Article: Politicisation of Ethnicity: A Study on the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam

Author(s): Dipika Paul

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 4 (1), April 2020, pp. 4-28

Published by: Indian Sociological Society
Politicisation of Ethnicity:  
A Study on the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam  

--- Dipika Paul

Abstract

Politicisation of ethnicity as a discourse looks into the process whereby ethnic groups based on their identity articulate their socio-political demands. It looks into different dimensions of the interplay between ethnicity and politics. Such interplay is visible in Northeast India and in the state of Assam. The developing socio-political context of Assam and Northeast India since the colonial period led to the rise of ethnic mobilisation in the region. Bodos and Koch-Rajbongshis are the two ethnic groups of Assam who are associated with long drawn movement for identity assertion. Such movements raise questions about their distinct identity and the factors that led to such assertion. The present paper attempts to answer those questions by analysing their identity assertion movement within the framework of politicisation of ethnicity.

Key words: Assam, Bodos, Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity, Koch-Rajbongshis, Politicisation of ethnicity

Introduction

The inter-relationship of ethnicity and politics which gained importance in the contemporary world led to the new discourse of the politicisation of ethnicity. The discourse tries to understand how ethnic groups get mobilised and articulate demands for improving their socio-economic and political status (Wani, 2013). Such interplay of ethnicity and politics is visible in Northeast India. Immediately after Independence, mobilisation among the Naga, the Mizo and the Khasi tribal groups led to the formation of new states. The formation of states motivated other ethnic groups for mobilisation in Assam. Among them, the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis are the ethnic groups in Assam associated with movements for identity assertion. Majority of the people of these two ethnic groups live in the western part of Assam in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri,
Bongaigaon and Goalpara districts. A large number of the Koch-Rajbongshis also live in the northern part of West Bengal – Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, West Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda districts. Their socio-political movements are an ideal representation of the process of the politicisation of ethnicity. This paper looks into different aspects of the politicisation of ethnicity by focusing on the identity assertion of the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis within a theoretical framework. It focused on the two groups due to their commonality in factors and methods of identity assertion. To analyse the process of identity assertion among these two groups within the framework of politicisation of ethnicity, the paper relies on review of relevant literatures and memorandum of organisations.

Ethnicity: A Conceptual Understanding

The term ethnicity, although entered into the academics in 1960s, it has been in use in different forms like ethnikos or ethnic since middle age. In this period, it was used to refer ‘others’ like non-Christians, non-Jews. However, by the middle of 19th century, the term was used for people sharing similar characteristics (Tonkin et al., 1996, p. 21). During 20th century, in America it was used for the immigrants from the western European nations (Green, 2006). Since 1960s the concept of ethnicity has been interpreted from different perspectives. Primordialism, the dominant perspective of ethnicity in 1960s, viewed ethnicity as a ‘given’ aspect of the society. The main advocate of primordialism, Clifford Geertz believed that primordial attachment emerges from blood ties and kinship relationship (Brown & Langer, 2010, pp. 412-413). Primordialism believes that ethnicity is the result of biological process and therefore, unique and unchanging. However, by 1970s primordialism started losing hold, for its inability to explain the changes that takes place among ethnic groups over the period of time (ibid., p. 413).

A major shift in the understanding of ethnicity came since 1970s with the emergence of constructivism and instrumentalism (Green, 2006). Instrumentalism argues that ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon, used by different interest and status groups as ‘a social, political and cultural resource’ (Cohen, 1996, p. 8). It gives importance to the role of elites in perpetuating differences based on ethnic identity. Instrumentalism believes that the elites help ‘to transfer potential hostility’ within their community, which emerges due to ‘inequalities and power disparities’, against ‘the elites and subjects of other communities’
(Brown & Langer, 2010, p. 413). However, instrumentalism was criticised for its inability to analyse the participants’ sense of primordialism i.e., sense of the permanent element of their ethnic identity (Cohen, 1996, p. 9). In 1980s constructivism emerged, which viewed ethnic identities as both ‘a cultural endowment’ and ‘malleable’. However, unlike primordialism, it tries to focus on the circumstances, which increases the significance of ethnic identity in modern society (Brown & Langer, 2010, pp. 413-414).

Although constructivism and instrumentalism became popular since 1970s, the prelude to such assumptions began much earlier in the work of Max Weber (1922). Weber opined that ‘ethnic group does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere.’ (Weber, 1996, p. 35). He believed that any collective feeling among the members is the result of political action and it is the pursuit of collective interest that instigates people to organise for ‘ethnic identification’ (Jenkins, 1997, p. 10). However, a concrete framework to instrumentalism and constructivism was forwarded by thinkers like F. Barth (1969), A. Cohen (1974), and P. Brass (1991). Barth believes that since ethnicity is a non-static phenomenon, it should not be studied only in terms of cultural traits. He observed that the participation and self-evaluation in terms of the group values helps individuals to continue their membership in the larger ethnic groups. For him ethnic identity is the result of human experience and therefore, more than the cultural traits, attention should be focussed on the process of ‘the creation and the maintenance of the borders’ (Barth, 1969, p. 16). Following instrumentalism, Cohen observed that ethnic group is constructed in order to ‘help people pursue or defend their political or economic interests’ (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006, p. 11). In this process, Cohen (1974) and Brass (1991) emphasised on the role of elites who in order to fulfil their political goals, manipulate ethnic symbols and identity to gain the support of the masses (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 8).

