Chapter IV

The Bodos And The Autonomy Movement

The Bodos, an off-shoot of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, have been one of the earliest settlers of Assam. They form one of the major constituents of the present population of the province. The early history of the Bodos still remains oblivious due to dearth of evidences, either written, epigraphic or archaeological. The references found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in early Sanskrit literature, and in other religious texts are not sufficient to ascertain their past history. The traditions still prevailing among the people consists of one lengthy list of Kings that is not at all reliable.

The Buranjis, i.e., the Ahom chronicles, give some information on the past history of the Bodos. The Buranjis contain only the narratives of the wars between the Ahoms and the Kacharis (Bodos). So nothing is precisely known regarding the origin, migration and early state formation of the Bodos. The historians, social scientists and anthropologists studied the subject have produced some guesswork only. Sidney Endle remarked 'the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history.'

Original Homeland of the Bodos:

Sidney Endle who spent many years of his life in propagating Christianity among the Kacharis, had referred to Tibet and China as the original homeland of the Bodos. He believed the Bodos were the most dominant race in Assam in the
past and some of the physical feature of the country and place names were given by the Bodos or derived from the Bodo words. Moreover, they established powerful kingdoms in the eastern and western parts of Assam the remnants of which survived till the coming of the British. He remarked 'the Kachari race were the original autochthones of Assam, and that even now, though largely Hinduised, they still form a large, perhaps the main, constituent element in the permanent population of the province.'

Gait also describes the Bodos as 'the aborigines or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley.' According to him the names 'Kachari' and 'Mech' are given to them by the outsiders. They call themselves as 'Bodo' or 'Bodo-fisa'(sons of the Bodos) in the Brahmaputra valley, and 'Dimasa' or 'Dima fisa' (sons of the great river) in the north Cachar Hills. The Ahoms called them 'Timasa', a corruption of the word Dimasa.

But the modern scholars do not like to regard the Bodos as the aboriginal or the 'earliest known' people of Assam due to want of authentic historical evidences and refused to support the views of Endle and Gait. On the bases of the Buranjis, however, they recognised the Bodos as the people inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley before the coming of the Ahoms. According to Barpangari: “No primary source is available as to the claim of the Boros as ‘Bhumi-patra’ or sons of the soil....”

According to Raj Mohan Nath, there had been an ancient country in between north of the Himalayas and western China known as the Bodo or Bod country which meant the homeland of the Bodos, synonymous with the Sanskrit word ‘Varsha’ (like Bharat-varsha the homeland of Bharat). There were various parts of the country such as Hor- Bod, Kur- Bod, etc. and in later times when
Buddhism spread into the country, the southern part inhabited by the Buddhist Lamas was known Bsti (Lama)- Bod which has now been transformed into Tibbot or Tibet.\(^9\)

The inhabitants of the various parts of the Bod country were known as Boddo- Ficha or Boddo- cha (Ficha- Cha- Children) or the children of the Bod country, and were later known as the Boddos or Bodos.\(^{10}\) He further said the Bodos had attacked the Austrics while the latter were in the Brahmaputra valley from across the Himalayas.\(^{11}\)

These Bodo invaders were the people of the Bod country. G.A. Grote also supported the view of the existence of the Bod country. According to him there was a country in Tibet known as 'Bod- yut' and its inhabitants were known as 'Bod- pa' and their language was Bod- skad.\(^{12}\)

According to S.K. Chatterji the national name of the Tibetan people was 'Bod' which has been Indianised as 'Bhota'. "Some groups of them came south towards India nevertheless, notably in Sikim and in Bhotan.\(^{13}\)

Similarly Bishnu Prasad Rabha said the words 'Bodo' and 'Bhot' have originated from the word 'Bod' meaning the Tibetans. The Tibetans living in the hills came to be known as 'Bhota' and in the plains as 'Bodo', and both were the descendants of the same Tibetan family.\(^{14}\)

