

Working Paper Series

**IDENTITY AND  
APORIA OF  
AUTONOMY:  
THE BODO  
MOVEMENT IN  
RETROSPECT**

**12**

**Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social  
Change and Development  
Guwahati : Assam**

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*Working paper 12*

# **Identity and Aporia of Autonomy**

## **The Bodo Movement in Retrospect**

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Political sociologists theorized colonialism as a system of racial domination and segregation, and the colonial state as an agency which ruled by creating differences. The differences could be marked by myriad signs and were contextual; one could displace another as the most practicable application of the rule. Of all these signs, race was, nevertheless, the most obvious mark (Bourdieu 1961: 120-144; Julian Go 2013: 49-74; Chatterjee 1999: 10-20). In the specific historical context of the North East frontier too, the colonial system not only reinvented myriad forms of racial and ethno-cultural difference and reinforced what already existed, but also placed them in a cultural-economic hierarchy, a political strategy of domination. Therefore, legitimization of the ordering to make it an integral part of everyday life of the colonial subjects became a primary concern of the colonial project in the periphery. The creation of the dichotomy between hills (“primitive and savage”) and valleys (“civilized”) was materialized through the Inner Line Regulations of 1873 and its reinforcement continued till the Government of India Act of 1935 to be followed by the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order, 1936<sup>1</sup> for implanting a diving line between hills tribes and the plains tribes on one hand and to segregate the plains tribes from their non-tribal counterparts on the other.

The colonial logic behind constructions of such socio-political and administrative divides, which decisively influenced the political imaginations of the post-colonial state (Sarmah 2018), is crucial for comprehending the political discourse of myriad ethnic/racial communities of the region as a whole. Besides violent contestation to India’s “nation building project” by the racial identities of the hills, especially by the Nagas with their demand for autonomy for safeguarding the Naga way of life followed closely by the Mizos, the political space that remained under hegemony of the upper caste Hindu Asomiya after independence too has a long history of violent political assertions of different cultural or ethnic identities<sup>2</sup>. With radicalization of their cultural political consciousness, political assertion of the Bodos for separate political space became visibly violent. The pertinent question is what contributes to the construction of subjectivity of

specific community to be politically violent? Is it due the colonial legacy of the post-colonial statist discourse making indignity a test for rights and entitlements (Baruah 2010) or an eruption of historically accumulated fury of being marginalized? With these basic questions, this essay is an attempt to understand the cultural political discourse of the racial communities of the Brahmaputra valley, characterized as plains tribes, especially of the Bodos of western Assam.

As the historicity of caste Hindu Asomiya cultural identity necessitated miscegenation of non-Aryan races, its operation liberally permitted non-Hindus to enter the caste hierarchy. The Vaishnavite movement that appeared in the religious landscape of the sixteenth century Assam preaching a more liberal form of worship than the prevailing Sakta practices gradually became a popular religious-cultural movement for the cultural means it adopted to reach the people (Gohain 2014; Neog 1965). Though immanent conflicts of power amongst the influential disciples of Sankardeva and compromise with the Brahminical hegemony by some of them resulted in splitting up of the movement into different sects or Samhatis (Sarma 1966; 2007). While the Brahma Samhati maintained practices pertaining to Brahmanic rituals, the Kaal Samhati being completely free and even critical of Shastric rituals became more acceptable for the people belonged to multiple tribes such as the Matak, Morans, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Ahoms, Kaivartas etc., most of whom were freshly Hinduized and placed low in the social hierarchy (Dutta 1996). Though the proselytized Vaishnavism unlocked the door of the Asomiya caste society for the non-Hindus, of course by performing the prescribed penances and paying fees either in cash or kind, complete absorption of the non-Hindu racial identities was prevented primarily by the position given to the convert in the enlarging caste hierarchy. Nor did the socio-religious practices ever allowed the convert to feel at home in the new milieu even after the penance (Barman 1995). With colonialism, the Christian Missionaries appeared in the scene with their modern means of proselytization targeting the non-Hinduized racial communities as well as the others marginalized by Hinduism. With proliferation of schools, the primary evangelistic agency, the valley experienced steady growth of Christian population amongst the tribes.