A well formulated analysis of instrumentalism and constructivism in the development of ethno-nationalism is forwarded by Ernest Gellner (1983), Benedict Anderson (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1983). Thinkers like Gellner (1983) and Baruah (1994) understand nationality as a synonym of ethnic group and nationalism as the politics of identity. Gellner (1983) used instrumentalist approach in conceptualisation of nationalism. He observed that nationalism is a product and necessary condition of industrial society. For him the notion of nation is a fabricated phenomenon, created and conceived by the elites. However, unlike
other instrumentalist theorists, he did not believe that creation of nation is to benefit the elite. He believed that the transition from agrarian to industrial society raised the need for homogenised culture (Finkel, 2013). Industrial society generates need of common language for standardised communication among people. Such common language creates the need for ‘cultural identification’. In Gellner’s words, ‘modern people do not in general become nationalist from sentiments or sentimentality atavistic or not, well-based or myth-founded: they become nationalists, through genuine, objective, practical necessity, however, obscurely recognized’ (as cited in Kumar, 2010, p. 397). Thus, ethnicity is viewed as the product of modern society.

Constructivism reached another level in Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’, which argued that ‘…all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined’ (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). For him, nation is imagined political community because the members of the nation ‘will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (ibid.).

Hobsbawm’s ‘invented traditions’ also helped the development of constructivism as a perspective. In his view, traditions are not necessarily permanent phenomena in modern period. He held that tradition many a time is of recent origins and sometimes it is ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1). For him, invented traditions are the result of the novel environment but it is not completely detached from the old situation and often invented tradition uses ancient materials. He observed that often ‘...the customary traditional practices such as folksongs, physical contests, marksmanship were modified, ritualized and institutionalized for the new national purposes’ (ibid., p. 6). These invented traditions are the result of social engineering, which enables the ruling elites to channel the energies of the newly enfranchised citizens for their own benefit (Kumar, 2010, p. 396). Therefore, in their common perception ethnic groups are visualised as artificially created and not an eternal phenomena. Hence, ‘as they can be created, they can also be destroyed...’ (Green, 2006).

The discourse of ethnicity is, further, developed with the contribution of other perspectives. Armstrong (1982) and Smith (1986), following ethno-symbolic approach, emphasised on the role of symbols and myths in unifying people and ensuring their persistence. Armstrong (1982) considers ‘nostalgia for past life-styles, religious civilisation and organisations, imperial mythomoteurs and
language fissure’ helps in creating ethnic identities. For Smith (1991) ethnic is ‘a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among elites’ (as cited in Sutherland, 2011, p. 26). Hechter (1975) and Nairn (1977) widened the discourse of ethnicity emphasising on the factor of relative deprivation. They held that capitalism with its unequal development provides advantage to some regions and puts some region in backward state. The groups living in these backward areas get mobilised ethnically because of the sense of relative deprivation (as cited in Kumar, 2010, p. 395). Therefore, since the advent of the concept of ethnicity in academics, ethnicity is understood in relation to different dimensions. In this discourse, ethnicity is also studied as ‘a political phenomena’.

Ethnicity and Politics: A Theoretical Understanding

Scholars predicted years ago that ethnicity would disappear in modern society. In contrast, ethnic identity seems to be more clearly articulated than before (Anttonen, 2003, p. 53). One of the reasons for its persistence has been the practical applicability of it as an instrument in the competition for scarce resources (ibid., p. 54). Rothschild believes that ethnicity survives in the modern times because of the process of politicisation of ethnicity (Rothschild, 1981, p. 30). Therefore, ethnicity should not be ignored as epiphenomenal, rather should be viewed as ‘a political phenomenon’. Such understanding of ethnicity since 1980s has led it to study not in terms of cultural traits, rather to analyse the circumstances under which culture, tradition and history are used as a political tool (Anttonen, 2003, p. 53). Such concern has given rise to the discourse of ethnopolitics as a new domain, which studies the process of the politicisation of ethnicity.

