THE ROLE OF THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY TO ACCOMMODATE BODO IDENTITY AND POLITICS

The arena of history is vast. It encompasses each and every sphere of human culture and civilization. History often involves a continuous dialogue between the past and the present and the importance of history lies in the fact that it can explain how and why of present day happenings. History has often been forced to play the role of legitimizer behind political demands made by an ethnic community in multi-ethnic societies. An ethnic community while establishing the legitimacy of such demands shows a tendency to go back in past years and search the roots based on which they can reassert themselves in the existing politico-economic context. In this endeavour cultural differences are high-lighted, new traditions invented, folklores revived. There is a tendency to use past glory as an emotional wagon in a very systematic and clever way, as a trump card of political gambling and to mobilize the masses behind the ideology of such movements. The history of a particular community therefore becomes important. The facts on which the ideologies are built must be real, and at the same time, convincing to the public so as to mobilize them.1

In this chapter an effort has been made to show how the activists of the Bodo Movement interpreted history while constructing.

1. Bhattacharjee, C Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement: Case of the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam, Vikas, New Delhi,1996,p.154
legitimizing and asserting a distinct Bodo identity to gain political power.

In Assam the idea of self-determination has found acceptance during the years after independence when a variety of ethnic identity movements raised their heads. In 1967 a certain section of Ahom leaders floated the idea of separatism with the formation of Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad (UARP) demanding a state comprising the three districts of Upper Assam (Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh). This happened to be an important event in political history of Assam since the Ahoms formed an integral part of Assamese nationality. By 1978 the movement died out with merger of the UARP with the Janata party. In 1967 the PTCA also demanded a separate state of Udayachal for the plains tribals including the Bodos. This movement also went into oblivion by 1978.

After the Assam Accord of August 15, 1985 the political climate of Assam started changing colour. The two controversial clauses of the Accord i.e. clause 6 and 10 contributed to a storm that created havoc particularly in Bodo dominated areas of the state. Clause 6 which provided safeguards for protection of distinctive identity of people of Assam was viewed with caution and a crisis of identity was felt by the Bodo leaders. Before 1974 the Bodos never clearly raised the issue of identity crisis. It was the “script issue” that stirred the Bodo heart and soul as their agitation for Roman Script faced state’s harsh repression. The repressive measures to deal with the movement created a mental divide among sections of Bodos \ Bodo intellectuals. Gradually, a state of mind was created and social mobilization was thought necessary to realize the ethnic and political demands of the community.
We have observed earlier that the underlying causes of the Bodoland
Movement lay in the urges and aspirations of the ethnic Bodos, while
the immediate occasion was provided by the example of Assam
Movement and its apparent results. The central theme of this ABSU
led phase or Bodo politics of identity was to repudiate the process of
unequal assimilation into the Assamese sub-national formation and to
seek differentiation from and equality with, the ethnic Assamese.2
Therefore, the Bodo leaders focused more on history and cultural
symbols while constructing Bodo ethnic identity and distancing
themselves from the Assamese people whose hegemony they were to
challenge. With this end in view the Bodo leaders started their
movement at two different levels: on political level and in cultural
level. In both history played important role.

Interpretation of history to legitimate Bodo territorial demand:

The Bodo intelligencia relied on history while chalking out a feasible
plan to realize their hegemonic project. While asking for a separate
state the Bodo activists used the term “Bodo” in a broad sense not to
mean only the pure Bodo speakers but all the people who speak or used
to speak one of the languages of the Bodo group of languages. Among
the groups of people whom the ABSU listed within Bodo group in
their Why Separate State demand document3 are the following four
categories:

2. Baruah, S India against Itself, Oxford, New Delhi,2001,p.183
1. People currently speaking the Bodo group of languages i.e. the Rabha, Sonowal, Lalung, Deori, Dimasa, Barman, Garo, Hajong, Hajong-kachari and Tripuri (Tipperah).

2. Pure Bodo speakers

3. Completely Assamized groups such as Chutiya and Moran

4. Hindu Assamese caste such as Koch and Xaraniyas, who were once Bodos but now call themselves Assamese

The Rajbonsis of Western Assam, who are said to be of same Bodo stock but have totally forgotten Bodo languages, are excluded from the ABSU list.

This broad connotation of the term Bodo is used following the works of colonial linguist-ethnographers like Grierson etc. The 19th century colonial texts had popularized the assumption that “language families” tell a definite story about race. Most of the linguists and learned authors of that period seem to have arrived at their analytical decision that the Bodo language was the ancestral common language of its many akin and ethnic groups of the indigenous tribal people of Assam.

G. A. Grierson⁴ in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, volume III, Part II (1930) stated Bodo as one of the groups of languages belonging to the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family falling under Tibeto-Chinese family of languages. He included the following languages in the Bodo group:

1. Bodo or plains Kachari, Bodo proper , Mech
2. Lalung
3. Dimasa or hill Kachari

⁴. Report of the One Member Committee on Tribal Affairs in Assam, 1996, p. 101
4. Garo
5. Rabha
6. Tripura or Mrung
7. Chutiya
8. Moran

Other colonial writers such as Briand Hadson (*Essay on Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribe, 1846*), W. Robinson (*Notes on the Language Spoken by the Various Tribes Inhabiting the Valley of Assam and its Mountain Confines, 1847*) etc portrayed in their classification and illustration of languages that Bodo- kachari, Mech, Tiwa, Rabhas, Dimasa, Karbi, Kok- Borok, Garo, Moran, Hojai, and Chutiya belong to the Bodo group of the Bodo-Naga section under the Assam Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman division of the Siam-Tibetan speech. Their assumption has been used to the fullest by the Bodo activists of the movement.