Alongside socio-economic as well as educational backwardness, the perceptible influences

of both Hinduization and Christianization invoked an attempt to reconstruct subjectivity of the Bodos as a distinct people. Initiated by Kalicharan Mech (subsequently known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahmachari) in the first quarter of the last century, the partially Hinduized Brahma sect (Brahma Dharma), attempted at amelioration of socio-economic conditions of the Bodos through a plethora of reforms. Glorified as Bodo renaissance, this reform movement succeeded in embracing people to its fold by unifying the Bodos by establishing different socio-economic organizations such as the Bodo Chatra Sanmilian (1919), the Bodo Mahila Sanmilian (1920), the Bodo Mahasanmilian etc. With its modest beginning in Goalpara, the reform movement was gradually expanded to reach the Bodo-Kacharis of other districts of colonial Assam on one hand also to influence the other racial identities such as Rabha, Mishing, Lalung, Deoris and Dimasas on the other. Besides addressing the religious issues, the regular conventions of the Bodo Mahasammelan provided the Bodos a new platform to discuss other pertinent issues. With a newly infused sense of identity, as evident from the 1921 census, the Bodos started identifying themselves as Brahmas.

The indispensable chapter of modern history of the Bodos with growing influences of Brahmanism also witnessed remarkable spread of education, a prerequisite for emergence of an enlightened section to politically articulate the common interests of the racial community<sup>3</sup>. Though the acceptance of the Bodos by the caste Hindu Asomiya society was conditioned by entry of the former to the fold of caste hierarchy with Asomiya language as mother tongue and the reform movement essentially contested the existing paradigm, the newly structured Brahma Dharma or Brahmanism did not entirely dislodge Assamese language from the position it had already occupied (Pathak 2010). For spread of education, the movement favoured introduction of Assamese as medium in the schools in Bodo dominated areas in lieu of English which was in vogue till 1917. Nor did the movement in its strive for reconstruction of a distinct cultural identity of the Bodos detached itself from the contemporary cultural-linguistic movements of larger Asomiya society<sup>4</sup>. For instance, the Bodo delegation of the Goalpara under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma asserted in its memorandum to the Simon Commission that Goalpara be kept within Assam as against the attempts made by the local zamindars to merge the district with Bengal. Relocation of Goalpara, as they argued, would jeopardize the

interest of all ethnic communities (Das 2012: 9). The movement, nevertheless, inspired the increasingly contesting voice against hegemony of caste Hindu Asomiya cultural identity as reflected by the resolution adopted by the annual conference of the Kachari Sanmilan held in 1922 at Titabor. The unequivocal resolution states: "Resolved that the meeting is of opinion that the Kachari community of Assam do not recognize themselves as a lower class of Hindus as untouchables and do hereby declare that they are quite independent from the Hindu community in all respects such as political, social, religious etc." (quoted in Barman 1995: 88).

Concomitant to the spread of Brahmanism reshaping Bodo identity, the initiative of the colonial state was to execute a new phase of peasantization with the logic of enhancement of both agricultural production and revenue leading to a large scale settlement of the hard pressed tenants of East Bengal zamindars to make productive the water-logged, jungle infested land of the Brahmaputra valley, the wasteland in the colonial lexicon. The tenants from East Bengal with overwhelming majority of the Muslims favorably responded to the new colonial project to find the Brahmaputra valley not only as their 'lebensraum' but also as a land of plentiful opportunities. Though the political implications of massive immigration have already been expounded by many scholarly works (Guha 2006; Kar 1990; Barooah 2010; Misra 2017; Nag 2017), it may be reiterated that the continuous flow of immigrants naturally caused apprehensions, especially amongst the autochthons as the strange aggressive immigrants settled indiscriminately in the valley started procuring arable land, besides occupying the village reserved land, forests, and the riverine chars. Therefore, alienation of land of the autochthons has continuously been influencing the political discourse of the plain tribes, especially of the Bodos reshaped by the Brahma movement as a distinct identity.

Formation of the Tribal League in 1933 after the demand of the Kachari Jubak Sammilani placed before the Simon Commission for reservation of seats in the provincial legislature for the plain tribes reflected the growing political aspirations of the valley based myriad racial groups<sup>5</sup>. The short history of the Tribal League till it became a non-political entity in 1952 is crucial not only for political struggle for protection of tribal land but also for reshaping multitude of racial/ethnic identities that started gradually demystifying the