The popular legends prevalent among the Bodos also support the hypothesis of the outside origin of the Bodos, mainly from the Himalayan region. One of the legends has to say that 'the highest and the whitest mountain (the Himalayas) is their father' (Zwma Fwtma Bipha Hazwma).\(^{15}\) It suggests the Himalayan region as the former abode or homeland of the Bodos.
Political Unity of the Bodos:

The different sections of the Bodos had the credit of building several powerful kingdoms in the Brahmaputra valley and the neighbouring hills. Though belonged to the same racial stock the Bodos as a community did not have political unity. The different ruling houses of the Bodo kingdoms did never try to unify the scattered Bodo communities in the past. The process of state formation among the various Bodo communities remained in a state of semi-tribal semi-feudal condition of existence. Gait said "There was no strong national spirit or other cohesive element amongst the Mongolian tribes of Assam, and their natural condition was probably that of number of small communities, each under its own Chief or headman, and independent of its neighbours a state of things, in fact, very similar to that which existed at the time of the British conquest amongst the Garos, khasis and Nagas, whose organisation in many cases was of a distinctly republican type. From time to time a local chief of unusual enterprise and ambition, or possibly some khatriya adventurer, would reduce these petty states and make himself master of the whole country. So long as the central administration was young and vigorous, the tribal headman would be held in check, but as soon as it became weak and effeminate, as usually happened after a few generations, the latter would recover their lost independence, and enjoy it until it was again subverted in the manner already described."16

The only bond of unity existing amongst the various Bodo communities was the 'community of blood, and language as well as the religious rites and customs.'17 Besides this, Bhuyan has identified two other factors contributing to the communal unity of the Bodos; first, the Bodos living in various parts outside Cachar, looked to the Heramba kingdom with its capital at Dimapur, Maibong or
Khaspur as a symbol of their racial unity, and second, wherever the Bodos lived they paid their loyalty to the Heramba kings and paid their tributes to them. Buchanan-Hamilton recorded in 1808 thus, "Although long separated from their prince, and scattered through dominions of more powerful sovereigns, they still retain their loyalty, and every year contribute to give them support. Each family wherever settled, gives from one to five rupees, which are collected by persons regularly deputed from Cachar."  

Another symbol of the unity of the Bodo-Kacharis was the 'Kechakhab Gosani at Sadiya. The bodos of the Brahmaputra valley as well as the Duars rulers continued to pay homage to the Goddess.  

Thus 'the annual tribute to the Cachar Raja and worship at the Sadiya temple accomplished what the Olympic games and the temple of Appollo at Delphi had done in the unification of the separated states of Hellas'. But whatever may be the degree of racial unity brought into being by these symbols, it did not serve the purpose of political unity of the Bodo people.  

The racial and political consciousness among the Bodos grew in modern times. Under British colonial rule there grew up a middle class elite amongst the Bodos also and they in turn helped in inculcating a sense of consciousness among the Bodo people. Prominent among the Bodo elite was Kalicharan Brahma (b. April 1860). Having a little bit of formal education and being engaged in timber trade along with his father, he took up the cause of serving the people of his community. A Brahma by religious conviction and persuasion, Kalicharan took to religious preaching amongst his community. Apart from this he also tried his level best to serve the cause of reforms in the field of economic, social, educational and political life of the Bodo people. He was instrumental in forming
the ‘Bodo Mahasanmilani’ for the regeneration of the finer qualities of the Bodo people.22

The important activities undertaken by the Bodo Mahasanmilani were:

1. The ban on the use of rice-beer (zou) in festivals and in private,

2. The reduction of bride price to Rs.51,

3. The restriction on women folk for going out to market places etc. until they attain the position to safeguard their own selves.

4. The ban on the rearing of harmful animals like pigs, etc.,

5. The ban on the method of marriage by forcefully carrying the bride against her wishes, and so on and so forth.

Moreover, the Mahasanmilani also took steps for the promotion of the welfare of the women, publication of monthly magazine for intellectual development of the Bodo people, the spread of education. A simple code of conduct to be followed by the Bodo people was also formulated.23 All sections of the Bodo people lent support to the reformation programmes initiated by Kalicharan Brahma and thus a racial awakening grew up amongst the people of the Bodo community.

