Article: Understanding the Alienation of Indigenous Ethnic Groups during the Assam Movement of 1979-1985

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Published by: Indian Sociological Society
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Abstract

The Assam Movement which started in 1979 and was supposedly resolved in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord, had its roots in the contention between sections of the Assamese population and the Central Government regarding the unchecked and large scale influx of immigrants into Assam and the threats it posed to the greater Assamese culture and their aspirations. However, one of the unexpected outcomes of this Assamese nationalistic fervour was the alienation of the indigenous ethnic groups that resided in Assam. With the mainstream Assamese organisations like AASU and AAGSP at the helm of the movement and the call for Assamese to be the state language and medium of instruction throughout the state, many of the ethnic groups of the area felt immensely under-represented and their culture threatened. This paper attempts to look into the experiences of indigenous ethnic groups of Assam, focusing on the Bodo tribe, during and after the Assam Movement.

Key words: Alienation, Assam Movement, Ethnic identity, Identity politics

Introduction

In societies like that of Assam, where many ethnic groups exist to share political and economic control, some form of stable power-sharing is always essential; if that is not possible, the group in the position of political power needs to make efforts to safeguard the economic well-being of the rest in order to maintain stability. However, as Myron Weiner points out such an arrangement is so fragile that ‘...demographic changes – the result of differential natural population growth rates among ethnic groups, emigration, or immigration – can disrupt the political system’ (Weiner, 1983, p. 279).

The sudden demise of Lok Sabha member Hiralal Patwari on March 20, 1979 necessitated the conduct of by-elections in the Mangaldai constituency of Assam.
The electoral rolls thus prepared revealed a shocking and massive increase of electorate which could not have possibly been a result of natural increase of population. The only explanation that seemed plausible was that illegal immigrants and non-citizens, mainly from Bangladesh, residing in the state were being inappropriately enfranchised and were somehow able to sneak their names into the electoral rolls. This issue soon caught the attention of the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) who noticed the dangers it posed to the demographic profile of the state as well as its economy, society and its identity. Organisations like AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) took it upon themselves to stand against this threat. The Assam Movement was thus launched in 1979 demanding the eviction of undocumented foreigners and the declaration of Assamese as the State Language by mobilising mostly Assamese-speaking population.

The Assam Movement went on to become the most significant recent event in Assam’s history which left deep impacts on the future political as well as social spheres of the state. The number of communities expressing dissent and demanding a state separate from Assam visibly increased. The separatist movements are noticeably rooted in social conflict caused by the marginalisation, alienation and oppression felt mostly by the indigenous tribal communities of Assam at the hands of the dominant Assamese-speaking population. To limit the scope of the paper, this study will specifically focus on the experiences and testimonies of the Bodo community which is the largest indigenous plains tribal community of Assam. In order to understand the genesis of this social conflict, the study would also need to trace back the social interactions and relations between the communities throughout their shared history. To accomplish this, the study would rely on the analysis of existing academic works related to the subject, oral testimonies from a few people who were directly involved, government reports, newspaper reports, and public as well as organisational appeals, memoranda, etc.

**Identity Consciousness, Preservation and Assertion**

The issue of identity, its assertion and preservation, which played a major role in the Assam Movement, had already been lingering in the Assamese consciousness. This acrimony between the Assamese-speaking and the Bengali-speaking people had been brewing ever since the annexation of Assam by the British. With the establishment of numerous tea gardens, the demand for hard-working and low-
cost labour also increased. The British sought to employ local people but they were reluctant to work in the gardens as labour. Owing to the abundant nature of the region’s resources, the general population of Assam neither had the necessity nor the attraction towards toiling in the tea gardens. Thus, in the initial phase, mostly workforce from the Bodo community was employed in the plantations. However, as the remuneration never increased proportionately to the work-load, even the Bodo workforce started opting out of working as tea garden labour. But, as the demand for cheap labour-force kept increasing, the British resorted to bringing in labourers from the then poverty-stricken regions of India. Labourers were brought in mostly via the sardari, thikadari and arkattiya systems, where a class of professional recruiters (arkattis), headmen of groups (sardars), and contractors (thikadars) would indiscriminately bring in labourers from impoverished and famine-stricken areas with the siren song of prosperity (Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931). Soon labourers started to pour in to work in other production and industrial sectors as well. They started working in the fields, factories as well as households. This influx of ‘outsiders’ however, was quite welcomed owing to their ability to perform back-breaking manual labour on behalf of the local population which was increasingly getting acclimatised to an easier life. The indigenous society started to prefer office jobs, especially government jobs, as they considered those to be more prestigious.

