CHAPTER-III

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The feeling of separateness and the urge for a separate political arrangement for the Bodos, though the movement for the same for intensified later only, was not quite a new thing. The feeling of the Bodos constituting a separate and distinct ethnic group was, so to say, an inborn instinct. They have always been very sensitive on their racial belongingness and tried their level-best to maintain their distinct identity. They used to suffer from an unusual feeling of racial ego and used to call other ethnic groups of people as “Harsha” (Hari+phisa) or “inferior races”. Their feeling of racial superiority used to keep them always boasting over being identified as the “Bodo” or “Bodo Phisa” (Son of the Bodos), as Sir Edward Gait also was quite sure about it.

When we study the ethnic movements in North-East India we find that the first step of this movement is to assert the identity around certain social problems and the next step is to concretise the identity by forming an ethnic association. The third step is to claim for a separate administrative arrangement, so that the group can preserve their cultural heritage, language etc. The final step is to demand a separate administrative unit comprising the areas where the ethno-cultural groups form a majority.

MEMORANDUM SUBMITTED BEFORE THE SIMON COMMISSION:

When the rather infamous Simon Commission visited Shillong in 1929, a delegation led by Shrimat Kalicharan Brahma met the Simon
Commission and submitted a Memorandum. In this memorandum the delegation, among other things, demanded, “There should be a separate category, the ‘Bodo’ in the Census Report. The delegation also demanded, “In order to safeguard the interest of our community we should have separate representative in the Council”. They also claimed that the Bodos are “serving the British Government by enlisting in the military department” and impressed upon the fact, “A number of Bodo Sepoys are included in the Gorkha Regiment and are generally known as Gorkha. To our opinion, there should be separate regiment as “Bodo Regiment” for the Bodo people of Assam.

The Commission invited memorandum from different representative associations, local bodies and responsible individual on any subject within the limit of the enquiry, fixed 4th January, 1929 as the date for acceptance of memoranda from members representing the “Primitive and Backward Classes”. But the Bodo delegation arrived late in Shillong could submit the memorandum on 28th January only. Altogether four organisations representing respectively the Bodo Community of the Goalpara District, Assam Kachari Jubak Sanmilani, Dhubri Bodo Jubak Sanmilani, and the fourth one representing the Bodos, Garos and Rabhas of the Goalpara Sub-Division. Among them, the third and fourth representations also demanded, “the District of Goalpara should not be transferred to Bengal as the Zamindars have desired.” The last representation was sent through the Governor of Assam praying that His Excellency “will be gracefully pleased to consider the general opinion and interests of the great bulk of the population of the Goalpara district and hold one of this view of the question of its transfer to the Simon Commission”.

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CONVERSION OF THE TRIBAL LEAGUE TO TRIBAL SANGH:

The period following the visit of the Simon Commission to Shillong saw the upcoming of a few newly educated Bodo and other tribal youths to the forefront. At that period, Bodo social reformation movement was undercurrent under the leadership of Shrimat Kalicharan Brahma. In the period preceding this movement, the Bodo society saw a moral fall and social degradation. Bodos at that period were hated by the high-caste Assamese people and their society as “Melchchas” and misbehaved with them inhumanly. The Bodos were not given equal place in the society and were looked down upon. Even in the school and college hostels, Bodos and other Tribals were put in the “Second Mech” only, which was different from the ones boarded by the high-caste students. In these hostels, equal provisions were not provided and treated as if was for “second class citizens”. Bodos at that time were hated because of their domestic habits of rearing livestock like chicken, pig, goat, duck, etc. in an insanitation condition and for their drinking habit. So to say, a few social ills relating to insanitation and vulgarly due to excessive drinks began to intrude slowly. The Bodo villages and their households bore an unseemingly vulgar looks. So Shrimat Kalicharan Brahma from Kajigaon village of Dhubri district undertook a social reformation movement and newly educated Bodo youth extended a helping hand towards it. So as to bring living standard and condition of the society, Shrimat Brahma brought into ‘Brahma Religion’ among the Bodos, from Shrimat Shibnarayan Paramhans of Kolkata.

Imbied with the aspirations for social privileges and political role, Late Rupnath Brahma, the first graduate among the Bodos, took up the venture of forming the All Assam Plain Tribal League, in 1933, alongwith
Late Bhimbar Deuri. This is the first pan-Tribal political platform of plain Tribals ever known to Assam. The League began to raise voice for the political rights of the Bodos and other plain Tribals of Assam.

