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UDAYACHAL MOVEMENT IN ASSAM - A CASE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL IDENTITY FOR THE BODOS

JITENDRA NARAYAN DASH

Like the Jharkhandis in Central India, the Bodos in Assam are presently agitating for their separate identity and distinct position in the national life of India. Starting as a socio-cultural and economic movement amongst the Bodo-Kachari tribe concentrated in the northern parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam,¹ this movement had the avowed goal of ameliorating cultural, economic and political status of the Bodo people.² But now it has developed into a socio-political movement demanding a separate state for the Indian Union, to be known as Udayachal.

This movement led by the militant All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and launched on March, 2, 1987, initially included 92 demands which related itself to many points of vital interests to the Bodos. Subsequently the ABSU dropped as many as 89 non-political demands from its 92-point charter of demands and resolved to discuss the creation of a separate homeland for the plains tribals of Assam only with the Centre. Adopting a resolution in this regard at the four-day annual conference in December last year the ABSU decided to press for the fulfilment of only three of its political demands. The three demands are: (1) Creation of a separate state called "Bodo land" on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, (2) Creation of a district council in the tribal dominated contiguous areas of south bank, (3) Inclusion of Bodo-Kacharies of Karbi Anglong in the sixth schedule of the Constitution.³

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With the claim of Mr. Upendra Brahma, President of the ABSU, that the ruling Asom Gana Parishad Government is not interested in solving the tribal problem, it has now decided to talk to the Centre only to solve the tangle. On one side a rumour is afloat that the Bodo movement has the blessings of the central government (Congress I) to thwart the Mahanta Government (AGP) in the state and on the other ABSU is riding rough shod in killing and terrorising the non-tribal people in the state to buttress their stand thereby driving the Mahanta Government to sheer desperation. In such a background Assam Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mohanta is already beset by dissensions within the party and large-scale antagonism, from without and he can ill-afford now to turn a deaf ear to the Bodo demand for a separate state of Udayachal.⁴

The Bodos themselves are not a single tribe but now there is a close feeling of affinity between the various tribes, which go by the name Bodo. Though a separatist movement in Assam it is a unifying movement within the Bodos themselves.⁵ Actually, the plains tribals movement comprises nine tribals including the Bodos, the Mishings, the Deoris, the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Mechs, the Hojais, the Sonwal Kacharis, and the Barmans of Cachar — the Bodos and Mishing being the most educated and advanced.

It is claimed that initially the movement had a literary bent: the Bodo Sahitya Sabha founded in 1952 aimed at uniting, the Bodo on the language issue and to work towards developing the Bodo language. It also demanded introduction of the Bodo language in schools existing in the Bodo dominated areas.⁶ Bodo as the medium of instruction at primary school level is now conceded only after a prolonged agitation in the early sixties. Later another bloody agitation had to be launched in the early seventies to secure the Roman script for the Bodo language. After much resistance and the loss of 21 lives the Assam Government agreed in 1975 on a compromise.⁷ But now the demands have reached such a simmering situation, where any attempt to suppress the agitation would mean a virtual *impasse*.

Now the question is why are violent separatist movements thrown up so often in Assam and not in other ethnically mixed areas like Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra? It is

probably because of the very fragmented structure of society in Assam, which is just changing from a self-contained agrarian economy to a semi-literate consumer society. In this situation, apparent and perceived injustice intensifies the conflict. In addition to this, there is much turmoil in Assam because its communities are just not ready for co-existence.

The Assamese themselves don't see tribals and non-tribals as having a common future. The Chief Minister, Prafulla Mahanta and Home Minister, Bhrigu Phukan, are perceived as upper caste Assamese Hindu Leaders. Hiteswar Saikia is regarded as an Ahom and central ministers of state Santosh Mohan Deb, and Biren Singh Ingety as Bengali-Kachari and tribal leaders. Binoy Basumatari, MLA, supports the Bodo's cause which PTCA stalwart Shama Brahma Choudhury, rejects. But none of them has proposed a feasible solution to the Bodo problem.⁸

Going back a little into the past history, one finds that there has been trouble in this heterogeneous state since early 1967 when the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the oldest political party for the tribals was formed in order to preserve and protect the cultural, social and political identities of the plain tribals. In 1968, the PTCA launched a campaign to boycott the general election that year particularly in the Kokrajhar Parliamentary Constituency in Assam which is the only reserved seat for tribals out of the 14 Parliamentary seats in the state. In their bid to stop candidates from filing nominations many tribals received bullet injuries at the hands of the police and were subjected to police torture. This proved to be proverbial last straw and the tribal's grievances snowballed. A map of the proposed "Udayachal" state was prepared and memoranda supporting their demands was submitted to Indira Gandhi, President, V.V. Giri and also to the Home ministry.⁹

The question really is why did the Bodos become so very radical and what really unites them? Among the several causes that might be ascribed to the unrest-oriented solidarity of the Bodos, the mythological, constitutional, cultural, economic educational and political ones seem to be more vivid and discerning. Besides, it is also felt that the PTCA did not press seriously for Bodo claims during prolonged negotiations that preceded the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971.