Along with the labourers, there also came an educated, mostly Bengali-speaking, middle-class work-force to be engaged in the British government offices as well as the tea gardens. In 1836, Assamese was replaced by Bengali as a language of government offices, courts and schools. As a result, there gradually emerged bitterness among the Assamese elites against the Bengali-speaking population, although, it was not as critical yet, as a majority of the Assamese society was still mostly engaged with agriculture. But as the influx of migrants kept growing with different groups coming to Assam, the problem assumed a much serious proportion on the eve of India’s independence in 1947. Apart from the few who tilled their land by themselves, a sizeable portion of the society enjoyed the benefits of owning large areas of fertile land tilled by immigrant agricultural labourers.

After Independence, when the bulk of the Sylhet district except portions of Karimganj subdivisions was ceded to Pakistan, Assam came to be constituted of the plains districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, the belt of the autonomous hill districts constituted by the Garo Hills, the United Khasi and
Jaintia Hills District, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Naga Hills, the Cachar district in the Barak River Valley and the Lushai Hills to its South and the large stretch of mountainous country in the frontier tracts under the North East Frontier Agency.

Meanwhile, the need for re-organisation of states was felt throughout the country with the awakening of identity consciousness of distinct cultural units. This led to the appointment of the State Reorganisation Commission in 1953. Emphasis on the breaking up of states on linguistic lines was linked to the growing realisation of the need to strike a balance between the linguistic and geo-political constraint for the sake of administrative convenience, economic considerations, national unity, security and defence. This decision for the linguistic division of the states, however, turned out to be problematic for the newly established province of Assam.

**Problems of Accommodating Diversity**

Assam has been inhabited by a highly diverse population comprising of different tribes and communities. There also existed a sense of distinctiveness between the ‘hills’ people and the ‘plains’ people. While Assamese or Bengali (mainly in the Barak Valley, but also in many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley) was more widely spoken in the plains; most of the hill population spoke one of the many ‘tribal languages’ (Church, 1969, pp. 727-732). Including all these different communities, each with their own distinct sense of identity, into one unified state proved to be quite challenging as proper and total representation of each and every community was not a feasible goal.

Additionally, the problem of accommodating refugees was also troubling the state government. Gopinath Bardoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, expressed his concerns regarding the problems the state was increasingly facing with this unabated settling of East Pakistani refugees since the partition. To that, Nehru replied ‘if Assam adopts a policy of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help would obviously suffer’ (Sinha, 2007, p. 159). In the years that followed, the Central government seemed to maintain this attitude towards the region which slowly led its people to feel more and more alienated. Troubled by this unending influx, sections of Assamese population started criticising the Central government as
being apathetic towards the issue of preservation of their identity and their economic well-being.

But as mentioned before, the influx of ‘outsiders’ had been steadily going on for decades. There was no passionate mass mobilisation of the Assamese population, both tribal and non-tribal, to oppose said influx previously although intermittent anti-outsider sentiment was articulated. So, what changed now? The matter appears to be a case of late realisation and short-sightedness on the part of the Assamese leadership. When it was just the state government struggling to rehabilitate the massive influx of refugees or to deal with land encroachments by illegal immigrants, the bulk of the general population did not see it necessary to get involved directly in helping the state government convince the central government to put a check on the influx. It was only when they started seeing their own land and jobs being threatened by the presence of said ‘outsiders’, that they realised the critical nature of the issue.

**Understanding the Identity of the Tribal Communities of Assam**

It is necessary to discuss a few terms before moving forward with this study. The first concept to look into is that of ‘identity’ itself. According to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, the concept of ‘identity’ bears a hint of ‘sameness or continuity of individual self-concepts through time’ (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000, p. 6). A person’s self-concept however, is usually a dependent variable – it depends on context and interaction. From a socio-cultural and political aspect, the concept of ‘identity’ tends to be closely attached to one’s ethnicity which can be conceptualised as a social construct that encompasses various tangible aspects, such as a shared history, language, religion, customs or traditions. These aspects of ethnic identity allow differentiating between who belongs to their group and who does not (Wolff, 2007).