It may be recalled that the representation submitted to the Simon commission by Shrimat Kalicharan Brahma and Shrijut Shyamacharan Brahma of Dhubri Bodo Jubak Sanmilani demanded separate electorate for the Bodos. Very fortunately the Commission conceded this demand and reserved a seat of Goalpara district for the Plain Tribals. During the 1936 election, Rupnath Brahma was offered the candidature and contested it successfully.

In the floor of the Assam Legislative Assembly, the Tribal League extended support to the Indian National Congress and supported the short-lived Bordoloi Ministry. Later, in 1939, when the Bordoloi Ministry resigned in response to the call of the Indian National Congress against the involvement of India in the World War-II without consulting the Congress, Mr. Syed Sadullah took over the reign. Then the Tribal League did not hesitate to change over its loyalty to the Sadullah Ministry. Rupnath Brahma became a Minister and Bhimbar Deuri came to prominence in the Tribal Polity. The conditions ended in 1946 when Gopinath Bordoloi again became the Prime Minister of Assam. Then the Tribal League rejoined the Bordoloi Ministry and Rupnath Brahma again became Minister.

The Post Independent India witnessed a radical change in the polity. Congress Ministry under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi came to power with majority. The Tribal League joined this Ministry. They were for long with the Congress and so much identified with the Congress that the leadership no longer felt the need for the necessity of the Tribal
League as a political platform for them. Eventually, in 1956, the Tribal League was dissolved and candidly transformed into the All Assam Tribal Sangha, a mere socio-economic body. The new Sangha began to function as a welfare body, leaving aside its political character and role. Its activity was restricted to the identification of Scheduled Tribes and issuing Caste Certificate to them, craving for grates from the Government.

**FORMATION OF PTCA AS THE FIRST POLITICAL PLATFORM:**

The conversion of the Tribal League into the Tribal Sangha created a bid vacuum in the Post-Independent Tribal Polity in Assam. All the political thinking and activities got totally stopped. All leaders and workers of the erstwhile Tribal League began to take refuge under different political formations, many of the joining the Indian National Congress formally. The thought about an independent Tribal Polity in Assam thus met with a premature death.

This situation of the unforeseen political vacuum and of utter chaos in the Tribal Polity, was lamented by many people, including the upcoming youthfolk. These newly grown educated Tribal Youthfolk began to think about filling up this political vacuum created since the dissolution of the tribal League. For the purpose, this new band of Tribal Youths first of all tried to gather opinion and consolidated their position among the Tribal masses. These youths took the help of the young students and help from the Students Union on regional basis. Thus avenues were created for gathering political opinion and thus their hold among the masses was strengthened day by day.

The factors that led towards the birth of the Plains Trinals’ Council of Assam, it may be said that these are very closely connected to the Fith Schedule of the Constitution of India. After Independence, they compared
their position as regards constitutional safeguards with that of the Scheduled Tribes in the hill areas of Assam and the Scheduled Tribes living in other States. They found that the plain Tribals of Assam enjoy the minimum constitutional safeguard among the Scheduled Tribes in India.

On 23rd January’1967, Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, while talking to a Mizo delegation announced that Assam will be restructured on federal basis. This announcement emboldened the young student leaders, which made to think about creating a political platform so as to help raise voice for fulfillment of political aspiration of Plain Tribals of Assam. By then, political opinion among the Tribal people in respect of the need for a separate political arrangement for them was already ripe. The Goalpara district Bodo Students’ Union utilised this situation and solicited opinion for forming a political platform for the Plain Tribals. This proposal found many ready takers and consequently necessary steps were taken for a political convention. On 27th February’1967, an Independent political platform for the Plain Tribals of Assam was formed with the name and style – “Plain Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA)”.

With the ready help and initiatives of the students, thus the PTCA got its inception. The ABSU took the opportunity for utilising this platform for raising the demand of a separate political arrangement for the Plain Tribals of Assam —“Regional Autonomy” within the State of Assam. Thus the Bodos and other Plain Tribals of Assam came to assert their right for political autonomy as they were people different from Assamese mainstream population, differing in respect of language, culture, traditions and customs. The concept of an independent identity
and distinct ethnicity thus came to intrude among the Bodos and other Plain Tribal groups of Assam.

The demand for an “Autonomous Region” began to get unprecedented momentum and created an irresistible wave in the Tribal political urge. The demand was later on upgraded to a separate Union Territory, with the name and style – “Udayachal” and was demanded on 7th January, 1973. This demand for Union Territory got intensified during 1972-73. The movement continued democratically through time to time hartals (strike) and procession and mass-rallies. This made the Bodos and other plain Tribals of Assam politically conscious about their Constitutional Right and Civil Liberties.