perceived notion of assimilation of the valley based ethnocultural categories with the so called Asomiya nationality. In the extremely fluid parliamentary politics of Assam since the first general elections of the provincial legislature held in the early part of 1937 under the Government of India Act of 1935, the four elected tribal legislators<sup>6</sup> played a decisive role in power politics. The core of the political agenda set by the Tribal League for negotiations with both the Congress and the Muslim League was constituted by its primary concern for protection of the plains tribes as a collective by ensuring reservations to politically represent besides jobs, measures for promotion of education, and protection of land. While Gopinath Bordoloi was successful to overthrow the Muslim League ministry of Saadulla in 1938 with Tribal League's support materialized through emphasizing the issue of land alienation and the necessity of a protective measure in the form of tribal belts (Guha 2006: 185), the Tribal League's support to the subsequent Saadulla's ministry was based on the agreement signed in March 1940, again with land as a major concern. Though the Tribal League contested independently in the general elections held in 1946, its participation in the Congress ministry headed by Bordoloi was instrumental for materializing the idea of Tribal Belts and Blocks in 1947, what was raised by Bordoloi in 1938. The legal mechanism for protection of land of the plains tribes became an extra chapter to the colonial land regulations of 1886 that placed the avowed developmentalism at the mercy of a bureaucracy hegemonized by the caste Hindu Asomiya while cultural protectionism with developmentalism for the hills tribes was imagined by same Bordoloi in the form of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. Nevertheless, the hope generated by the avowed protectionism for the plains tribes suspended the politics of resource and reservation for the time being.

Despite its deep engagement with the some basic issues common to the plain tribes, the Tribal League under the predominant leadership of the enlightened Bodos emerged through the Brahma movement could not turn out to be as a viable political platform to unite all the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. Nor could it go much deeper into the tribal areas beyond the western part of the valley, the traditional stranglehold of the Bodos. With the exhilaration of independence being on the threshold, it was not difficult for the Congress to camouflage its caste Hindu Asomiya nationalist aspirations with the ostensible liberal ethical concerns of the pan-Indian nationalism while approaching

the common tribal people of Assam in the general election held in February 1946. Both pragmatism and lure for power incited leadership of the Tribal League to join the Congress Assembly Party in July, avowedly to accomplish the unfinished agenda more effectively. Though one of the major concerns of the Tribal League was immediately fulfilled by making provisions of the Tribal Belts and Blocks, the political compromise with the overarching Congress brought an end to the existence of the Tribal League as an independent political entity. It became a social organization, the All Assam Tribal Sangha in 1952 to work in close proximity to the power.

The anxiety of cultural and linguistic domination of the Hindu Bengalis, the historical trepidation of the Asomiya national identity, however, reappeared in the post-Partition political theatre of the Brahmaputra valley with the increasing number of Hindu Bengalis taking shelter in Assam as refugees. The Congress, which grew in Assam essentializing aspirations of the case Hindu Asomiya national identity, contemplated Assamese as the state language of Assam. A veteran Congress leader and an elected member, Nilmoni Phookan, made it clear in the Assembly in 1948 that:

“Assamese must be the State Language of the Province. There can be no gainsaying of it even if the Governments stand or fall by it. All the languages of the different communities and their culture will be absorbed in the Assamese culture. I speak with rather authority in this matter regarding the mind of our people that this state cannot nourish any other language in this province” (quoted in Choudhury 2007: 93).

Phookan’s prejudiced notion of “our people” must be understood in the given context of language politics underlined by riots essentially to desist from running separate schools for Bengalis, and the decision of the government of Assam to impose Assamese as medium of instruction in all the schools of the Assam amidst steep opposition from different linguistic and cultural identities.

The chauvinist assertion of the caste Hindu Asomiya national identity to encounter the historical influences of Bengali language and culture inescapably led to a rupture, one of the

inadvertent consequences that encouraged the Bodos to reconstruct its linguistic identity more enthusiastically than ever before. Though the followers of Brahmaisism encouraged Assamese medium schools in the Bodo dominated areas of western Assam, a section of the bilingual enlightened Bodos decided to democratically resist the Asomiya linguistic chauvinism by forming the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in November 1952 to reconstruct Bodo linguistic identity, espousal of the same mechanism evolved by the Asomiya linguistic nationalism in 1917. In absence a political organization in the post Tribal League political scenario, the newly formed civil society organization soon became a language movement with the support from all sections of the Bodo society. Besides encouraging a spate of literary works in Bodo language, the movement was geared up against the high tide of Asomiya linguistic chauvinism. To place Bodo language in its rightful position, the initial demand in 1953 was to introduce Bodo language as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education, and the government of Assam took a decade to accept it. Naturally, the demand got extended to the secondary level and finally the government accepted in 1968, after a continuous movement for another half a decade.