The Brahma movement of Kalicharan Brahma helped in the long run in the emergence of a Bodo elite the prominent of them were Rupnath Brahma the first Bodo graduate, Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury- the first Bodo M.P. and the President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Sobharam Brahma Chaudhury the founder President of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilani, Modaram Brahma the first Bodo to get Padmashree Award of the central Government.

The newly emerged Bodo elite soon realised the fact that the Bodo people were being neglected and socially oppressed and economically exploited. The Bodos, as they remained divided within itself and without a common platform,
helped in the creation of several ethnic organisations amongst the Bodo sub-
groups, such as the Kachari Sanmilan, the Deuri Sanmilan, the Talung
Sanmilan, etc. in the early decades of the 20th century. The main objectives of
these organisations were to work for the regeneration of their respective
societies.

The appointment of the Statutory Commission with Sir John Simon as the
Chairman on November 8, 1927 to go into the process of constitutional reforms
in India was taken advantage of by the plains tribes including the Bodos to move
in the direction of getting a better deal in terms of constitutional safeguards for
their respective communities. The Commission by a Royal notification on 6
March 1928 invited memoranda from officials, local bodies and responsible
individuals on any subject that fell within the scope of the enquiry. The Indian
national political parties resolved to boycott the Commission in view of the
fact that not a single Indian was included in the Commission. But the plains
tribes including the Bodos of Assam decided to co-operate with the Commission.
On the eve of the visit of the Commission to Assam, a representative
Conference of the Bodo community was held at Titabor (near Jorhat) on 12
August 1928 under the auspices of the Kachari Yubak Sanmilan. The
Conference marked the emergence of racial and political consciousness
amongst the plains tribes including the Bodos of Assam.

The Conference resolved "...the Kachari community of Assam do not
recognise themselves as a lower class of Hindu or untouchable and do hereby
declare that they are quite independent from the Hindu community in all respects
such as political, social and religious etc."

The Conference also made an
attempt at unifying all the Kachari (Bodo) communities and demanded that all
the different sections of the Kachari community such as Rabha, Sonowal, Thengal, Dimasa, Lalung etc. of both the valleys be counted and recognised as the Kachari community."²⁵

In another resolution the Conference affirmed that "...as this community was once the ruling race of Assam, they should be given opportunity to have hands in political matters even now."²⁶ Finally the Conference decided to cooperate with the Simon Commission and submit a memorandum on behalf of the Kachari Community.

When the Commission visited Assam in late 1928 the Plains tribal communities of Assam, then classified as the 'primitive and backward tribes', submitted four memoranda²⁷ including that of the Assam Kachari Yubak Sanmilani led by Jadav Chandra Khakhari representing the Lalungs, the Rabhas, the Mechés, Thengals, Saraniyas, Dimasas and the Hojais. But the Simon Commission treated these four memoranda as one (Memorandum E, Assam 733) and the plains tribes were given one interview on January 4, 1929.²⁸

These memoranda reflected the grievances and wishes and aspirations of the plains tribes in general and of the Bodos in particular. Some of their main demands were,

1. They demanded the maintenance and preservation of the racial integrity of the Kacharis (Bodos) who are divided into several sub-groups, such as the Rabhas, Sonowals, Mechés, Thengals, Lalungs, Saraniyas, Dimasas, Hojais, etc.,

2. Reservation of seats in the Central and provincial legislatures and in local bodies.
3. Reservation of jobs in the Government departments and establishments.

4. Providing facilities for spread of education, scholarships, etc., in the different streams of higher education, agriculture, engineering and commerce and science, etc.,

5. Creation of administrative units comprising the tribal areas.

6. Creation of a Bodo Regiment, and

7. Opposition to the plan of some Zamindars for the transfer of Goalpara district to Bengal.

Thus the plains tribes, mainly the Bodos, launched their political career through the submission of the memoranda to the Simon Commission in 1928-29. They did it in a situation when there was not a single person literate enough to draft the petition for submission to the Commission from amongst the plains tribes and they hired the services of a Muhammadan layer.