Mythologically it is believed, that during their 12 year's exile the Pandavas came to the North-east of India. Here Bhima, the second Pandava, married Hidimba, the demoness. Several Bodo tribes claim their descent from this marriage.¹⁰ Rajaji had once observed that the mythological facts of Ramayana and Mahabharata have more influence on the Indian mind than all the historical facts. Now it is becoming true in case of the Bodos. Ethnologically the Bodo race is spread from the Purnea district of Bihar to the far corners of Assam along the Northern bank of Brahmaputra upto Sadia in Arunachal Pradesh. The forest areas along the foot hills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh was a very difficult area in the past for civilised people to survive against weather, thick forests, mosquitoes and herds of wild elephants etc. It is here that the Bodos have lived and their heaviest concentration now is in the Kokrajhar sub-division of Goalpara district. If a separate state is ever formed Kokrajhar will be its capital. According to maps distributed by them the total population of Udayachal will be 12 lakhs out of which Bodos will be 8 lakhs.¹¹ However, according to a statement made by the Chief Minister in the Assam State Assembly the proposed state of Udayachal, as demanded by the PTCA comprises of the jurisdiction of 24 Police stations in the district of Goalpara, Kamrupa Darrang and Lakhimpur. In none of these police stations the plains tribals would be in majority. The population of the state will be around 34 lakhs out of which the plains tribals will account for about 7½ lakh people only. The scattered and sparse nature of the settlements of the Plains tribals is a big argument against it.¹² But what really inspires them, despite their scattered population is perhaps the superimposed mythology, they have belived in, over the years.

On another plain according to some sections, the most important aspect of the Bodo problem is supposed to be the "Constitutional discrimination" against them which obstructs their legitimate desire to maintain their own social, cultural, political and religious identities as opposed to those of the Assamese non-tribals.

Under the State Reorganisation Act and Art. 224(a) of the Indian Constitution, as applicable to Assam, the central government enjoys the authority to grant limited autonomy to the hill districts of Assam for the protection of the hill tribals and reten-

tion of their socio-economic and political identities. The tribal population in the Assam plains are totally excluded from the purview of Art. 244 (A).¹³

In the same vein, the sixth schedule of the Councils for each hill district, Assam included, which is to be elected by people of those districts. These powerful district councils are in charge of the land and education of the hill people and deal in local taxes to be levied on the population. The District Councils also help in preventing the influx of outsiders into the hill districts besides preserving the hill peoples' tribal tradition and culture.¹⁴

The plains tribals are once again perhaps inadvertently, left out from the ambit of the sixth schedule. The sixth schedule was amended by the Lok Sabha on November 29, 1988 with regard to Mizoram and Tripura by granting greater autonomy to the governors of these states towards the aspirations of the tribals, but not with regard to Assam. "Constitutional discrimination", as alleged by the plains tribals of Assam, is still more evident in the fifth Schedule of the Constitution which sanctions state level committees for the economic development and welfare of the tribal people all over India to be constituted, except in the case of the plains tribals of Assam. This was mainly perhaps because of the presumption that the plains tribals would ultimately undergo assimilation with the larger community in Assam. This differentiation between the hill tribals and the plains tribals (Bodos) and the consequent special provisions extended to the hill tribals is at the root of ferment among the Bodos today.

"So the plains tribals of Assam are deprived of protection to their identity in everyway", says Pranoy Musahary, Secretary of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, a Bodo, who was involved in the Bodo movement until very lately.¹⁵ Further, while the hill tribals are exempted from income tax through the offices of the district councils, the plains tribals are not.