In between, during 1974-75, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched a vigorous mass-movement demanding Roman Script for Bodo Language. As the demand fell into the deaf ear of the Government, the Sabha took own initiative of introducing Roman Script in Bodo Medium L.P. Schools and prepared primers in their own. Street Procession, mass-rallies, strikes, etc. continued. In the process, the PTCA extended full support to the movement and got involved in the movement, as the whole Bodo population became entangled in the same. On 28th Sept’ 1974, Police fired upon a peaceful procession at Barpeta Road and two processionists namely, Amlaram Boro and Shibram Boro met with death on the spot. Still the movement was intensified and altogether 18 (Eighteen) Bodos laid their lives for the cause of Roman Script.

The direct support and tacit involvement of the PTCA leaders in the Roman Script Movement can not be blamed as the whole Bodo people were actively involved in the movement. The then prevailing political atmosphere among the Bodos was nationalist politics, all activities relating
to Bodos were considered as their own by all Bodos and got involved therein in one way or other. For the same reason, the activities and works of PTCA and the ABSU were very hard to be distinguished as all leaders and activists of the Bodo organisations used to work together, hand in hand, in all programs. The same case was with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and ABSU. Frankly speaking, all programs of PTCA, ABSU and BSS used to get mixed and one could hardly distinguish the leaders and activists of these organizations. None did mind it for the sake of nationalist politics. The Roman Script Movement met with an unceremonious and disastrous end with the intervention of the Central Government. Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, could very successfully convince the BSS leaders and imposed Devnagri Script on the Bodos. The Bodos has a broken heart and finding no other way out they accepted the Devnagori Script on the experimental basis and on the conditions to be fulfilled by the Government in respect of its implementation. For the above reasons, many Non-Bodos mistake the Roman Script Movement as the movement for separate Udayachal State.

The course of the Roman Script Movement and the attitude of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, All Assam Students Union and the Assamese Intellectuals and the people in general too, brought about a great psychological alienation from the Assamese Mainstream. It was alleged that many Caste-Assamese youths used to accompany the Police and contribute to the torture on the agitating Bodo masses. Above all, the Assam Sahitya Sabha maintained a tactful silence. The AASU gave posture that seemingly aimed at the annihilation of the Bodos.

However, PTCA's role is not satisfactory. During the Emergency Period of 1975-76, the PTCA leaders stopped all political activities,
apprehending arrest and imprisonment. To escape arrest, they even suspended the demand of the separate Udayachal and kept aloof from the political scene. After the Emergency was over, the PTCA took part in the General Election of 1977. There was a strong wave for the Janata Party and the PTCA entered into an electoral alliance with it. The PTCA could return one M.P. and five MLAs and also joined the Golap Borbora Ministry in Assam. Tasting the political power, PTCA leaders shed away all nationalist tinge in their politics. The leaders bargained for power and foreshook the movement for separate State. Whatever little remained in respect of the demand separate “Udayachal” has vanished together after it had joined the Ministry. The lone Bodo member in Parliament, Shri Charan Narzary, the PTCA General Secretary, announced on 4th April’1977 that the PTCA has given up the demand of separate Udayachal. Also he did not hesitate to mislead the August House that 18 (Eighteen) Bodo laid down their lives for the cause of the Devnagri Script.

The above activities of the PTCA leaders hurt the heart of young PTCA leaders. When they protested it the Young PTCA was dissolved in 1979. Finding their leaders astrayed away from their original aims and objectives, the dissatisfied folk of Young PTCA leaders and workers formed the PTCA (Progressive). Thus the PTCA met an factional division and the tinge of nationalist polity vanished altogether from the PTCA.

The bosses of the PTCA were contended with political power and privileges. For the sake of self-interest, they had already fore-shaken the nationalist polity and the causes of the common people. Thus, the role of Regional political party in State politics is almost unpredictable.

The course of the Movement for a separate State under the leadership of the PTCA was comparatively long one, lasting at least for
a decade. For the agitating Bod mass, the period of decade long PTCA leadership was just a temporary phase in the Tribal Politics and proved to be not more than a mere euphoria. Tribal people very rapidly began to lose confidence on PTCA leaders, accusing them of betraying the great cause of Udayachal.

MOVEMENT LED BY THE PTCA (P):

Betrayed by their senior leaders, the young leaders of the PTCA were very much shocked. They persuaded the senior leaders to retain the demand of Udayachal. But when the young leaders insisted on continuous movement for the separate Udayachal, the PTCA bosses got the youth wing – YPTCA dissolved. Then the youth section of the PTCA along with the hardliner senior thought an alternative political party, which would keep the demand of “Udayachal” alive and lead a continuous movement for achieving the same. These youth leaders and senior party hardliners with a section of PTCA worker met in a political convention on 22\textsuperscript{nd} May’ 1979 and gave birth to the new political party, the Progressive PTCA or PTCA(P).