However, the Assam Committee that was formed to facilitate the complete assessment of the problems of Assam and to help the Commission in recording the findings and in preparing the Report was not sympathetic to the problems of the tribes. So the Bodos failed in their first political endeavour.

The educated leaders of the plains tribes thereafter took a concrete step to unite all the local organisations after the departure of the Simon Commission. Bhimbar Deuri and other tribal leaders realised that without a united tribal organisation they would not be in a position to exert sufficient political pressure for fulfilling their political and other aspirations. The proposed constitutional reforms under the Government of India Act 1935 also induced them to get united under a single socio-political organisation. For the consummation of this...
objective a convention of all the plains tribes of Assam was held at Raha on 17 April 1933 in the district of Nowgong. Jadav Chandra Khaklari presided over the convention. The convention resolved to form the All Assam Tribal League (Tribal League) comprising all the plains tribes of Assam. Thus was formed the first political party of the plains tribes of Assam. "The formation of the Tribal League was a step towards bringing all the Mongoloid tribes and communities to a common political platform."30

The Tribal League adopted a resolution to include all the tribal communities in the plains of Assam in one group besides demanding the reservation of seats for them in the provincial legislature.31 In this way the polarisation of tribal politics began under the leadership of educated tribal elites.32

The Role of the Tribal League in the politics of Pre- independent Period of Assam:
The Tribal League played a very important role in the politics of Assam in the pre-independent period. The demand for separate electorate to the plains tribals was granted under the constant pressure exerted by the League. The Government of India Act 1935 made provision for four reserved seats in the Legislative Assembly and one nominated seat in the Legislative Council for the tribals in Assam. In the general elections of 1937, held under the provisions of the said Act, the Tribal League bagged all the four reserved seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly.32 Bhimbar Deuri, the General Secretary of the Tribal League, was nominated by the Government to the Assam Legislative Council in 1939. Thus for the first time the plains tribals had their ethnic representatives in
the Assam Legislative Assembly and Council. This was a great political achievement of the plains tribes.

The involvement of the Tribal League in parliamentary politics was a matter of great importance in so far as the formation of the government was concerned during 1937-47. As neither the Congress headed by Gopinath Bardaloi nor the Muslim group headed by Muhammed Saadullah secured a majority in the Assembly, a tug-of-war ensued between the two. Both Bardaloi and Saadullah attempted to lure the members of the Tribal League to join their respective parties for facilitating the formation of ministry. The competition to lure the Tribal League members developed to such a pitch that at one time the Assam Congress proposed to support the Tribal League from outside if it formed the Government.33

The Tribal League, however, did not want to form the Government, but it took full advantage of the developing political situation and kept its option open and remained non-committal to either party. The fundamental aims of the Tribal League during this period were the preservation and maintenance of the socio-economic and cultural rights including the eradication of the opium evils from amongst the plains tribes of Assam. With this end in view the Tribal League also demanded the retention of the Line System without which, they thought the entire tribal economy and culture would be jeopardised by the influx of immigrants.34

The Tribal League leaders, therefore, decided to extend support to the government that would not go against the interests of the tribes and work for the fulfilment of their aspirations.35 Saadullah formed one after another two coalition ministries during 1 April 1937 to 18 September 1938. The policy pursued by
Saadullah was not favourable to the Tribal League and therefore they accused Saadullah for being anti-tribal. Being frustrated at the policy of Saadullah, the Tribal League inclined towards the Congress.

In the second session of the Tribal League held at Kokrajhar in June 1938, Bhimbar Deuri, presiding over the session overtly criticised the successive Saadullah government for doing nothing for the tribes while the latter worked for the betterment of the Muslims.