Besides the political insensitivity of the so called Asomiya linguistic nationalism reflected by the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 and reluctant response of the state government to the language movement of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, yet another episode that almost completed the process of alienation of the Bodo cultural identity ceasing the minimum historical cultural relation it sustained with Asomiya cultural identity or nationalism was the movement for a separate script for Bodo language. Though the Bodos of undivided districts of Goalpara and Kamrup were using Assamese script for writing in Bodo since the beginning of the Brahma movement in the early part of the twentieth century, the Christianized Bodos of the undivided district of Darrang were using the Roman script for the convenience of Christianity<sup>7</sup> (Dewri 2001: 103-104). Considering suitability to their language, while the activists of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha attempted to introduce the Bodo English Primer - Bithorai printed in the Roman script - in the Bodo medium schools in the early 1970s, the response of the government of Assam was to penalize such schools which had introduced the new, unrecognized textbook by stopping grants and payment of salaries to the teachers (Prabhakara 2012: 19). The subsequent protests that assumed the form of an organized movement for Roman script and witnessed the killing of more

than dozen of people including two Central Reserve Police Force men (Prabhakara 2012: 19-20) was seen by the non-Bodos either as a conspiracy of the missionaries or refusal to continue with influences of Assamese language. The question of script, which could have been democratically resolved, continued to influence the Bodo society for long and finally it came to end with the successful intervention of the government of India in 1975 to convince the Bodo leadership to accept Devanagari script, rejecting both Assamese and Roman.

Alongside the visibly undemocratic resistance to the strive for reconstruction of Bodo linguistic identity, the conscious move of the government of Assam to violate the logic of Tribal Belts and Blocks not only aggravated the protracted land question but also added new components to the already complex ethnic composition of western Assam. While the protective mechanism failed to prevent different forms of autochthon's land alienation, the government was actively engaged in settlement of the refugees from East Pakistan in the areas demarcated as Tribal Belts and Blocks since the beginning of the 1960s (Choudhury 2007: 106-107). With a conscious move to diffuse the Santhal rebellion (1855-58), colonial state settled a sizeable number of Santhals in 1859-60 in different isolated pockets of western Assam. This was followed by the large scale settlement of the Bengali Muslims since beginning of the twentieth century, and the legacy was continued after independence mainly with the Bengali Hindus, the refugees from East Pakistan. This process of settlement initiated with colonial logic and continued by the post colonial state was not only intrinsic to the question of land, but juxtaposition of the two major ethnic communities, the Bodos and the Koch Rajbangshis who shared a compact geographical space (the erstwhile district of Dhubri), to three other ethnic identities also had many palpable political implications.

The political subjectivity of the Bodos instilled by the historical experiences with the caste Hindu dominated Asomiya cultural nationalism was certainly not insulated from the political developments in the hills. Being dissatisfied with limited autonomy given to them, while different hills tribes such as the Khasis, the Garos, the Jaintias, the Mizos of erstwhile Assam augmented their pressure on the Indian state for larger political space after the birth of Nagaland as a separate state in 1963, the Bodos decided not to remain

indifferent. The Bodos were denied even the limited political space either in the Fifth or the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution at the time independence, as they were presumed to be a part of the Asomiya nationality. After reconstructing its cultural and linguistic identity, now the Bodos had logic to clamor for an elbow room independent of the political control of the caste Hindu Asomiya elites. The All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed in February 1967 with the demand for an autonomous region for the plains tribes followed by formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) within the same month with the same desire for separation from Assam. Coming into being at a crucial juncture when the Indian state was engaged in negotiations with the hills tribes with an array of possibilities that finally culminated in the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971; the primary objective of the PTCA was to demand an autonomous region for the plains tribes. However, owing mainly to the insensitivity of the government as well as the caste Hindu Asomiya nationalists, the demand for autonomous region took a more pronounced form in 1973 with the demand for Udayachal, a Union Territory covering the areas predominated by the Bodos. Subsequently, it became a demand for a separate state popularizing the slogan of ABSU "Divide Assam 50:50" demarcating almost the entire northern part of Assam as "Bodoland". The entire course of the movement till the mid 1980s, nevertheless, was by and large peaceful and democratic in nature, and the mode of negotiation was mobilizational politics involving large section of the Bodos without much contestation from other ethnic or cultural entities scattered in western Assam.

Nevertheless, conflict of interests within the leadership was also an integral part of the movement. Becoming closer to the parliamentary politics immediately after the internal emergency, the decision of the top leadership of the PTCA to abandon the demand for Udayachal and to support the cause for autonomy of the Bodos without redrawing the map of Assam was not only resented by ABSU, characterizing it as a betrayal, but also led to vertical split with formation of the PTCA (Progressive). While the PTCA extended its moral support to the Assam Movement and finally gave up the demand for autonomy in 1983 to accept the Tribal Development Authority as a solution to the Bodo problem (Choudhury 2007: 138), the PTCA(P) continued with its demand for a separate political entity.

