectations of the movement leaders. With no political or financial authority, the word 'political' finds no mention in the Bodo Accord (Prabhakara 2002). The preamble of the accord clearly states that what is envisaged is an administrative institution within the state of Assam with the authority to provide maximum autonomy to the Bodos for the social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement (George 1994: 888-89). The BAC was formally created on 17th December, 1993; however, most Bodo leaders rejected it, terming it undemocratic and anti-Bodo (ibid.: 890).

Under the leadership of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the second phase of the Bodo movement began and it ushered in a period of large-scale violence and militancy. They blew up trains and bridges, causing gruesome loss of lives and property. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) also emerged as a major militant organisation determined to fight an insurgent movement for the creation of the state of Bodoland. The NDFB indulged in systematic extortion of the tea industry and other businesses in the Bodo area, shifted major bases to Bhutan and resorted to selective assassination of rivals within the community (Bhaumik 2009: 125). The NDFB also went about its programme of ethnic cleansing. The Assam government was refusing to give the proposed Bodoland Territorial Council possession of 2,570 villages because it claimed there Bodos were less than 50 per cent of the population. In order to create a Bodo majority in areas lacking one, the NDFB unleashed a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing, targeting one non-Bodo community after another. The worst of these campaigns led to the death of hundreds of Adivasis belonging to the Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribes during the 1996 elections (ibid.: 125-26). Finally, to settle the armed conflict, the state drew up the second Bodo Accord, known as the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) 2003, which gave enormous legislative, financial and executive powers to the Bodo leadership. Flushed with funds that the state government had no control over except in their disbursal, the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) was envisaged as having powers equivalent to a state, with only the actual status of being one denied to it (ibid.: 9-10). Today the BTAD includes four districts of Assam – Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang and Baksa.

Thus, with the establishment of BTAD, the grievances of the Bodos seemed to have been settled to a large extent. However, incidents of violence between the Bodos and the other settler communities, especially the Muslims continue to this day. There have been major bouts of ethnic violence – in 2008, 2012 and now in 2014. The worst outbreak of violence in 2012, when over 100 died and about 4.5 lakh were displaced in rioting and killing, was described as the most extensive internal displacement since Partition (Hazarika 2014). According to Misra, the current tragic situation in the BTAD is the outcome of wrong policies which have been pursued since independence, all resulting in the marginalisation of the plains tribal communities and the dispossession of their rights to land. The Bodo struggle needs to be seen as the story of resistance of a small ethnic nationality trying to preserve its identity which is so inextricably tied up with land (Misra 2012: 36-39).

Another major factor is the fact that within the BTAD, an area of 27,100 square kilometres, the Bodos constitute less than 30 per cent, with no other ethnic group having an absolute majority. Autonomy exercised by an ethnic community in an ethnically plural context calls for a kind of conciliatory accommodation (Dasgupta 1998: 203), which unfortunately has not been achieved in the region. Sanjoy Hazarika points out that the violence in the BTAD region shows how a minority of a population controls the lives and destinies of the others. (Hazarika 2014). He says that the core of the problem lies in the mobilisation of identity over land, territory and natural resources. The situation has been aggravated by the verbal violence of our politicians, the blame game and the total incapacity of the state government to deal with existing conditions (ibid.). It is an undisputed fact that much of the violence could have been prevented had the security forces promptly moved into the affected areas. But there was a clear administrative failure in the deployment of forces



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and this resulted in the total erosion of confidence on the part of the people in the administration and the resultant fear and panic in which thousands from different communities fled their homes. This partly explains the huge numbers of refugees in the camps (Misra 2012: 39). According to Kaustubh Deka (2014), the reason for the enduring political failure to prevent the violence lies in the very political-bureaucratic predispositions with which the government has been addressing the complex ethnic and security challenges in the region. With intensified inter-group competition over resources and the subsequent rise of the 'sons of the soil' doctrine, the escapist measure of the State in allowing selective elite dominance in Bodoland created conditions for future conflicts. Thus, what is urgently required at this present juncture is strong steps to prevent further alienation of tribal land and forest reserves coupled with measures to protect the constitutional rights of the other communities in the BTAD area (Misra 2012: 41)

With the BJP in power in Assam since 2016, several attempts have been made to assuage the grievances and to meet the political demands of the Bodos. Over time, there has also been a complicit realisation on the part of the Assamese mind-set that the indigenous communities of Assam need to be given the adequate space and respect within the socio-political spectrum of the state for a peaceful coexistence. On 27th January 2020, the third peace agreement, the Bodo Accord, was signed in New Delhi by the central government with representatives of the All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), the United Bodo People's Organisation (UBPO) and all four factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). The deal renamed the BTAD as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Some of the other significant agreements in the accord include rehabilitation of NDFB rebels, redrawing of BTR boundaries, and naming Bodo as the associate official language of the state. With the signing of this Accord, the ABSU agreed to suspend its demand for statehood and all the four factions of the NDFB also decided to lay down arms, which the government has hailed as a historic moment in the history of Bodoland movement. However, what such a move also brings into the fore is the concerns and apprehensions of the other communities that reside within the territory of the region, including many non-Bodo communities, like the Koch-Rajbanshis, Adivasis and immigrant Muslims, for the protection of their own rights. Moreover, Assam has autonomous councils for many indigenous communities including the Rabhas, Deoris, Misings, Tiwas, Sonowal-Kacharis and Thengal Kacharis. With the signing of the Bodo Accord, the representatives of these councils have also begun the push for upgrading the autonomous councils into territorial councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Conclusion

In a political democracy, every identity is aspiring for its own share of socio-political power and rights. In a country like India, teeming with multiple identities, every identity hopes to achieve a fair and adequate share of resources. As George Orwell (1984) had said, nationalism is 'inseparable from the desire for power'. Nationalism invariably brings in elements of political and cultural aspirations of communities. And when an identity fails to give adequate representation to all, fissures in identity occur giving birth to a spiral of sub-identities. What the rise of Bodo nationalism in Assam demonstrates is how a nationalist imagination which fails to include all identities equally leads to the growth of separate demands for identity, rights and resources. The growth of Bodo nationalism is a perfect example to understand the contending pulls of nationalism that contains multiple identities that constitute it. Nationalism can be seen as an evolving and dynamic idea which can either contract to privilege only certain identities and excluding others, or it can expand to include all identities that constitute its thriving imagination. In a 21st century world, ideas of nation and identity continue to hold significant importance globally, and an inclusive and holistic nationalism holds the promise of an equal and peaceful coexistence.

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