Assam Congress, on the other hand, under the leadership of Gopinath Bardaloi, lured the Tribal League by giving assurance to protect the tribal areas by maintaining the Line System for safeguarding the interests of the tribes. An agreement was made between the Congress and the Tribal League on 16 September 1938, to the effect that

1. The Tribal League would maintain its independent identity,
2. The principle of separate electorate for the Tribals would be maintained,
3. The Tribal Communities would have the rights to send representatives to the local bodies,
4. The inclusion of all tribals irrespective of religion or faith in the schedule list,
5. The plains tribes would be treated as a separate class in matters of appointment in government services,
6. The provision for making grants in the annual budget for the spread of education amongst the tribes and for stipends to tribal students in general and professional education.
7. The induction of one tribal member of the Assembly in the ministry, and,

8. The settlement of lands to the landless tribals.

Thus taking the Tribal League leaders into confidence, Gopinath Bardaloi, the leader of the Congress was successful to topple the Saadullah government on 13 September 1938. Bardaloi then formed a Congress coalition ministry on 20 September 1938 with the induction of Rupnath Brahma as a minister in the Cabinet. The ministry led by Gopinath Bardaloi continued for nearly a year and it resigned on 15 November 1939 in pursuance of the decision of Congress Working Committee.

In the wake of the resignation of the Bardaloi ministry Saadullah formed the third coalition ministry on 17 November 1939 and the League Leaders supported him on the basis of an agreement the terms of which were the same as had been agreed with the Congress earlier. Rupnath Brahma again became a minister.

But the policy pursued by the Saadullah ministry went against the interests of the tribes. Great resentment prevailed amongst the tribes even some of the tribal leaders became restive because of the anti-tribal and pro-Muslim policy favouring Muslim immigration to Assam by Saadullah. The 'colonisation scheme' and the 'grow more food campaign policy' of Saadullah at best went against the interests of the tribal people.

In the fifth session of the Tribal League held at Mangaldoi on 20 April 1945, Rabi Chandra Kachari (a Tribal League member of the Assembly and a coalition partner) openly criticised the land settlement policy of Saadullah.
The voice of protest was also raised in the Kachari Sanmilani held at Sibsagar in May 1945. Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury presiding over the 13th session of the Sanmilani expressed the opinion that the tribals had no sympathy with the Saadullah and criticised the Tribal League leaders for extending support to Saadullah.38

Thereafter the question of 'Grouping of Assam' with Bengal came up in the wake of the declaration of the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946. Saadullah supported the Grouping of Assam with Bengal, while the Tribal League opposed it.

On 1 October 1945, the Assam Legislative Assembly was dissolved and general elections were held in January 1946. The elections returned the Congress to the Assembly with a majority enabling Gopinath Bardaloi to form the ministry. The Tribal League leaders suffered heavy defeats, only two leaders Bhimbar Deuri and Rupnath Brahma- were returned to the Assembly. Later Bhimbar Deuri was inducted to the Bardaloi ministry. Since then the Tribal League lost its independent identity as a political party.

To assuage the feelings of the Tribal League leaders, the Bardaloi ministry made certain enactment (the Assam Act XV of 1947) creating 33 Tribal Belts and Blocks exclusively for the plains tribes of Assam. The dependence of the Tribal League leaders on the Congress became very conspicuous, and they failed to send a single representative to the Constituent Assembly to plead their own case of constitutional protection in independent India.39

On 20 March 1947, the Tribal League submitted a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly demanding the creation of scheduled areas for the plains tribes of Assam under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. While the
Hills tribes of Assam had their representative in the Constituent Assembly in the person of J.J.M. Nichols Roy. The plains tribes did not have their own representative in the constitution making body of the country. The Congress Legislature Party in Assam had turned down the name of Bhimbar Deuri, the Tribal League nominee, to the constituent Assembly and instead they elected the Congress nominee, Dharanidhar Basumatari, to it. Basumatari maintained a rigid silence in the Assembly so far as the interests of the tribals in Assam are concerned.

However, the Committee appointed by the Constituent Assembly under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bardaloi, submitted its recommendations and on the basis of these recommendations the Fifth and Sixth Schedule were added under Article 244 of the Indian Constitution. While participating in the debate on the Sixth Schedule in the Constituent Assembly, Bardaloi said, on 6 September 1949,

"I wish to state, Sir, that there are three categories of tribals in Assam. There are the plains tribals men who were the original inhabitants and who have a culture and civilisation of their own. They were gradually absorbed into the folds and culture of other plains people to put more appropriately the Aryan culture. These people have now been classed with the minorities, just as the scheduled classes and they have been granted the same rights as the other minority communities."