Politicisation of ethnicity refers to the process of ethnic groups being ‘politically conscious and organized’ (Garg, 2007). To politicise ethnicity, Rothschild viewed, is to render people aware of the relevance of politics on their ethnicity and vice versa; to develop their concern about the relationship between politics and ethnicity; their group consciousness and thereby, direct the behaviour in the political sphere (Rothschild, 1981, p. 6). Anttonen held that the ambiguity, which is inherent in the ethnic symbols leaves scope for manipulating it politically (Anttonen, 2003, p. 54). It is similar in the case of myths where different version of same myths can be created for different political purpose. Cohen (1996)
identified four features of the politicised ethnicity. Firstly, the present day ethnicity is the result of interaction between ethnic groups, which often takes the form of struggle for some ‘strategic positions of power’ in places of employment, development and education as such. The struggle becomes more intensified when accessibility to powers differs based on tribal identity, as tribal groups tend to organise politically to participate effectively. Secondly, the tribalism has both dynamic and continuity elements within it. Continuity of ethnic groups exists through customs and social formation, whereas change can be observed in its functions. Thirdly, various traditional customs of ethnic groups are used as an idiom and mechanism for political gain. Lastly, ethnic grouping remains informal as it is never incorporated into the formal framework of the economic and political power as a state or region. If any ethnic group is recognised as a region or state it will no longer remain within the framework of ethnicity, rather it will be a nation (Cohen, 1996, p. 84).

The work of prominent thinkers on ethnicity and politics such as Barth (1969), Cohen (1969), Rothschild (1981), D. Horowitz (1985), Brass (1985, 1991), Hechter (1975) and some others have showed the conditions, which instigated the politicisation of ethnicity. The reason for the increasing politicisation of ethnicity lies in the modern society. The process of modernisation and globalisation in a multi-ethnic society has generated inequality by conferring benefits to some groups and debarring some others. Under such situation politicised ethnicity becomes an effective instrument for those who wanted to maintain or change the existing unequal structure in the ‘competition for power, status and wealth’ (Rothschild, 1981, pp. 2-3; Brass, 1991, p. 25). The competition on ethnic lines creates greater consciousness among people about their identity (Chee-Beng, 2010, p. 443). Referring to the process of politicisation of ethnicity, Rothschild describes it as ‘a dialectical process’ (Rothschild, 1981, p. 3), which on one hand, emphasises in preserving the singularity of the ethnic groups and on the other hand, uses the modern skills and resources of the members of ethnic groups to transform them into political conflict groups. Broadcasting of sacred texts through modern innovation such as radio and television reinforces the sense of belonging to the unique collective identity (ibid., p. 30). The political scenario of modern society seem to emphasise more on diversity and differences giving rise to a new essentialism whereby all differences are considered as inherent and crucial (Anttonen, 2003, p. 55).
In this process of politicisation, the state’s policies of positive discrimination on ethnic lines provide scope for the politicisation of ethnicity (Brass, 1985, p. 8). Such policies generate the need to manipulate identities to gain access to resources. Chee-Beng observed that such state policies always influence the formation of ethnic group, realignment and redefinition of identities (Chee-Beng, 2010, p. 443). Moreover, the existing cultural differences and objective inequality among groups do not necessarily develop them into mobilised groups (Rothschild, 1981, pp. 2, 27; Brass, 1991, p. 26). The elites, to win over the competition for resources, instigate the members that without solidarity their identity and culture is at stake (Rothschild, 1981, p. 27). Considering the significance of their role in ethnic identity formation, the elites are referred to as ‘political entrepreneur’, ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ and local elites (Rothschild 1981, p. 2; Brass 1991, p. 26). Brass observed that when local elites rise in conflict against the external elites it leads to ‘ethnic self-consciousness’, ‘ethnic demands’ and ethnic conflict (Brass, 1991, p. 26). He argued that the elites play a major role in the transformation of the ethnic groups into ethnic nationalism. Chee-Beng (2010, p. 446) and Anttonen (2003, p. 60) observed the role of elite in ethnic mobilisation among Malay and Kven respectively. For Rothschild, the major condition for ethnic mobilisation along with primordial difference is the elite’s capacity in the competition for scarce resources (Rothschild, 1981, p. 29). Therefore, he held that the formation, consolidation and politicisation of ethnic group is a mobilisation process led by elites and result of the challenges brought out by modernity in the form of competing group and alien values. Thus, ethnic groups cannot be termed as ‘primordial tout court’ (ibid., p. 30).

Politicisation of ethnicity, thus, is a process in which groups under certain conditions become conscious about the position of the group at societal level and thereby, use their identity to improve or maintain their position by gaining political power. Consciousness emerges as groups interact, which takes the form of struggle for resources such as political power, economic advancement or social status. Ethnicity is used because unlike other identity, it is relatively abstract and therefore, can be manipulated for political purposes. The cultural elements attached to an ethnic group such as myth, religion, language becomes a great source of unity in modern society. Moreover, when accessibility to power is based on identity, people organise more on ethnic line. Therefore, in the present day, nationalism and sub-nationalism emerge among people for fulfilment of practical and objective need. Ethnopolitics as a domain studies the conditions under which groups become conscious and use their culture, tradition and history as a political
tool. In the present paper, the identity assertions among the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis have been analysed within the framework of politicisation of ethnicity.