The Assam Movement (1979-1985) clearly manifested the fascist character of the caste Hindu Asomiya nationalism, especially while executing the pogroms targeting the religious and linguistic minorities. There are instances, such as Gahpur, Jahamari etc., when the aboriginal Bodos became the soft target of Asomiya chauvinism. In addition, the outcome of the mass Asomiya nationalist movement embodied in the Assam Accord was perceived by the Bodo leadership as a political instrument for preservation of Assamese identity, culture and language; devoid of any deeper concern for the set of political, economic as well as cultural issues reflected by the Bodos for long. In response to the insensitive attitude of the Asomiya nationalist leadership which occupied power in the state after the Assam Movement, the Bodo leadership intensified their movement for a separate state creating space for insurgency, the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) emerged in 1986. The obvious response of the government was that of repression and hostility. With arrogance and indifference towards the basic concerns of the Bodos, the state government headed by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) preferred a reign of terror instead of any sincere efforts for negotiated settlement of the issues raised by the movement. Hundreds of stories of police atrocities of that period are still haunting the common Bodo people. Taking a cue from the Assam Movement, the Bodo leadership also adopted a two pronged strategy. Along with democratic means of protests, subversive activities like disrupting train services by way of damaging railway tracks, setting government offices on fire or bombing of bridges were carried out to intensify the movement (Roy: 1995). The immediate attacks were carried on the lives of the officials posted in the Bodo dominated areas and the PTCA office bearers and supporters who opposed the movement. Consequently 249 activists of the PTCA were killed allegedly by the militant faction of ABSU during the course of the movement (Narzary: 2011). The cult of violence and the tendency of gagging any voice of disagreement had a far reaching consequence upon the subsequent politics in western Assam.

Amidst unprecedented political turmoil, the Expert Committee on Plains Tribes of Assam<sup>8</sup> (ECOPTA) submitted its report in 1992 envisaging a three-tier politico-administrative institutional structure comprising village councils, sub-district or district level regional councils and sub-statal inter-district apex council. The Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed on 20 February 1993 with ABSU and the Bodo People's Action Committee

(BPAC), a structure created by ABSU itself (Prabhakara 2012: 216), nevertheless, totally ignored the model of autonomy envisaged by the Expert Committee and made provision for an elected body to be called the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) within the state of Assam. Substantiated by the legislation of the government of Assam, the Bodoland Autonomous Council Act, 1993 for granting "maximum autonomy within the framework of the Constitution to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement", the façade of autonomy, now known as the first Bodo Accord, soon became a serious political question and the provisions made under the ad-hoc state legislation proved insufficient. The shrewd political engineering that underlined the structure of autonomy laid down by the legislation never allowed the so called autonomous council to function smoothly, nor could the council resolve the question of its territorial jurisdiction. The inclusion of the non-Bodos in the BAC area created uproar among them leading to vehement protest<sup>9</sup>.

The BAC fiasco inevitably led to increasing militarization in the troubled politics of Bodo autonomy with the appearance of two competing militant groups – the Bodo Security Force that rechristened itself into National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in 1994 demanding a separate sovereign Bodoland and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) demanding a separate Bodoland, a state within Indian Union. While the leadership and the cadre base of the NDFB was drawn mainly from the Christianized Bodos of the undivided district of Darrang, the BLT was dominated mainly by the leadership emerged from the areas influenced by Brahmaism. The intense militarization of the Bodos had also been accompanied by growth of militancy especially among the Adivasis with the increasing influences of the United Revolutionary Movement Council of Assam (URMCA) since 1996, when the attacks on the other communities by the Bodos were started and intensified.

Therefore, the autonomy provided in the form of BAC brought an end to the peaceful identity movement, replacing the civil society initiatives by the 'nationalist' armed forces of the disgruntled Bodos. Apart from frequent confrontations between NDFB and BLT, counterinsurgency operations of the state armed forces, violent activities which included indiscriminate killings, explosions in public places, clashes with the ethnic communities etc. had brought back to western Assam virtually a Hobbesian state of nature. While the

general strikes almost paralyzed the normal life, frequent *bandhs* mainly in Kokrajhar had disturbed the roads and rail links between the northeast with the rest of India. The disputes over territorial jurisdiction of the BAC resulted in series of collective violence involving all the major ethnic communities<sup>10</sup>. For Baruah,

“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. The continuing public discussion about a dissonance between what is seen as a historically Bodo are and the contemporary demographic reality of overlapping ethnicities has served to focus attention on the issue of who “belongs” to the area and who does not” (1999: 194-195).