It is also necessary to understand the term ‘indigenous’. According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, indigenous people refer to the:

> Descendants of the peoples who inhabited the land or territory prior to colonization or the establishment of State borders; they possess distinct social, economic and political systems, languages, cultures and beliefs, and are determined to maintain and develop this distinct identity; they exhibit strong attachment to their
ancient lands and the natural resources contained therein; and/or they belong to the non-dominant groups of a society and identify themselves as indigenous peoples. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 3)

Francesco Capotorti, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in 1977, provided a definition of a ‘minority group’ as:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 2)

The Constitution of India in Article 29 regarding protection of interests of minorities, defines minority groups as ‘any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own...’.

Therefore an indigenous ethnic minority may simply be defined as an ethnically distinct group of people who may have been naturally or forcibly marginalised in a particular geographical or conceptual space either in terms of their strength in number or in terms of their share in the power structure.

In this understanding, while ethnicity and indigeneity of a community for most parts can be considered a constant variable, the status of minority would be dependent on comparison and context. For example, in India, the Muslim population is officially considered to be a minority. In fact, whenever the term ‘minority’ is mentioned, most people often assume that it implies the Muslim community only. However, this assignment of exclusivity to a term is immensely limiting and flawed. The term minority refers to a status or state of being. It is not a fixed label that can only be claimed by a single group. This status is subject to change when put under different contexts and comparisons. So even if in context
of population in India, when put in contrast with the Hindu community, the Muslim community does qualify as a minority, however, if put in the context of world population, the Muslim community clearly becomes an indisputable majority community, being the second largest religious group in the world.

Similarly, while both the Bodo and Karbi tribal communities have a sizeable population in terms of existence in Assam, if put in the context of the number of members from any of these communities in positions of power or political representation in the state, then this number is disproportionately small. Therefore, it would not be wrong to refer to these tribal communities as a minority in the political scene of the state of Assam.

Impact of the Assam Movement on Indigenous Tribal Communities

In the 1979 mobilisation, even the indigenous tribal groups, such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Tiwas, amongst others came forward in support of the eviction of the foreigners and also participated in the movement. However, as the movement progressed, its nature started to get altered. The definition of ‘who was an Assamese?’ became narrower, and as stated by Uddipana Goswami, gradually came to be hijacked by the dominant Assamese-speaking Hindu community (Goswami, 2014, p. 6).

This growing chauvinism within the movement was criticised by Hiren Gohain as he pointed out that despite various episodes of violent mob attacks, the state and national leaders were keen on presenting a peaceful image of the movement. The Assamese press, according to Gohain, further aggravated the atmosphere of terror and anxiety by prevaricating the movement to justify it and make it more palatable to the public (Gohain, 1980). The movement also no longer remained focused on the issue of the eviction of illegal immigrants and transformed into an ethnic conflict between the Assamese-speaking, the Bengali-speaking and the many indigenous non-Assamese speaking communities. This garnered a lot of opposition and criticisms from political leaders and section of the public alike.

This noticeable obsession of the movement with the reinforcement of the Assamese identity left many indigenous ethnic communities feeling grossly alienated. The initial draw of the movement, owing to its aim to rid the land of illegal immigrants and to preserve the identity of its native residents, soon wore off. Although the movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985,
it left in its wake a host of unresolved ethnic unrest within the state. Despite starting out as a politically inspired movement, the Assam Movement had soon converted into a complex socio-political catalyst.

Indigenous ethnic communities of Assam like the Karbis and the Bodos felt more conscious of their own ethnic identity and the need to assert and preserve it. First, the language movements launched by the dominant Assamese-speaking community and later, the Assam Movement also led by the dominant Assamese-speaking community and their call to impose Assamese as the medium of instruction in all levels of education throughout the state and the attempts to enforce this upon the linguistic minorities, came to be perceived as a cultural threat, ‘to “ASSAMISE” the linguistic minorities by wiping out their distinct language, culture, traditions and ways of life’ (Action Committee of the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Separate State Demand Committee, 1993, pp. 49-54). The non-Assamese speaking communities were overwhelmed with indignance and the only solution they saw to end this marginalisation was in their separation from Assam. Thus, in the post-Assam Movement period, Assam witnessed an exponential increase in secessionist movements and anti-state militant organisations.