**Identity Assertion among the Bodos**

The Bodos are a plain tribal group settled in the northern part of Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the districts of Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon and Goalpara. The Bodos are a Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloid group. Sidney Endle, a British anthropologist held that the people ‘known to (others) as Kacharis and to themselves as Bada’, belongs to the Mongoloid group spread over a large territory covering the present day Assam, North-east Bengal Koch- Behar and Hill Tippera (Tripura) (Endle, 1911, p. 4). Considering the huge number of population, Endle referred to them as a Kachari race which includes – Bara (Kachari), Rabha, Mech, Dhimal, Koch, Solanimiya, Mahaliyas, Phulgariyas, Saraniyas, Dimasas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos, Haijongs, Hill Tippera, Morans and Chutiyas (ibid., p. 5). In course of time, because of isolation these large groups emerged as separate communities. British scholars like S. Endle, E.A. Gates and Indian historians like K.L. Baruah agreed to the predominance of the Bodos in the large part of Assam until the advent of Ahoms (Saikia, 2009, pp. 106-107).

Although Bodos have distinct culture, in the initial phase they showed a tendency of assimilation with the Assamese society. In the religious sphere, under the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism large numbers of Bodos were converted (S. Choudhury, 2007, p. 55). In the linguistic sphere, E.A. Gates who was in-charge of the 1891 census of Assam observed widespread assimilation of Bodos into Assamese linguistic fold (Baruah, 1999, p. 181).

However, religious assimilation received a set-back with the religious movement known as Brahma movement that began among the Bodos in the early part of the 20th century (S. Choudhury, 2007, p. 56). The Brahma Movement under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma emerged due to the ongoing exploitation of the neo-vaishnavite preachers. Initially, Kalicharan’s movement, preaching Brahma Dharma, tried to bring cultural and religious reforms among the Bodos. Later on, the movement turned multi-dimensional with its focus on social and economic reforms such as uplifting the educational status of the Bodos, organisation of mass meetings and adoption of new methods for agriculture (ibid., p. 58). Such multi-
dimensional effort helped in the development of an educated section of youths among the Bodos and made them conscious to revive their indigenous religion.

The linguistic assimilation was challenged by the Bodo educated middle class with the formation of socio-religious and literary organisations like Habraghat Bodo Sommiloni (1912) and Dakhinkul Sahitya Sammiloni (1918). These organisations published the first literatures in Bodo language in 1915-1924 written in Assamese and Deodhai scripts (Saikia, 2009, p. 110). Such pursuits for indigenous socio-cultural practices and literary activities created new aspiration among the educated sections of the Bodos to aspire for equal political rights.

By the later part of 1920s, while the political aspiration among the Bodos was growing, they were kept away from any discussion on the nationalist movement. Further, the negligence of the nationalist leaders towards their issue of land alienation, due to large-scale immigration, caused resentment among the Bodo youths (S. Choudhury, 2007, pp. 67-68). Such resentment was articulated when All Assam Kachari Association submitted a memorandum to the Simon commission in January 1929, demanding separate representation, reservation in education and employment for the Bodos. However, during this time although the Bodo leaders made demand based on ‘their distinct civilisation’ and backwardness, they did not assert their separation from greater Assamese identity. Paragraph six of the memorandum opposed the transfer of the then Goalpara district of Assam to West Bengal in which considerable number of population were Bodos. The memorandum stated that ‘the habits and customs of the people of this district are more akin to Assamese than to Bangalees. We the Bodos can by no means call ourselves other than Assamese’. In 1933, All Assam Tribal League formed to articulate the interest of the Bodos and the plain tribes (Mahanta, 2013, p. 50). The League participated in the electoral politics of Assam in both pre and post-independence period. However, the League, being dominated by the middle class, focused on reservation in education and job and neglected the land alienation issue (S. Choudhury, 2007, p. 82).

On the other hand, due to the state policy of encouraging immigration during the colonial and post-independence period, land alienation issue became rampant among the common plain tribes (Pathak, 2012, p. 22). In spite of that, in the decades immediately after Independence, the Bodo leaders showed the tendency to assimilate into the mainstream Assamese society. The Bodo leaders showed political support to the Assamese leaders at the time of reorganisation of the state
in 1954-55. On the literary front, the educated section of the Bodo leaders accepted Assamese language and extended their support during the formation of *Assam Sahitya Sabha* (S. Choudhury, 2007, p. 94). Therefore, during that time mobilisation among the Bodos was not strong. It was the Assamese chauvinism, which again led to the growth of consciousness among other groups about their own identity.

Immediately after the Assam official language act of 1960, which made Assamese as the only official language of Assam, other linguistic groups of the region started a series of movements for the protection of their language. In 1962, Bodos under the leadership of *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* (BSS) (1952) raised the demand for making Bodo language as a medium of instruction in the schools of Bodo dominated areas (ibid., pp. 103-104, 107). The state government partially fulfilled their linguistic aspiration and completely neglected the ongoing land alienation process among them, which caused linguistic and economic marginalisation among Bodos. Such condition has ultimately, as Mahanta observed, led to the alienation of Bodos from the Assamese society (Mahanta, 2013, p. 51). The sentiment that grew out of such negligence provided the emotional base for the aspiration for more political power (ibid., pp. 107, 108). Therefore, by the later part of 1960s such aspiration took the form of organisations like Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) (Goswami, 2001, p. 134).