Thus the backward plains tribes of Assam were deprived of the constitutional benefits due to the betrayal of the leadership of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee which was dominated by the Assamese middle class. But there was no immediate reaction amongst the plains tribals about the
negation of the benefits of the constitutional provisions. They were happy to learn that the Government policy was to help them 'to grow according to their own genius' without imposing on them a pattern of life that would disrupt their traditions and customs. They were hopeful that the independent government of India would give adequate protection to their land, bring an end to all kinds of exploitations, provide facilities for economic development and would help conserve their language, culture, customs and traditions.\textsuperscript{42}

Apart from this the entire country was in the grip of the euphoria of independence and the tribal people were also under the spell of this euphoria. They, therefore, eschewed the path of separate political activities and toed the political line earmarked by the Congress. The tribal people surrendered their political initiative to the hands of the Congress, i.e., mostly to non-tribal leaders. They converted the tribal League into a socio-cultural organisation under a new name, the 'Tribal Sangha' in 1953.

The PTCA, while submitting a memorandum to the President of India, described the psychological impact of independence on the plains tribes of Assam thus,

“Simple and unsophisticated, the Plains Tribals were the happiest on the policy which the National Government loudly proclaimed to pursue. Following the attainment of political independence, a profound wave of new hope (sic) for bright future pervaded through the length and breadth of India. This wave touched the hearts of the Scheduled tribes of plains of Assam also and they thought that the National Government of the free and secular India would do justice to the tribals and they can eschew the political side and safely devote
more attentively to socio-cultural economic side of rehabilitation of their society

That is why the plains tribal leaders changed their political organisation.  

Notes and References

1 Chatterji, S.K., 1951, p.27
2 Gait, 1984, p.228
3 Endle, S., 1990, p.3
4 Ibid., pp.5-8
5 Gait, 1984, p.247
6 Ibid.
7 Bhattacharyya, J.B., 1993, p.8
8 Barpujari, H.K., 1998, p.92
9 Nath, R.M., 1978, pp.15-16
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p.15
12 Grierson, G.A., 1903, p.14
13 Chatterji, S.K., 1951, p.26
14 Rabha, Bishnu Prasad, 1982, p.344
15 Bhattacharyya, J.B., 1993, p.12
16 Gait, 1984, p.9
17 Bhuyan, S.K., 1984, p.iv
18 Ibid., pp.v-vi
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Sarma, D., 1983, p.2
The first Bodo Mahasanmilani was held at Bhaoraguri in 19??, the second at Rangia in 1925 and the third at Roumari (Bongaigaon) in 1928.

Sarma, D., 1983, pp.22-25

Basumatari, B.K., n.d., p.13

Ibid.

Ibid.

The memoranda submitted by different organisations of the plains tribes of Assam were, (I) Memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara district, (II) Memorandum of the Kachari Community of Assam, (III) The Humble Memorial of the Boros, Garos and Rabhas of the Goalpara sub-division in the matter of transfer of Goalpara to Bengal, and (IV) Memorandum on behalf of the Bodo Yubak Sanmilani of the district of Goalpara by Shyama Charan Brahma, Secretary, Dhubri Boro Yubak Sanmilni.

Basumatari, B.K., n.d., p.18

Ibid., pp.21, 46-47


Deuri, I., 2001, p.13

Rupnath Brahma from Goalpara district, Rabi Chandra Kachari from Kamrup district, Dhirsing Deuri from Nowgong district and Karka Chandra Doley Miri from Sibsagar district.


Ibid., p.312

Deuri, I., 2001, p.13
37 Ibid., p. 316
38 Ibid.
39 Deuri, I., 2001, p. 1
40 Ibid.
41 Baruah, N.K., 1990, p. 124
42 Datta, P.S., 1993, p. 124
43 Ibid., p. 125