This feeling of alienation, however, did not manifest itself overnight. Most tribal communities, throughout the history of this region were never completely assimilated into the dominant Assamese-speaking community. Owing to their geographical isolation and inaccessibility of their habitation, they were able to maintain their distinct tribal culture (Hussain, 1987). Years of being at the periphery of the political, economic as well as social pursuits of the state, most non-Assamese speaking communities did not feel a full sense of belongingness towards the state. Assam’s post-Independence history is laced with demands for separation and autonomy by various tribal communities.

Identity Consciousness and Assertion of the Bodo Tribal Community

One such tribal political organisation, known as All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL), had come into existence in 1933 with the objective of safeguarding the interest of the tribal communities residing in the Assam plains during India’s struggle for independence. However, after Independence, the Tribal League gave up its political character and took to social and cultural matters and came to be known as Tribal Sangha. Dissatisfaction regarding the land settlement for
indigenous tribes and their lack of political representation however continued to exist.

In the second half of the 1960s, a secessionist movement was launched by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) representing the indigenous hill tribes. On January 13, 1967, the Indian Government declared its decision to re-organise Assam on a federal structure within six months. Consequently, the indigenous plains tribes were also inspired to ride this political wave and raised the demand for an autonomous administrative unit for the plains tribes as well. The tribal leaders of the plains held a meeting at Kokrajhar on February 27, 1967 and formed an organisation known as Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) to take their demands for autonomy forward (Assam Police Department, Special Branch, 1970).

The PTCA, which was mostly led by the Bodo elites, was one of the first political organisations to shed light on the political marginalisation of the Bodo community. Right after its formation, in 1967, they submitted a memorandum to the President of India demanding for the ‘separation of the northern tracts of certain districts of Assam’ and the creation of separate administrative units for the plains tribes of Assam. On May 20, 1967, they submitted another copy to the then Home Minister Y.B. Chavan who had arrived on May 19, 1967 to address the demands of various communities regarding the re-organisation of Assam (The Assam Tribune, 1967). The party also contemplated to launch a mass movement for achievement of their demand for a separate autonomous unit, re-delimitation of Parliamentary tribal constituency, eviction of non-tribal people from tribal blocks and belts, etc. As the restlessness and dissatisfaction grew, the leaders, according to government reports, started giving inflammatory speeches on the policy of blood for blood, etc. A booklet captioned Janajatir Tez Kiman Ranga (How Red is the Blood of Tribals) written and published by two PTCA leaders invited the Communist Party to work among the tribal communities. Information was also recorded by the police about PTCA trying to manufacture guns and explosives in jungle hide-out in Goalpara district with the intention of staging an armed rebellion (Assam Police Department, Special Branch, 1970).

As a second stage to this political assertion, they launched an agitation for introduction of Bodo language as medium of instruction on February 28, 1968. There were a few cases of assaults and intimidation of non-tribal headmasters and teachers. The Bodo students also threatened to disrupt the School Leaving
Certificate Examination scheduled to be held soon. The agitation only stopped when the Government agreed to introduce Bodo language in the school up to the stage of class VI (ibid.).

In 1968, the PTCA boycotted the by-election in Kokrajhar (Goalpara) Parliamentary Constituency seat on the ground of unjustified delimitation of the constituency. On the date of polling, the PTCA volunteers interfered in the polling stations and started picketing in front of the polling booths. As a result of these disturbances, polling had to be suspended in 107 polling centers. A number of persons, including top leaders were arrested. The arrest of the PTCA members only further infuriated the tribal protestors who went on to protest more aggressively to the point where, in one instance, the police had to resort to lathi charge and firing. After the arrest of the top PTCA leaders and the repressive measures of the police, the by-election was successfully conducted at a later date, although very few Bodo people participated (ibid.).

On this, the Chief Minister at the time, B.P. Chaliha, was asked by Y.B. Chavan to look into the genuine grievances of the plains tribes and take appropriate action. Chavan emphasised the need for giving them ‘a feeling of satisfaction that their genuine grievances were receiving sympathetic consideration from the government of Assam’ (ibid.). However, the state government was unable to properly address this issue or send a proper report back on the matter and in time this issue went back to the side-lines.