The immediate instigation for such organisational mobilisation came from the announcement made by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi about the re-organisation of Assam, which the Bodo leaders interpreted as a signal to launch autonomy movement (Misra, 1989, p. 1147). The three organisations BSS, ABSU and PTCA were able to create a ‘politically conscious movement’ of the Bodos in 1960s (Mahanta, 2013, p. 51). The successful participation of these organisations in the 1970s language movement helped them to emerge as a potent force. Simultaneously, script movement, which emerged in the late 1960s for separate script to Bodos, against its earlier preference for Assamese and Bengali script for Bodo language, gave impetus to the identity assertion among Bodos. The successful mobilisation during the script movement prepared the ground for homeland movement of the plain tribes.

The period 1970s signify an era of political movement of the Bodos for autonomy. At that time, PTCA led by Bodo leaders demanded for separate
homeland i.e., Udayachal for Bodos and other plain tribes of Assam, especially Mishings (ibid.). But soon after its launch two major events changed the course of the movement – firstly, the emergency period of 1975-77; and secondly, the emergence of Assam movement. After the emergency, when the senior leaders of the PTCA, in alliance with Janata Party, decided to abandon their movement for a separate state, a rift appeared in PTCA causing the formation of PTCA and PTCA (Progressive), renamed as United Liberation Nationalist Front (UTNLF). The movement for homeland was carried on by PTCA (P) (Misra, 1989, p. 1148). The rift continued during the Assam movement, while PTCA supported it, PTCA (P)/UTNLF considered Assam movement an attempt to ‘Assamise’ the tribal population (S. Choudhury, 2007, p. 139).

Despite, the partial support of the Bodo leaders during the Assam movement, right after the movement resentment started growing among other tribal groups in Assam, including the Bodos. The Assam accord of 1985 made no provision for the protection of tribal groups in Assam. Moreover, the anti-tribal policy and Assamese chauvinism shown by AGP Government made the Bodos apprehensive of their identity. Criticising the AGP government’s decision of compulsory knowledge of Assamese language for government job, ABSU said that it is a way of depriving Bodo medium students from getting jobs (ibid., p. 141). This caused the identity assertion after Assam movement among the Bodos to become more emboldened. ABSU submitted several memorandums from 1985-87 with the demand to form Bodoland state for Bodos; two district councils on the southern bank of Brahmaputra river; and to enlist Bodo-Kachari of Karbi-Anglong as schedule tribes of hills (Mahanta, 2013, p. 51).

Under the leadership of ABSU a new era of homeland movement started, which shifted its focus from the pan tribals to protection and upliftment of the Bodos (Pathak, 2012, p. 20). The new era witnessed several new features such as fratricidal clash among the Bodos, emergence of militant organisations such as Bodo Security Force (BSF) and violence. This phase of the Bodoland movement came to an end with the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) after 1993 accord signed between ABSU and Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) on one side and Government of India and state government on the other (Mahanta, 2013, p. 51). But the institutional arrangement under the 1993 accord failed due to the limitations in its provisions and reluctance of the state government to implement it. Its failure not only aggravated the already operating BSF but also disappointed the ABSU (Nunthura, 2005, pp. 596-597). Such
disappointment led to the second phase of the autonomy movement for the Bodos, far more violent than the earlier phase. The rise of two extremist organisations, Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) and National Democratic Front Of Bodoland led to a process of ‘ethnic cleansing’ whereby the other ethnic groups sharing the same territory were attacked by the Bodo militants to create a territory of homogenous population (Goswami, 2001, p. 136). The severe violence ended when Government of India began peace talk with BLTF, and after a series of discussions the historic accord of 2003 was signed. Accordingly, as per the Accord, Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed and for the first time 6th Schedule provisions of the Constitution was extended to cover the plain tribes of Assam.