Amidst unprecedented violence and mass movement for a separate state, the BLT, formerly the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF), declared ceasefire in August 1999 to facilitate negotiation with the government of India. After several rounds of discussions, the leadership of the military outfit eventually agreed to withdraw its demand for a separate state in lieu of an autonomous council under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. Accordingly, the second Bodo Accord<sup>11</sup> between the government of India, the government of Assam and the Chairman of the BLT who solely represented the Bodo nationalistic aspiration was signed on 10 February 2003. The required constitutional amendments to accommodate the accord were made in September, 2003 and subsequently four newly created districts<sup>12</sup> were clubbed as the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) for jurisdiction of the BTC with a contiguous geographical area. However, the ‘Bodoland’ which became a constitutional political reality has historically been a shared space of the caste-Hindu Assamese, the Assamese Muslims, the Hindu Bengalis, the Bengali Muslims, the Adivasis, the Koch Rajbanshis, the Nepalis and other small tribal groups. Although the Bodo as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) constitutes the largest demographic share, there are other STs such as the Rabhas, the Madahis, the Garos, the Hajongs, the Sarania Kacharis etc. and all the STs together, including the Bodos, constitute hardly one-third of the total population<sup>13</sup> of the ‘ethnic mix’. Therefore, the exclusive autonomous space given to the Bodos has been justified not on any claim for a demographic majority, but its credence is substantiated with the logic of being historically marginalized both socially

and politically, land alienation particularly in the Tribal Belts and Blocks, intemperate Assamese linguistic chauvinism, non-conformation to the norms of reservation for the Scheduled Tribes in government jobs leading to backlogs, general backwardness due to administrative apathy and most importantly the embedded social prejudice against the Bodo-Kacharis and many such issues. However, one of the striking constitutional amendments made to establish the BTC was the abolition of the provision for constituting any autonomous region<sup>14</sup> within the BTAD, and this has prevented the possibility of providing political space for any other Schedule Tribe as a distinct category.

Creation of the BTAD that embodied the long treasured idea of “Bodoland” was, however, promptly and predictably contested by the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samity (SJSS), an apex body of 22 non-Bodo organizations<sup>15</sup>, which started mobilizing the non-Bodos during the crucial period between BLT’s ceasefire and formation of the BTC. Emerged as a voice of apprehension of the non-Bodos, though the SJSS did not have any opposition to the right to self determination of the Bodos, its objection to creation of BTC was rooted in the demographic composition, such an arrangement would greatly shrink the democratic and constitutional rights of the other communities constituting the majority of the population in the BTAD. As an alternative, the SJSS favoured the implementation of the recommendations of ECOPTA which envisaged a three-tier structure of autonomy - a village council, a regional council and an apex council.

In addition to such larger political contestations, apprehended as obvious reactions spearheaded by the caste Hindu Asomiya, there had also been other political voices articulating the fear of the non-Bodos. Besides several other organizations leading different ethnic communities sharing the geographical space with the Bodos, formation of the All Bodoland Minority Students’ Union (ABMSU) in April 2005 is worth considering. The birth of this students’ organization provided a voice to the minority students specifically in BTAD. The All Koch-Rajbongshi Students’ Union (AKRSU), spearheading the Koch-Rajbongshi identity politics in Assam for long, also joined the protesting voice soon after formation of the BTC. While the political and administrative jurisdiction of the BTC was still a major question before the non-Bodo people, as a large number of non-Bodo villages were brought under the BTAD for sake of territorial contiguity and many such

villages appealed for judicial remedies, the anxiety of getting politically marginalized by the Bodos was further aggravated by the movement for separate state intensified by the Bodo political leadership in the beginning of 2010s. In response, another umbrella organization engaging different sections of non-Bodo population of the BTAD, that came to be politically prominent as Abodo Suraksha Samiti was formed in March 2012, 'Abodo' literally implying all non-Bodos. The basic concerns were equal rights and treatment to the non-Bodos staying in BTC and their security against killings, extortions and atrocities as the post BTC identity politics had also experienced clash between the Bodos and the immigrant Muslims in Udalguri and Darrang in August-September 2008.

