Chapter VIII

Conclusion

The Bodos in Assam who had begun their movement for ethnic linguistic-cultural regeneration ultimately developed to a political movement for autonomy within the state of Assam. The religious reform movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma may be said to have been the first attempt towards revitalising the Bodo society with new ideals as distinct and different from the prevailing tribal-feudal beliefs and practices. Again the history of the Bodo autonomy movement began as an integral part of the autonomy movement of the plains tribes against the hegemonistic role of the Assamese middle class.

The Bodo people have been numerically larger in comparison to other tribal groups belonging to the same Tibeto-Burman racial stock, like the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Mishings, the Kacharis, the Deuris, the Chutiyas, etc. The other tribes belonging to the Tibeto-Burman racial stock did not appear to be strong enough to continue the struggle for autonomy and therefore, the Bodos, gradually steered clear their way to autonomy despite opposition to their political aspiration from the domineering section of the Assamese middle class. As has been demonstrated in the preceding pages, there has been no cultural-political dichotomy in the history of the Bodo autonomy movement. The linguistic-cultural and political movements are the two sides of the same coin designed to cash in the political market of territorial distribution and re-distribution.
The Bodo Accord, signed on 20 February 1993, appeared to have brought to a close the autonomy movement of the Bodos. But this was seemingly deceptive. The movement was continued further after the signing of the said Accord and ultimately the Bodo leadership has registered their achievement with the signing of the ‘Memorandum of Settlement’ for the Bodo Territorial Council on 10 February 2003. The Memorandum of Settlement creating the BTC was signed by the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) with the representatives of the Central and State Governments in the presence of Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Tarun Gogoi, the Chief Minister of Assam.

Thus the role played by the BLT or the extremist elements appeared to be crucial for the success of the Bodo autonomy movement.

The Assamese middle class consisting mainly of the caste Hindus had been dominating the socio-economic, socio-cultural and political-administrative life and institution of the province almost since the middle of the 19th century as the junior partners of the colonial rulers. They, along with certain outside elements, appropriated the benefits that percolated down to the natives under colonialism.

The Assamese renaissance that flourished in the late 19th century did not exert any positive impact on the life and institution of the plains tribes and it did not have any action plan for ameliorating the grievances of those people. The Assamese renaissance that began as an offshoot of modern education introduced by the colonial rulers helped in the regeneration of the Assamese language, literature and culture bereft of all others. As a matter of fact, the ethnic languages then remained in the stage of spoken dialects without written scripts.
There had been no conspicuous attempt at developing these ethnic speeches into languages while the dominating Assamese language itself was under the grip of the powerful Bengali language. At the same time there had been an attempt at assimilating the ethnic groups into the greater Assamese society or community in terms of language, literature and culture. But with the emergence of the elite amongst the tribes a cultural clash gradually began to develop between the tribals and non-tribals leading to the fruition of separate political aspirations amongst the tribes. Thus the ethnic linguistic-cultural movement has turned out to be the harbinger of political movement for autonomy as the Bodo autonomy movement has clearly demonstrated in Assam.

The ethnic societies languishing under colonial rule in terms of social oppression and economic exploitation naturally desired for the end of their ordeal in an independent political set up after 1947. But this did not happen. The socio-economic changes brought into being by the new political dispensation did not help in the development of the tribal groups at par with the other segments of the society. Rather the dominating tendency of the Assamese middle class increased after independence and this resulted in the consequent increase of incidence of social oppression and economic exploitation on the plains tribals.

The process of alienation of tribal lands to the non-tribals had begun under colonial rule under the impact of immigration mainly of East Bengal Muslim peasants to Assam. The settlement of refugees in the wake of partition of the country mostly on tribal lands within the tribal Belts and Blocks actually endangered the prospect of the very survival of the tribes in their traditional habitats. Thus the alienation of lands of the tribals to the non-tribals, mainly the
Immigrants, constituted the main hindrance of tribal development as well as sources of discontentment.

The autonomy movement of the plains tribes and for that matter of the Bodos passed through different contours and it was marked by peaceful and violent methods intermittantly and sometimes simultaneously. It has been marked by the submission of petitions and memoranda, mass squatting, demonstration and procession, mass hunger strike, picketing of Government offices and establishment, road blockade, rail blockade, bandhs, then sabotage activities, kidnapping and murder, bomb throwing and blasting in sensitive areas and installations, etc. The movement resulted in the creation of an atmosphere of political uncertainty and instability leading to economic dislocation and sterility and unproductiveness.

One distinctive feature of the tribal autonomy movement was the demonstration of the same methods and techniques that had been initiated by the AASU and AAGSP during the Assam Movement, 1979-85. Rather the Assam Movement became the role model of the Bodo autonomy movement. The ABSU showing definite leanings to non-violence and peaceful methods formed the vanguard of the movement while the other allied groups followed pressure tactics with violent methods and activities. The Bodo people, suffering from various ills since a long time past, rallied behind the ABSU and other allied organisations for the realisation of their long felt socio-cultural and socio-political aspirations. Thus ABSU, like the AASU, emerged as the symbol of unity of the Bodo people as well as the catalyst for their socio-cultural and socio-political objectives.
It has been demonstrated in the preceding pages that the Bodo autonomy movement also has been marked by a series of talks and negotiations, both with the Central and State Governments. The leaders, at times, appeared to have showed a certain degree of political maturity in terms of placing their demands in the form of concrete proposals and at times creating a sense of pressure by resorting to violent methods and techniques while sitting across the table for negotiations. This sort of shifts and turns between the pressure> compromise> pressure and again compromise had the effect of yielding results to their expectation. The ABSU leadership as well as their sister organisations including the Bodo people showed the utmost tenacity of bearing the brunt of police atrocities or something like a state terrorism let loose in the wake of the movement.

As has been demonstrated the Bodo people and other ethnic groups were in the process of being assimilated with the greater Assamese society. This had been the normal historical practice over the periods of history and a larger number of tribal people had assimilated with the caste Hindu Assamese population in the medieval period and this continued under the British colonial rule also. The clash started to began in the context of sharing political power between the tribal leaders and the leaders of the caste Hindu Assamese society, more particularly between the emerging tribal educated elite and the domineering section of the Assamese middle class.

The emerging ethnic consciousness, propelled by modern education and the paraphernalia of development, helped in the rise and growth of a sense of pride as well as deprivation. Their pride is that they had a history of their own with rich heritage. Their deprivation is that they have been deprived of their due
share in the field of economic development, cultural advancement and political power and achievement. Naturally they believed that salvation lie in attaining the political power and in the exercise of that power in the direction of fulfilling their overall material progress.

The emergence of this concept ultimately gave birth to the autonomy movement of the Bodos in Assam. For its realisation, they had before them the lessons of the movements of other tribes in the hills who attained first autonomy within the polyglot state of Assam and then full-fledged state with legislative and financial powers under the Constitution of India. Thus the course of action was clear for them before they had launched the movement for autonomy. And the autonomy movement is not anti-thesis to democratic polity. It is a step forward for liberation and democratisation of the society. It is a further step to liberate the tribal society that has remained mostly prone to feudal customs, beliefs and practices. The words change and modernity are not simply the gifts of heaven, they must bring some sort of succor to the afflicted. The successful termination of the movement has raised high hopes amongst the tribes, not only the Bodos, and it is expected to do away with the afflictions from which the tribal population have been suffering so long.

Notes and References