Identity Assertion among the Koch-Rajbongshis

Koch-Rajbongshis are associated with the homeland movement known as Kamatapur movement since 1970s. British scholars like S. Endle (1911), G.A. Grierson (1903) mentioned that the Koches belong to the broader Bodo family (A.C. Choudhury, 2009, p. 46). In the 16th century, the community established its kingdom known as Koch or Kamatapur Kingdom having domination over large area of eastern India with its capital in Koch-Behar (present Cooch Behar district in West Bengal). Presently, the Schedule Caste list of West Bengal mentions Koch and Rajbanshi separately and in Assam they are categorised in the OBC list as ‘Koch-Rajbongshi’ii. The mention of the term Koch in the ancient Indian text and their stone inscriptions in historical places indicates that the Koch identity was prevalent before any other identity. Interestingly, nowhere in the literary work of recent past the Koches were mentioned as Rajbanshi (Bhakat, 2000, p. 5). Colonial officials and some native scholars like C.C. Sanyal (1965) and S. Bandopadhyay (1998) viewed that some sections of Koch who adopted Hinduism, in course of time, came to be known as Rajbanshi. The census data until 1891 made Koch a wider category having Rajbanshi and Paliya people within it. But in 1901 census, Rajbanshi was formed as a wider category having all the sub-sections of Koches within it (Sanyal, 1965, p. 14). During kshatriya movement, because of mobilisation among the Rajbanshis, administrators attempted to separate the Koches and the Rajbanshis. However, due to ongoing assimilation the officials found it difficult to separate the people (ibid.). Thus, there can be Rajbanshis who may not be Koch and there are Koches who may not be Rajbanshi.
In the early 20th century, with the emergence of kshatriya movement, kshatriya identity was attached to the community. The assertion for such identity lies in the socio-political changes taking place in the north Bengal. The annexation of Koch kingdom in 1773 by the British ruler opened the region for large-scale immigration of upper caste Bengali-Hindus. Although the patronisation of Brahminism during the Koch kingdom brought changes in the indigenous practices among their subjects (Koches and Meches), in many aspects they continued their distinct aboriginal practices (Basu, 2003, p. 45). The upper caste Hindus used to practice untouchability with the Rajbanshis because of their distinct language and culture. Thus, humiliated Rajbanshi leaders aspired for higher status. Under such situation, the census conducted during the colonial rule was viewed by the Rajbanshis as means of getting recognition of the kshatriya status (ibid., pp. 63, 65). With the large-scale mobilisation, Rajbanshi leaders inscribed them as kshatriya in the 1911 census (ibid., p. 70). This was followed by the *kshatriyaisation* process among the Rajbanshis under the leadership of *Kshatriya Samiti*, a socio-cultural organisation of the community.

The identity assertion took a major turn in 1930s, when the Rajbanshi leader started claiming for Scheduled Caste status based on socio-economic backwardness (ibid., pp. 89-90). In 1933, due to mass mobilisation, Rajbanshis and Koches were enlisted as SC, in sharp contrast to their earlier claim for upper caste status. The movement for Scheduled Tribe status among the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam that began in 1967 with the demand for only en-scheduling them added another dimension to their identity (A.C. Choudhry, 2009, p. 20). But with *All Assam Koch-Rajbongshi Sammilani* in 1980s the movement emerged with the demand for Scheduled Tribe status (Telegraph, 2002) and in 1990 All Assam Koch-Rajbongshis Students’ Union (AKRASU) gave momentum to the movement for the ST status.

On the political front, by the end of the British period, the socio-religious organisations of Rajbanshis-Kshatriya Samiti and *Hita Sadhini Sabha* started aspiring for political power and became a potent force in the electoral politics in north Bengal, so far dominated by the upper caste (Basu, 2003, pp. 94-95). The socio-economic and political changes in the post-independence period had significant impact on the group. The transfer of Cooch Behar to West Bengal transformed Cooch Behar and its natives (Rajbanshis) into a periphery of West Bengal (Sen & Dutta, 2005, p. 2). In the post-independence period, due to the partition the immigration into the region got a boost, causing land dispossession
and marginalisation in the employment sector among the natives (ibid.). Culturally Rajbanshis were marginalised as their mother tongue was not recognised as language (A.J. Das, 2009, p. 76). The Rajbansi leaders viewed such marginalisation as a threat to their identity, which led to the political movement for separate homeland in 1970s.

However, the seed for homeland was laid by Hita Sadhini Sabha (1946), which demanded ‘to retain the independent status of Cooch Behar’. But due to the opposition of the non-Rajbanshi organisations and the conspiracy of the Kolkata leaders, the movement for independent state did not gain momentum (P. Barman, 2007, pp. 74, 76, 77). It regained strength in the early part of 1970s, when Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) started mobilisation for the formation of separate Kamatapur state in north Bengal, emphasising the Kamatapuri identity of the Koch Rajbanshis (R.K. Barman, 2012, p. 231). However, the movement declined due to pro-people policy of the then Left Government in West Bengal and internal division in the leadership (Ghosh, 2013). Thereafter, Uttar Banga Jati O Adivasi Sangathan (UTJAS) demanded the protection of their Kamatapuri language. Simultaneously, the ethnic mobilisation among the Koch-Rajbongshi of Assam in 1960s and 1980s often raised the demand for separate state based on their Kamatapuri identity.

In 1990s the homeland movement in north Bengal entered a new phase with the emergence of Kamatapur People’s Party (KPP) and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). While KPP followed a moderate and democratic method of protest, KLO was an extremist organisation involved in several major militant activities in 1999-2002. But the movement suffered after the police force of Assam and West Bengal executed joint operation (Debnath, 2010, p. 247). At that time, the arrest of the moderate party leaders of KPP revealed the repressing strategy of the government towards ethnic movement (A.J. Das, 2009, p. 82). However, in subtle manner KPP continued its democratic way of protest and kept the movement alive.

Along with KPP and KLO, Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association joined the political movement of the Koch-Rajbongshis (R.K. Barman, 2012, p. 235). In Assam, the political movement of the Koch-Rajbongshis was led by the young leaders of AKRASU. In September, 2003 in a memorandum submitted to the then Defence Minister, AKRASU raised the demand for separate Kamatapur state (A.J. Das, 2009, p. 23). With the arrival of the 21st century, the Koch-Rajbongshi
organisations in north Bengal and Assam jointly launched movement for separate state comprising the six districts of West Bengal – Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda; and the four districts of Assam – Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara (The Hindu, 2006). Thus, Koch-Rajbongshi movement, their issues and demands based on their identity helped in the development of a separate Koch-Rajbongshi identity and the Kamatapuri identity as an integral part of the group.