While accumulated dissatisfaction of the Bodo leadership over the limited autonomy provided to them in the form of the BTC led to renewal of their movement for a separate state, the voices and political mobilization of the non-Bodos became more visible than ever before. And, when the political mobilization spearheaded by the Abodo Suraksha Samiti engaging different organizations of the religious minority to counter the aggressive Bodo nationalism became a reality to be reckoned with, western Assam was waiting only for a spark to flare up another spate of violence. In July 2012 clash erupted between Bodos and Muslims in Kokrajhar and spread to Bongaigaon, Chirang, Baska and Dhubri districts. Clash broke out over land and living space between the Bodo people and the Muslim settlers leading to mass displacement in western Assam, one of the biggest humanitarian crises that the country has ever faced. In less than two years, ethnic conflict ridden Kokrajhar once again experienced violence a day before the final phase of the Lok Sabha Election 2014 in Assam in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang and the worst affected Baksa, taking a toll on hundreds of innocent lives. The sudden burst of ethnic clashes in the regions exemplifies the complexity of the political issues involved, the growing human insecurities as well as challenges to the very existence of Indian democracy. Though the violence was apparently a communal clash targeting the Bengali-Muslims, it was a specific response to the efforts of all non-Bodos to assert politically against authority of the Bodos. The Parliamentary Elections 2014 triggered a situation conducive for rejecting the political domination of the Bodos in electoral politics.

Being inspired by the nationalistic aspirations of the Bodos, other numerically conspicuous

racial or cultural categories of the Brhmaputra valley, comprehended as the plains tribes, also started contesting political as well as cultural hegemony of the caste Hindu Asomiya national identity. The process of reconstruction of an identity has, therefore, become a political project of myriad ethnic or racial identities, especially after the historic Assam Movement, intensifying movement for political space which a reconstructed cultural identity deserves. Being only concerned with safeguarding the electoral support base, political engineering of the regime that controls the state apparatus, irrespective of its ideology, has always been to win over the leadership of the movement launched with the reconstructed identity by offering autonomy which was once packaged as BAC. Consequently, formation of the BAC in 1993 has been followed by institutionalization of half a dozen of similar ad-hoc 'autonomous' structures for different cultural communities (Lalfakzuala and Sarmah 2019) including the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council offered to an identity manufactured by the state itself (Prabhakara 2012: 103-110). Depending on the numerical strength, critical for electoral politics, some of the reconstructed identities have started clamoring for the next phase that is inclusion under the Sixth Schedule - now a mechanically perceived notion of autonomy as an instrument of bargain, which was once the instrument for the emerging nation state to politically integrate the hills districts of Assam neither disturbing the colonial cartography nor plunging down the hegemony of the caste Hindu Asomiya political elite in the power relation reconstructed by independence. The autonomy that was idealized by the nation state at the dawn of independence could not gratify the political class that emerged in the hills districts, nonetheless delayed the process of atomization of Assam.

The BTC, perceived as a sine qua non of placing a historically marginalized cultural community in its rightful position has also been an instance of denial of the same for others, who besides sharing the same geographical space do have similar historical and material conditions of life with the specific community now being constitutionally protected. Plethora of academic engagements with identity politics, marginalization, tribal movements and autonomy have highlighted the historical process of emergence of the Bodo as a distinct identity and its struggle against marginalization and different forms of historical injustice, nevertheless, the voices of the 'others' marginalized by the Bodos nationalistic discourse is still to be focused on, albeit the present attempt is also not an

exception. Nevertheless, it pertinent to point out that the state, in the name of autonomy, has always been patronizing and constructing an indigenous political class devoid of any ideological commitment, so always subservient to the centralized power structure with the lure for power and material gains. Ever since its formation, the BTC, a “state within the state” of Assam, has been under exclusive control of the same political leadership, especially the formerly Chairman of the BLT who also became the Chairman of the Bodoland People’s Front, which was formed after signing of the Bodo Accord to capture power through elections essentializing the historic victory of the Bodos. The autonomy frozen in the hands of the leadership emanating from a clandestine structure once outlawed by the state, has hardly benefited the common Bodos. Even the hard pressing material issues, on which the common Bodos were mobilized to sustain the prolonged movement and the youths were inspired to dedicate their lives, were grossly ignored by the leadership. One of the many such examples is the question of land. The much talked about process of land alienation apart, even a large segment of the Bodo people is still “encroachers” in official lexicon, though the land is in their possession for long without any legal document, a tradition inherited from the practice of shifting cultivation. Though the autonomy in vogue has never reached the people, it became an effective instrument in power politics. Therefore, the autonomy objectified as BTC has proved to be a politically maneuvered mechanism of peace negotiation with militancy rather than becoming an agency of inclusive democracy, the dream cherished by the people at large for long.

## Endnotes

### 1 Notes:

The Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Area) Order, 1936, administratively divided the excluded areas of Assam to cover (a) the North East frontier/Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur Tract, (b) the Naga Hills district, (c) the Lushai Hills district, and (d) the North Cachar Hills subdivision of Cachar district; while the partially excluded areas included (a) the Garo Hills district, (b) the Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar districts), and (c) the British portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills district (other than Shillong municipality area and cantonment).