The most significant point in this atmosphere is that, since the plains tribals are poor and backward in many fronts, they are unable to compete with their more resourceful and affluent non-tribal neighbours. Therefore, the resulting process of loss of identity of the plains tribals the Bodos is the main cause of their unrest. This realisation among the Bodos has been further accen-

tuated by the tremendous progress made by the hill tribes in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. The Mizos in the Lushai hills, the Nagas in the Naga hills and the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos in the present Meghalaya — have been able to establish their separate distinct identity. Even the tribals in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills in Assam have enjoyed limited autonomy due to the autonomous district councils. But during all earlier formulation on the north-east, the Bodos have been ignored.¹⁶

Yet another awkward situation has arisen out the ownership of land among the tribals. As matters stand, many of the tribals in the plains of Assam are totally landless to-day. This has deprived them of their sole means of livelihood, i.e., agriculture. This is particularly invidious to the tribals, since, as they rightly claim, they are the true “sons of the soil” and the oldest inhabitants of Assam. According to some, land alienation is the primary problem of the Bodos who subsist on a simple paddy-based economy. No doubt that the state Congress government had created a number of “tribal belts” and “blocks” (around 40 of them) in 1950, in which only tribals and scheduled castes can own land, but the encroachments and land grabbings still continue unabated. Due to the large number of encroachers eviction from these belts and blocks is virtually impossible today. Bodo leaders allege that besides this encroachment, the State Government has taken away as many as six lakh acres for government projects. In fact the present Capital of Dispur stands on land which once belonged to the tribals. As many as 60 per cent of the Bodos are said to be landless to-day. Thus with reduced land holdings, they are forced to enter reserve forests ultimately. But the AGP government after assuming power, passed a law legitimising the eviction of “unauthorised persons” staying in the forests and other reserved lands. As a result, the tribals were forcefully evicted, beaten mercilessly and their houses were burnt. The Bodo tribals, therefore have now taken the lead in raising their voices of protest against such inequities, charging that the AGP is actually anti-tribal and that its main target is the tribal population of Assam. The AGP’s “foreigners” issue is simply an “eyewash”, according to the tribal leaders.¹⁸

Bodo leaders today further allege that their youths who have no knowledge of Assamese do not stand any chance of gaining

employment in the state. In this context, they cite the example of an advertisement of the state secretariat published in June, 1986, for lower division clerks which insisted on knowledge of Assamese as an essential qualification. Though such requisites are no longer being mentioned in the print following protests by Bodo leaders, they complain that it is strictly followed in principle.¹⁹

Previously in February 1986, the Secondary Board of Education in Assam issued a circular making Assamese a compulsory language in all schools which incensed the Bodos and other non-Assamese communities in the State. Though it was later revoked, the Bodos did feel that this was an attempt by the "chauvinist Assamese" to dominate the tribals. In the North Kachar Hills, this issue was a vital one which prevented the AGP from grabbing power there.

To-day, the Bodo question in Assam is a multi-faceted issue covering both land alienation and socio-cultural or linguistic problems, as the main undercurrents. Following the GNLf pattern and perhaps being inspired by their success the ABSU, now demands talks with the Centre, after it allegedly received the cold shoulder from the state government.

The Bodo agitation merely highlights the failure of Indian democracy as currently practiced to meet the aspirations of small backward communities. Ruling majorities throughout the country are indifferent to their needs.²⁰ Politically powerless minority groups inevitably turn to be violent when left unheeded and uncared. The remedy therefore lies in carrying democracy to common people and letting them have their socio-cultural identity within the framework of the Constitution and providing facility for these types of infra-nationalities to grow with flower and foliage.²¹

NOTES

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2. Srivastava, V. K., "Understanding National Integration from Anthropology", *Mainstream*, Vol. XXVII No. 15, Jan 7, 1989, pp. 15-22.

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3. *The Times of India*, 24, December, 1988.
4. Bose, S., "Mahanta cannot take the Bodos' demands lightly"; *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 24, January 1989.
5. Saksena, N. S., *Terrorism: History and Facts in the world and in India*, Abhinav, New Delhi, 1985, p. 169.
6. Srivastava, V. K., *op. cit.*
7. Sonwalkar, P., "Land alienation is the main problem for Bodos", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 23 February, 1989.
8. Jyoti, J., "Devolution of Power can solve the Bodo problem", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 11 April, 1989.
9. Bose, S., *op. cit.*
10. Saksena, N. S., *Terrorism: History and Facts in the world and in India*, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170.
11. According to the 1971 Census, the Bodos numbered only 6.1 lakhs out of a total of tribal population of 16 lakhs. The Bodos however, dispute the Census figures, saying that it was done by Assamese enumerators.
12. Saksena, N. S., *op. cit.*, p. 169-170.
13. See *The Constitution of India*, Part X.
14. Bose, S., *op. cit.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Sonawalker, P., *op. cit.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 23, February, 1989.
19. Sonwalkar, P., *op. cit.*
20. Jyoti, J., *op. cit.*
21. Roy Burman, B. K., "National Integration and Strategies of Development", *Mainstream*, Vol. XX, No. 47, July 1982, pp. 20-22.