**Identity Assertion within the Framework of Politicisation of Ethnicity**

The movements of the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis are an ideal representation of the process of politicisation of ethnicity. Similar to Rothschild’s (1981) analysis, in the case of these two ethnic groups too, their demand for homeland cannot be understood as separate from their identity. Such movement in Assam is described by Saikia (2009) as ethno-nationalism and Baruah (1999) as the rise of sub-nationalism. The groups being distinct from the other ethnic groups mobilised under certain circumstances. The historical overview suggests that both the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis assimilated into the dominant ethnic groups at different levels. However, such assimilation became one of the causes of their aspiration for separate identity.

Scholars like Prabhakara (1994) and Baruah (1999) regard the process of assimilation of the Bodos into the Assamese fold as unequal. Only those Bodos were accepted into the Assamese mainstream who gave up their native identity and accepted Hinduism and Assamese language. Thus, for Prabhakara, the Bodos were not accepted as a part of Assamese society ‘while they remained Bodos’ (Baruah, 1999, p. 180). Baruah opined that assertion for distinct identity is an attempt of the Bodos to come out of such unequal assimilation process (ibid., p. 183). Similarly, even after widespread adoption of Hinduism, the Koch-Rajbongshis were placed in the lower social strata by the neighbouring Hindu upper caste. The reluctance of the upper caste to accommodate the Koch-Rajbongshis into the Hindu caste system is observed in their opposition to the process kshatriyaisation in the 20th century among Rajbanshis of the Cooch Behar. Such attitude is reflected in a Rajbongshi publicist, A.K. Roy’s statement that ‘...Hindus (who) were not prepared to accept these (Rajbanshi) men as Kshatriyas. Many Brahmins began to refuse to serve these people as their priests in religious and social ceremonies and some officials refused to record the caste of these people as Kshatriya’ (Basu, 2003, p. 8). Such non-reciprocal attitude of
the dominant groups served as a factor for the groups to aspire for sub-nationalism.

Cultural chauvinism of dominant groups often leads to assertion for separate identity. The relationship between chauvinism and ethnic mobilisation can be understood in the light of Horowitz’s analysis who observed that any disobedience to the language and culture of ethnic groups can emotionally mobilise them (Hashmi & Majeed, 2015, p. 325). Baruah observed that ‘the practice of cultural chauvinism, insensitivity and exclusivism by the ethnic Assamese’ in their everyday interaction with the Bodos created a sense of alienation among them (Baruah, 1999, p. 188). Imposition of the Assamese language through 1960s language policy and anti-tribal policy of the AGP government created resentment among the leaders of the Bodos. Therefore, identity assertion among the Bodos was an attempt to ‘counter the effort of the Assamese to Assamize Assam’ (George, 1994, p. 882). The cultural marginalisation became severe among Koch-Rajbongshis, because neither in Assam nor in West Bengal the mother tongue of Koch-Rajbongshis is recognised as a language. It remained as a dialect of Bengali and Assamese. Soumen Nag identified that cultural marginalisation among the Rajbanshis rose because of the politics of nomenclature, whereby all the indigenous Rajbongshi names of places in north Bengal, particularly in Siliguri town, were replaced with modern names (A.J. Das, 2009, p. 76).

At the macro level, Barth observed that the state politics creates scope for ethnic groups to organise to gain access to state distributed resources (Anttonen, 2003, p. 56). In the post-independence period, political autonomy granted to tribal groups created aspiration among those groups deprived from the positive discrimination policy. The formation of tribal state has made ‘the idea of political separation from Assam both attractive and seemingly viable’, especially among the Bodos (Baruah, 1999, p. 184). Such provisions, Dasgupta observed, gave an impetus to Bodo radicalism (Dasgupta, 1997, p. 358). Moreover, the state policy raised the sense of relative deprivation among others deprived of state’s benefit.

Realisation of relative economic deprivation among the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis provided basis for their ethno-political demands, which is similar to the observation of Hechter (1975) and Nairn (1977). Economic deprivation occurred in land rights and employments due to the state policies in colonial and post-independence period. The land reform policy of colonial ruler emphasising
on recorded land rights caused land dispossession among the tribals including the Bodos who were practicing shifting cultivation (Baruah, 1999, pp. 189-191). In the post-independence period, while illegal transfer of land continued in tribal belts and blocks, simultaneously detribalisation of areas continued due to urbanisation and government projects. Bodo leaders claimed that almost 600 thousand acres of tribal land in Assam were engulfed in government projects. Thus, the Bodos asserted that they became ‘homeless in their homeland’ (J.K. Das, 1994, p. 419). Moreover, the language policy of AGP government, which proved beneficial for the Assamese-speaking people to get employment, posed disadvantage for Bodos and non-Assamese people to access education and employment (Saikia, 2009, p. 114; Dasgupta, 1997, p. 359). In case of the Koch-Rajbongshis of north Bengal, economic marginalisation occurred due to state reorganisation policy, which placed the Rajbanshi dominated areas into the periphery of West Bengal; and marginalisation in the employment and land dispossession occurred due to large-scale immigration of upper caste Bengalis in the post-independence period into Rajbanshi dominated areas of north Bengal (Sen & Dutta, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, inequality in terms of economic advancement and political benefits in the post-independence period has been one of the reasons for the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam to emerge into mobilised groups.