In 1972, the PTCA, under its General Secretary, MLA Charan Narzary, submitted another similar memorandum repeating their demands for the creation of an Autonomous Plains Tribal Region, comprising of the northern tracts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Lakhimpur districts. It pointed out that these northern areas were all tribal inhabited areas and that the proposed autonomous region would only include those tribal areas. Accordingly, the State Government furnished a report comprising the Development Schemes for the Welfare of the Scheduled Tribes (Plains) Implemented during the various Plan Periods which summarised the various development schemes that were apparently in progress, contrary to the claims of the PTCA leaders (ibid.). Yet again the claims and demands of the Bodo community were gradually pushed back into the margins as the popularity of the PTCA also declined.
About six years later, when the Assam Movement was launched in 1979, it garnered enthusiastic support from almost all communities of Assam. The Bodo community’s participation in the Assam Movement was led by prominent leaders like Upendranath Brahma and Prem Singh Brahma. While they supported the motive of the movement to evict illegal immigrants out of the electoral rolls and encroached lands, they were becoming increasingly wary of the direction the movement was seen to be moving towards.

The growing obsession of the movement with a narrow definition of Assamese identity and imposition of the Assamese language, against the backdrop of severe underdevelopment in the tribal areas, left a bitter taste for most of the indigenous non-Assamese speaking communities of Assam (Hussain, 1987). They criticised the irresponsibly aggressive methods of the Assamese leaders. They also condemned the AASU and AAGSP’s boycott of the 1983 elections and criticised it as being a ploy to ‘Assamise’ the state government (Weiner, 1983, p. 280). When AASU leaders refused the demand of the All Bodo Students Association (ABSU) to acknowledge Bodo language as the Associate Official Language of Assam, it came as a huge disappointment to the community and gave them the impression that the AASU leaders were anti-Bodo. Distressed by the lack of opportunities and representation in the political sphere, and negligence and deprivation in the economic sphere, the Bodo-speaking community decided to bifurcate from the mainstream Assam Movement. This initiative was mostly spearheaded by the ABSU. The intention was not to disrupt the Assam Movement but to carry out a parallel movement that would assert their demand for autonomy as well as support the initial goal of the Assam Movement to oust the illegal immigrants (ABSU, 1987).

However, even amidst this strain, there were instances and efforts of unifying the masses of Assam by keeping aside their ethnic differences. Smt. Putali Kayastha, who was immensely active during the Assam Movement, recollected during an interview that there was both support and condemnation for the movement in the hearts of the Bodo and the Karbi communities and others as well. She mentioned that AASU and AAGSP both elicited different responses from the different non-Assamese speaking ethnic communities. AASU was unable to keep the non-Assamese speakers feel represented or satisfied. These communities were vehemently opposed to AASU and their functions within the tribal regions. However, AAGSP was successfully maintaining their position with the indigenous tribal communities. With the efforts of leaders like Nibaran Bora and
Prasenjit Brahma, many Bodos, Karbis and Rabhas not only supported but were also actively involved in the Assam Movement and many even sacrificed their lives as martyrs fighting for the cause. A delegation comprising of activists like Putali Kayastha, Jyotsna Sonowal, Paresh Barua, Ganesh Pegu, Binanda Deka, Iswar Barua, Gautam Bordoloi, Rajat Rabha, Mitradev Mahanta, Jagadish Patgiri and many more, travelled from corner to corner of Assam rallying support from all masses for the movement. They were able to win over large scale support and involvement from diverse communities (Kayastha, 2018).

After the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, situations only took a turn for the worse. Although there were Bodo signatories in the Assam Accord, they found a serious lack of provisions explicitly meant for safeguarding the interests of the tribal communities. The clauses which did indirectly have some semblance to tribal welfare or protection were very vague and susceptible to loopholes.