The PTCA(P), for the first time, submitted a memorandum to Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, on 8\textsuperscript{th} July’ 1979 demanding a separate Union Territory with the name and style- “Mishing Bodland”. This was followed by a number of occasions when the PTCA(P) leaders submitted memoranda on the demand of a separate Union Territory. Lastly, the PTCA(P) staged a huge demonstration at the Boat Club, New Delhi on 22\textsuperscript{nd} April’ 1983 and submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister, Smt. Gandhi in this regard.

The movement under the leadership of the PTCA(P) for a Union Territory lasted only for a half a decade and proved to be just a intermittent
phase in the history of the Bodo Tribal Movement for a separate State. The move taken by the ABSU for unification for the divided PTCA leaders brought about an elimination of the PTCA(P) and coming up of another political platform – UTNLF.

**MOVEMENT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF UTNLF:**

Seeing it very clearly that a fractured political leadership can bear no fruit, the ABSU began to take steps for unification of the PTCA and the PTCA(P). The ABSU leaders began to make consultations with the leaders of both the fractions in this regard. Finding green signals from various Bodo quarters, ABSU took up steps for giving birth to altogether a new political platform unifying both the fractions of the PTCA. From 17th to 19th April'1984, a political convention of all Tribal Organisations was held at Harishing of Darrang District. In this convention, dissolution of both the fractions of PTCA was favoured and a new political platform namely, the United Tribal Nationalists Liberation Front (UTNLF) was formed. Of course, only a few middle ranking leaders and workers of PTCA attended this convention though all leaders of PTCA(P) attended it. Mr. Binoy Khungur Basumatary became the Chairman, while Mr. Kanakeswar Narzary became the General Secretary of the new Tribal Political Platform.

Thus we find that there were just a change in the label but not in the substance as both of them were in their respective posts in the erstwhile PTCA(P). The grand unification move of the ABSU thus met with an utter failure and ended in a fiasco, as the big bosses of the PTCA did not turn up fearing that they will lose hold in the proposed new structure.

The new front, for the first time, submitted a Memorandum on 2nd May'1984, demanding a separate Union Territory, which has been re-
christened as the “Homeland” for the Plain Tribals of Assam. This was
done evidently to mobilise towards the cause of a separate State, from
various Tribal groups other than the Bodos. Since then the UTNLF met
the Prime Minister Late Rajiv Gandhi and other Minister of Union
Government in a number of occasions demanding a “Tribal Land” for
the Assam Tribal Delegations from the UTNLF met the Prime Minister
Late Rajiv Gandhi, on 10th July’1985 and 31st July’1986 reiterating the
demand for creation of a separate “Tribal Land” carving out of existing
Assam.

The Bodo Tribal Movement for a separate Tribal “Homeland” on
the northern bank of Brahmaputra, under the leadership of the UTNLF,
met with a few significance changes, in respect of the students
participation in the movement. It is true, by virtue of ABSU initiatives
for political mobilization, the students has been the pioneer of the
movement for a separate State. It is also already noted that the ABSU
took initiative for forming the first independent political platform – the
PTCA, for the Assam Tribals in Post Independent India. In the later
period of the movement for a separate State under the leadership of the
PTCA and the PTCA(P) also, the ABSU used to take all major initiatives
for mobilisation of public support. All the ABSU used to take all major
steps for political unification of the PTCA and the PTCA(P). But since
the time of the formation of the UTNLF, the students participation in the
political activities became more open and direct. So to say, the students
became active participants of all Tribal Political Programs and their
determinator. Consequently, the ABSU could have a bigger say to
formulating the Tribal Movement Programs than they had ever before.

The UTNLF could very successfully paved the away for larger
political activity among the Bodos. It began to handle the more basic substantial issues like eviction of the Tribals from the reserved forests, sexual abuse on the Bodo women by the minorities, voice against compulsory Assamese subject in the schools and the likes. The lone member of the party in Asam Assembly Mr. Binai Khungkur Basumatary, President of the Front, used to make hue and cry against these all. He took his oath of allegiance to the Constitution in Bodo, which aroused support and supports among the masses towards the party as the champion of the ethnic causes.

By then, the ABSU had become matured in itself. It began to build it up so as to make it fit to handle political programs independently. The student activities and their postures began to become more and more extreme day by day. Towards the end of 1986, the UTNLF leadership began to lose its hold over the students. By then the ABSU found the situation ripe for snatching away the leadership of the movement for a separate State.

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