In the transformation of the marginalised Bodos and Koch-Rajbongshis into a mobilised ethnic group, the role of elites is visible since the initial phase of their mobilisation. Socio-economic reforms during the colonial and post-colonial period created circumstances for the formation of educated section among the two groups, who later on provided leadership to the movements. The multi-dimensional Brahma movement helped in the development of an educated section of youths among Bodos. Later on, the prominent leaders of the movements of the Bodos were drawn from the followers of Brahma Dharma. Similarly, the role of Rajbongshi leaders in the kshatriya movement was commendable in generating mobilisation. This is similar to Brass’ (1991) observation on elite’s role in ethno-nationalism.

In each stage of mobilisation, the active involvement of ethnic organisations of these two groups played major role in the articulation of their demands. The organisations like ABSU were able to harness the trust of the individual community members by educating them about their goals and activities (Saikia, 2009, pp. 139-140). Ethnic organisations seem to be a potent force in the electoral
politics as they view electoral politics as a means to materialise their socio-political goals. We can take into consideration Cohen’s observation, who held that ethnic groups organise themselves in political groups because they visualise it as an effective means to participate (Cohen, 1996, p. 84).

Apart from these, the strong sense of solidarity among the groups, especially among the Bodos, as identified by Saikia (2009), helped organisations like ABSU to facilitate strong mobilisation. The existence of high level integration at the local level emerged from the pre-existing community affiliation (which Saikia termed as horizontal networks), made it easier for the organisation to mobilise the group members (Saikia, 2009, p. 146). Moreover, the Bodo leaders placed demands based on their historical domination and affiliation of other groups in Assam into the Bodo-Kachari family. Dasgupta rightly pointed out the advantage of the Bodos in his statement that ‘credibility to recall a community’s early historical accomplishments can offer valuable political capital for its political leaders’ (Dasgupta, 1997, p. 357). Similarly, the Koch-Rajbongshsis’ demand for Kamatapur state is a representation of their nostalgia of their glorious past of Koch kingdom. Smith (1986) and Armstrong (1982) identified that cultural symbols and historical memories serve as a potent force in unifying the group. In the Koch-Rajbogshi and the Bodo ethno-national movement, such symbols are used to legitimise their political demands. Further, the ‘geographical contiguous and close proximity of the Bodos’ helped in their development as mobilised group by providing them a sense of a ‘strong ethno-territoriality’ (as cited in Saikia, 2009, p. 146). However, the Koch-Rajbongshis being more scattered geographically, the level of mobilisation and violence is not as strong as that of the Bodo movement.

Both the communities, in spite of common lineage, often come in contestation with each other. The Koch-Rajbongshis being one of the largest ethnic groups, their demand for ST status was not welcomed by the Bodos. Moreover, in 2003, when Bodoland Territorial Council was formed in the area where the Koch-Rajbongshis are inhabitants, they along with other ethnic groups rose to counter mobilisation. Such contestation can be understood in Baruah and Chandhokes’ statement that state policies of providing self-government actually contributed to competitive mobilisation that increased contestation among groups and intensified conflict (Hassan, 2007, p. 3).
Conclusion

The discourse of the politicisation of ethnicity visualises ethnicity in contemporary times as ‘political phenomena’ and considers that it should not be studied separate from politics. The discussion on the movement of identity assertion by the Bodos and the Koch Rajbongshis in this paper has tried to analyse such interplay of ethnicity and politics. The study shows that multiple factors such as state policies, chauvinistic attitude of dominant groups, elites and ethnic organisations at different points of time led to the process of politicisation of ethnicity among these two ethnic groups. Therefore, the discourse of the politicisation of ethnicity can be considered as a significant approach to understand the present day ethnic movements.

Notes:

i All Assam Kachari Association submitted memorandum to Simon Commission consisting of 10 points.

ii In this paper, the author has used the word ‘Koch-Rajbongshi’ for the community because some of the prominent organisations of the community named it as ‘Koch-Rajbongshi’. But for the Rajbanshis of North Bengal, the author has followed the same word and spelling.
REFERENCES:


Web sources:


With a sizeable presence in the heart of the proposed Bodoland, the Koch-Rajbongshis are seeking ST status to have a say in the decision-making process. (2002, October). Telegraph. Retrieved from http://www.telegraphindia.com/1021004/asp/northeast/story_1259016.asp

**Dipika Paul** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Nagaland University. Email id: paul.dipika6@gmail.com