In the 1985 elections, the leaders of the Assam Movement became leaders of the state. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the erstwhile President of AASU, took the reins of the State Government as the Chief Minister. The people of Assam had high hopes now that power was in the hands of someone who emerged from among them, their aspirations would get the utmost attention and priority. However, it did not take long for the people to get disappointed and disillusioned with the new popular government. The diversity of communities that came together when participating in the Assam Movement was not reflected in the sharing of power of the new government. Most statements and recollections made on this phase of Assam history states that once they had secured positions of power in the state government, the new leadership quickly lost sight of its original goal that was the eviction of illegal migrants and efficient governance of the indigenous people of Assam. Similar to the propagated narrow definition of Assamese identity, the political scene also remained dominated by the already dominant Assamese-speaking community. According to Uddipana Goswami, the earlier imposition of Assamese language and the ‘expressions of cultural and social superiority’ by the Assamese-speaking Hindu community, created a potent anti-Assamese feeling among the non-Assamese speaking autochthonous communities (Goswami, 2014, p. 7).

On February 28, 1986, the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) issued a circular stating that learning the Assamese language would become mandatory for all Secondary School students. This was seen an imposition and further infuriated
the indigenous communities who no longer identified with what the Assamese identity had evolved into (ABSU, 1987).

Another significant development that deterred the common people from maintaining faith or getting more involved in the political scene was the emergence of militant secessionist organisations during and after the Assam Movement. Two of the most significant militant groups relevant to this study were the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), formed in 1979, and the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) formed in 1986. The modus operandi of both the groups was similar – wage an armed struggle for independence against the Government of India. According to police records, both groups also ‘had bases in Myanmar, Bangladesh & Bhutan and with the blessing of the ISI who provided all sorts of logistical support for destabilising India by way of assisting in procurement of arms & explosives etc. from the international arms cartels’ (Home and Political Department, 2014). The violence unleashed by these groups, especially ULFA, largely destabilised the internal security matters of the state to a point where during the end of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta’s tenure as Chief Minister, in November 1990, the entire state of Assam was declared as ‘Disturbed Area’.

Assam thus continued to be in a perpetual state of upheaval and tension ever since the launch of the Assam Movement and even after its supposed resolution. Being a part of a nation trying to rebuild its political and economic status after the ravages of colonialism, these disturbances and the inability of the state to resolve it, dealt heavy blows to the progress of the state which only added to the frustration of the general public. Thus, continued a vicious cycle of discontentment with the state.

**Demand for a Separate State**

Exhausted by the delay in progress and the feeling of betrayal amongst the Bodo community, especially due to their near exclusion from the political power-sharing, eventually led them to launch the Bodoland Movement in 1987. With ABSU at its helm, the movement demanded a separate state of Bodoland. The Bodoland Movement adopted and innovated on the lessons learnt from the Assam Movement itself; one of the most important lessons being that ‘the state does not listen to peaceful petition making; noisy agitation was the only course of action if redress of grievances was sought’ (Goswami, 2014, p. 8).
Goswami identifies two phases within the Bodo Movement. The first phase stemmed out of a feeling of betrayal when the Bodo community, who despite participating in the Assam Movement, found themselves to be ignored both in the Assam Accord and by the new government formed by their fellow Assamese-speaking agitators. This phase was pacified with the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993. The second phase stemmed out of frustration and disappointment from the inefficiency of the BAC settlement. This phase was finally subdued with a second settlement that is the Bodo Accord of 2003, also known as the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), which led to the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (Goswami, 2014).

The genesis of the Bodoland Movement can be attributed to Upendra Nath Brahma who led ABSU during the Assam Movement, and was later posthumously conferred the title of Bodofa (Father of the Bodos), and Premsingh Brahma who was actively involved with the AAGSP during the Movement. Forsaken by the post-Assam Movement developments, both the leaders realised that the only way to uplift the condition of the Bodo tribe was to take control over their own political and economic conditions; and in order to take this control, they had to form a separate autonomous state. Upendra Nath Brahma thus launched the demand for an equal (fifty-fifty) division of Assam to create a separate Bodoland. He claimed that the Bodo community had long been pushed to the margins by the Assamese leaders.