2 Assam witnessed major riots during 1960 and 1972 on the question of official language and medium of instruction followed by spate of violence in February 1983 when the Assam Movement (1979-85) reached its peak. However, starting from 1990s, violent political assertions had entered a completely different phase. Some of the violent riots that shook the state are, 1993-94 conflict between the Bodos and the Muslims of East Bengal/ East Pakistan/ Bangladesh origin; 1996 and 1998 riots between the Bodos and the Adivasi communities; Hmar-Dimasa conflict in 2003; Karbi-Kuki clash in 2003-04; Karbi- Dimasa conflict in 2005; Bodo-Immigrant Muslim community conflict in 2008; Zeme - Dimasa conflict in 2009; and Garo- Rabha conflict in 2011 etc.

3 The enlightened political leadership that emerged through the movement included Satischandra Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma, Ananda Chandra Brahma, Sitanath Brahmachoudhury etc.

4 Many Asomiya nationalists such as Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Nalini Phukan, Mahadev Sharma enthusiastically participated in Bodo Mahasammelan. Moreover, Sitanath Brahmachoudhury became the President of the Asom Sahitya Sabha twice due to his contributions to Assamese literature.

5 Though the Kachari Jubak Sammilani was formed in 1928 specifically for the representation before the Simon Commission, it reflected the political aspiration of the plain tribes, especially of the Bodos and it led to formation of the Tribal League in 1933. This was the beginning of the organized movement of the Bodos (Choudhury 2007; Dewri 2001; Pathak 2010).

6 Though the Tribal League did not officially participate in the elections, the block constituted by four elected tribal members was called Tribal League or Tribal Party.

7 Rev. Sydney Endle published his A Hand Book of Kachari Grammer in 1884 in Roman script as Bodo did not have a script of its own.

8 The Committee was constituted by the government of India in 1991 to make recommendations in regard to legislative, administrative and financial autonomy that could be conferred on the Bodos and other plains tribes of Assam.

9 The non-tribal people living in tribal dominated areas of Tamulpur, Goreswar, Kumarikata, Nagrijuli and other such places of North Kamrup and Nalbari areas have panic stricken following the large-scale extortion of money, intimidation, arson, looting and physical harassment on them by a section of a Bodo activists following the signing of the Bodo Accord ('Tension in Bodo Dominated Areas', *Assam Tribune*, 6 March, 1993).

10 Some examples of such collective violence are, the conflict between the Bodos and the immigrant Muslims in October 1993 in Bongaigaon, again Bodo - Muslim conflict in July 1994 in Barpeta district, ethnic clash between the Bodos and the Adivasis in Kokrajhar in May 1996 followed by the ethnic clash between the Bodos and the Santhals in May-September 1998. All such conflicts resulted in killings of hundreds of innocent people besides rendering homelessness to nearly two lakh people of different communities including the Bodos within a short span of five years.

11 The stated objectives were "to create an autonomous self governing body to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the state of Assam and to provide constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule to the said Autonomous Body; to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area".

12 The newly created districts are Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa and Chirang and these districts are carved out of eight districts viz. Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur.

13 As shown by the Census of India, 2011, the total ST population in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri is 31.41, 37.08, 34.70 and 32.10 per cent respectively. Therefore, the share of the total ST population in the four districts together is 33.45 per cent.

14 The Sixth Schedule provides that if there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district, the Governor may, by public notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them into autonomous regions, and there shall be a separate Regional Council for each area constituted an autonomous region.

15 The organizations include Sadou Asom Koch-Rajbanshi Sanmilani, All Assam Minority Students' Union, Jharkhandi- Adivasi Sangram Parishad, URMCA, Obodo Nagarik Suraksha Samiti, All Adivasi Students' Association, All Koch-Rajbanshi Students' Union, Ojonojatiyo Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Samiti, United Minority Students and Youth Council of Assam, Santrash Birodhi Ganamancha, Koch Rajbanshi Sanmilani (BAC), United Minority Front, Janajati Suraksha Parishad, Koch Rajbanshi Sahitya Sabha, Sadou Asom Koch Rajbanshi Jubo Chatra Sanmilani, Sadou Asom Jogi Sanmilani, Sadou Asom Janagosthiya Kalita Alpine Sanmilan, Namoni Asom Sangkhyalaghu Parishad, All Assam Bengali Youth-Students' Federation, Janagosthiya Sangram Parishad: Namani Asom, Brihattar Asomiya yuba Mancha and Sanjukta Sangkhyalaghu Yubo Parishad.

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