In the beginning of 1987, ABSU, with Upendra Nath Brahma as its president, submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi elucidating on their demands for a separate state, with the hopes that the young Prime Minister would be empathetic towards their genuine grievances. In the memorandum they stated that the Bodo community was one of the earliest settlers of the region along with some other Mongoloid tribes. Even the word ‘Assam’ had its roots in the Bodo language, asserts the document. During the Ahom rule, the Bodo speaking community was able to maintain their own separate niche of a kingdom. The memorandum also claimed that the people who did fit the current chauvinistic definition of Assamese, that is, the non-tribal Assamese-speakers, had actually only started arriving in the 13th and 14th century and were therefore ‘Artificial Assamese’. In the words of ABSU:
...the present artificial Assamese captured Assam and its administration through the process of silent aggression and engulfment policy. The plains tribal people now want to regain the lost ownership and administration of Assam. (ABSU, 1987)

They thus suggested that the state of Assam should be divided fifty-fifty and using the Brahmaputra river as the natural boundary, the Northern valley of the river should be given to the plains tribes. The memorandum also condemned the ‘chauvinist’, ‘anti-tribal’ and ‘repressive’ policies of the contemporary Assamese government.

In August of the same year, ABSU issued a booklet titled *Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty: Fifty three questions and answers* which reiterated the factors and basis of their demand for autonomy. Through the booklet, ABSU pointed out the various grievances of their tribal community and why the creation of a separate state was essential for the all-round protection and development of the plains tribal people of Assam. According to ABSU, their community had to be separated from the seemingly anti-tribal and repressive rule of the Assamese section. A separate state, it was hoped, would help protect the ethnic identity of the Bodos, enable them to preserve and flourish their language and culture, and make it possible for them to achieve equality of status, justice, constitutional rights, and political, economic and social self-determination. The booklet was supposed to address the most frequently asked questions related to their demand for separate state in an attempt to both justify and further clarify their aspiration. Most notably, through the booklet, ABSU clarified that their movement was not a secessionist one as they did not want to break away from India but only to organise themselves into a separate state or a union territory within the Indian nation. ABSU also expressed their support for the creation of a separate state of Karbi Anglong (ibid.).

In November, ABSU submitted yet another document to the then President, Prime Minister, and the Home Minister of India advocating for the creation of a separate state. This document was a book titled *Why Separate State?* which offered explanation of their demand including the historical background, reason, legitimacy, feasibility, and, the ethnic, linguistic and political factors justifying the creation of Bodoland (ibid.).

In a press conference in Mumbai in 1990, U.N. Brahma stated that most of the positions of power in the Assam Government, its officials, bureaucrats, ministers,
policemen, etc. were held by the Assamese people and hardly any by those belonging to the tribal groups. As a result, their tribe was facing gross negligence and suffering from lack of employment opportunities, land alienation, and the lack of proper educational facilities. He also pointed out that ‘these economic plans or developmental schemes [that] are sorted out or chalked out, cannot be sincerely implemented in the true sense’ under the non-tribal government and its bureaucrats, and hence the only ‘solution is the separation, division of Assam and creation of separate state of Bodoland’ (UN Brahma, video footage of interview, 2015).

The movement gradually became violent and fell prey to ethnic cleansing of the Assamese-speaking population in the Bodo dominated areas as well as brutal killings of Assamese administrative officers. This violence was mostly carried out by the Bodoland Security Force (BSF) under Ranjan Daimary and an armed branch of the ABSU called ABSU-Volunteer Force (ABSU-VF) or Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF). In 1990, Upendra Nath Brahma passed away leaving the Bodoland Movement without proper direction or leadership. In the meantime, the Congress party came back in power and with the aim to restore stability and appease the agitating masses, hastily drew up an agreement with the ABSU leaders. BSF was declared as a banned and unlawful militant association in 1992 by the Central Government. With the mediation of the Central Government, in 1993, the Assam Government and the ABSU leaders signed the Bodo Accord which laid the foundation for the formation of the BAC (Sinha, 2007).

However, this understanding was very short-lived as the demand for a separate state still held strong. The BSF, which had rechristened its political front as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), also took to carrying out their separatist demands vigorously (Institute for Conflict Management, 2001). The number of violent episodes of agitation increased exponentially. In 1996, Prem Singh Brahma, who was actively involved with the AAGSP during the Assam Movement, established the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF). In 1997 ABSU declared its intention to resume the demand for the creation of a separate state. The People’s Democratic Front (PDF) sought the intervention of the United Nations in support of the Bodo Community (Sahni, 2002).

It is worth noting that while most of these groups shared similar grievances, their goals were not similar. While others aspired for the creation of a separate state
within India, NDFB aspired for a secessionist outcome – to create a sovereign state independent from India (Goswami, 2014).

In the 1997 elections, the AGP came back to power by forming alliances, with the PDF as one of the allies backed by NDFB. Both NDFB and BLT continued their violent means and the state witnessed brutal episodes of violence and ethnic cleansing in the Bodo-dominated areas.

Exhausted by the perpetual state of instability and law and order problems, the Central Government and the Assam Government finally signed another accord with the BLT – the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003. Through this memorandum, the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District was established which was to have almost similar powers as that of a state and minimum interference from the Assam Government. The Bodo leadership was given considerable political and administrative power under this agreement. Consequently, BLT surrendered arms and ended its separatist movement. NDFB continued its operations until the tripartite signing of the Bodo Peace Accord on January 27, 2020 with the Central and the State Governments (Jain & Kalita, 2020).

Examining the Role of Identity in Social Conflicts

The issue of identity, its assertion and preservation thus came to play a central role in the aftermath of the Assam Movement. Although the movement never explicitly went against any indigenous community, the threat of losing their identity was uniformly felt by the various groups. It is worth noting that the need for preserving ethnic identity exists in varying degrees among various communities depending on their strength in number and position of influence in multicultural India. For instance, communities which do not necessarily face any direct challenge to their existence or position as a whole usually do not experience a need to actively safeguard their ethnic identity.

Here, it would be helpful to understand the concept of ‘thymos’ adopted by Francis Fukuyama from the Platonian tripartite theory of the soul, where the term basically means ‘spiritedness’ or loosely, the ‘competitive spirit’. In the context of identity, Fukuyama defines ‘thymos’ as the ‘the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity’. In the same lines, ‘isothymia is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people, while megalothymia is the desire to
be recognised as superior’ (Fukuyama, 2018, p. iv). Most social movements or identity movements in India seem to stem from iso-thymia. The main issue that most marginalised communities base their movements upon is either erasure or mistreatment of their identities in the social sphere or negligence or exclusion in the economic or political spheres.

There is also a factor of relative perception when it comes to interpreting a socio-political movement. The Assam Movement, for instance, through the perspective of the Assamese-speaking community putting forward their demands to the Central Government, would seem as an iso-thymic movement. However, from the perspective of the marginalised indigenous communities of Assam, with the demands of Assamese to be declared the state language, the denial of other languages like Bodo from being declared the associate state language, and the concentration of administrative, educational, and economic positions of privilege in the hands of mostly the non-tribal people, the Assam Movement seemed like a megalothymic movement.

It can be safely assumed that a person’s quality of life is influenced by the cultural identity he or she is affiliated to. The strong feeling of cultural in-group thus generated is also accompanied by a strong guardedness against the cultural out-group. No matter what the essence of the grievances may be, be it negligence, deprivation, political or economic oppression, or even targeted violence, but in order for a social movement to take shape, there has to be a sense of shared or collective identity among the ostracised group of people. This collective identity may be an ‘imagined’ one where, as propounded by Benedict Anderson, despite never having met or known each and every member personally, a group of people may share a sense of belongingness and ‘in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 5).

The leaders of both Assam’s State Government and the Assam Movement were mostly unable to maintain the trust or confidence of the diverse indigenous communities. This feeling of discontent with the Assamese speaking community was already brewing amidst these communities, but the increasingly chauvinist nature of the Assam Movement seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of unity and coexistence within the state, as is evident in the numerous memoranda, publications, public speeches, and oral testimonies emerging from these communities. And as stated by Fukuyama, no economic or political threat can elicit a similar scale of mass mobilisation as a threat to the collective identity of
the group. It is the idea of belonging to one imagined community that awakens and unites its members transcending all other social or class disparities.

After all, identities compete for expression (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). When any of the groups feel that the expression of their identity is subdued under the ‘mainstream’ discourse, there develops a feeling of an identity crisis. The anxiety surrounding this feeling of identity crisis often manifests itself in the form of identity movements and social movements. In case of the Assam Movement, on one hand, the question of identity united a large section of the Assamese population but on the other hand, the assertion of the Assamese identity also muffled the voices of the ethnic communities of the state and caused them to drift further apart from the larger Assamese-speaking community.
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