There are popular sayings current among Boro folks which supports the above assumption of linguists:

*Joujuma Futma, bifa Hajoma*  
*Dilaoma Dilungma, bima Bulungma*  
*Bathoualai bandoba, Sijoua lai gorongba*  
*Dao Daoalai bima gaodali*  
*Dang dali rongjali, jajo aodali*  
*Pra Ari, Korasa Ari*

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5. Mosahary, P “Development of Language and Literature of Indigenous People of Assam with Special reference to the Bodos” in *The Bodo*-the mouthpiece of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 2007, pp.139-140
*Jong pari lari lari.*

(Only of the sentences having * mark)

Rendering: Of all the mountains, highest and whitest

Is the father (referring to the snow-clad Himalayas)

* Of all the rivers, longest and biggest

Is the mother (referring to the Brahmaputra)

* We are Korosa Aris, first born sea race

*our line is continuous

The above saying is very old. It is of mixed languages of the Bodos, Tipperas and the Dimasas i.e. three distinct tribes of present North East. According to his assumption it goes a far way to show that they are of common origin and belong to the same linguistic stock despite their present status.6 It is a fact that by whatsoever name the great Bodo race is known in different places, at different historical times, all of them originally perhaps belonged to the same root.

This idea of one race-language family was used to the fullest by ABSU. That is why grasping the psyche of modern Bodo youths Roy opined,

"The educated Bodos have now come to know of their glorious past and would naturally like to bask under the sunshine of past glory. All these various spinster tribes of Bodo origin scattered all over the vast tract of North India and divided by inter-state boundaries are living as depress minorities with very insignificant shares of facilities and resources of life. Except in Tripura nowhere else have they much say in the affairs of the state."7

7. Roy, A The Bodo Imbroglio, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1995 p. 43
This race–language equation enabled the Bodo activists to present Bodos as majority group numerically which is important for their politics. The ABSU even carried out a voluntary census in 1990 keeping this race-language equation in mind in Bodo populated districts of Assam to strengthen their demand. In their census three sets of enumeration proformae have been adopted, the most common relating to six items: village, house number, Bodo population, non-Bodo tribal population, non-tribal population and total population. The sample comparison of the ABSU’S census showed wide difference in terms of population with that of Census of 1971 and Provisional Census Report of RGI (Registrar General of India). The four revenue circles Kokrajhar and Bhaoraguri in Kokrajhar district and Kalaigaon and Khairabari in Darrang district have been taken for this comparison by the Three Member Expert Committee and after comparison they have categorized six types of villages. In villages like Chamka, Sukanjhar (Bhaoraguri RC), Basbari, Khargaon (in Kokrajhar RC) the 1990 voluntary census showed a much higher total population and ST population than the 1991 Provisional Census. In villages like Balipara, Naptipara (Kalaigaon RC) and Durgakhat, Salaipara (Khairabari RC) in Darrang district the total population obtained through the Voluntary Census of 1990 showed less than the population figures of the Provisional Census. There are villages which did not show any ST population in the 1971 and 1991 Provisional Census but in Voluntary Census they recorded sizeable ST population. In some other villages the population figures of Voluntary census was found equal or very close to the census of 1971. But, the Provisional Census figures are
higher in each respect. It is significant that none of these villages had any ST population.\textsuperscript{8} According to 1991 Census Report only 1.1 million or 11.5 percent of the population of the North bank of the Brahmaputra can be identified as Bodo speakers, where the Bodos want a state. ABSU and BPAC rejected the figures and called them incorrect and unacceptable.\textsuperscript{9}

ABSU documents reject the official census figures because they exclude from the Bodo category the tribes that as a whole or in part now speak Assamese. ABSU used the term Bodo to include those who speak or are supposed to speak one of the languages defined by linguists as belonging to the Bodo group. And as such the Bodo population extends to other North-Eastern states and even beyond the limits of India into Bhutan and in Bangladesh.

The Bodo Movement has evolved from the base of tribal ethnicity to regionalism. This transition simply shows the evolutionary nature of Bodo politics. Political atmosphere in the state and their needs and aspirations have guided this transition of Bodo politics.

The demand for a Bodo homeland no doubt is animated by the memory of ancient Bodo kingdoms and of a distant past when the great Bodo culture may have flourished uncontaminated by other cultures. Bodo is not a homogeneous category in the sense that even within Assam they have had a history of living under different socio-political norms. In the present geo-political context of Assam, the demand for a separate state was made from the Northern Bodos (living at the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh) and if one goes back in

\textsuperscript{8} no4, Pp.122-127
\textsuperscript{9} ABSU & BPAC, 1992
history one will find that they are the section of Bodo people living outside the influences of Ahom state formation and also of the neo-vaishnavite influences of Sankardev. Even within this active region two powerful divisions could be seen centering Kokrajhar and Udalguri. The Bodos of Kokrajhar and those of Udalguri show a kind of difference in terms of awareness, organization, goals and modes of movement. Kokrajhar group had had a long history of socio-political activitism since the period of Guru Klicharan Brahma. The Brahmas remained active in formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha and also in PTCA’s political mobilization, whereas Udalguri has been more exposed to missionary activities and it is also the area wherefrom the radical faction first raised their heads, the birth place of Bodo security forces.

The demand for a Bodoland on the north bank of Brahmaputra was the outcome of the evidences provided by colonial writers like Endle. His work *The Kacharis* (1911) may be regarded as the first comprehensive work on Bodo history. He wrote that the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. When Endle wrote his book in the first decade of the twentieth century the entire Bodo population of that time lived in a belt about 20 miles wide from the Sonkosh river in the west to Dhansiri river in the East. At that time Dotoma, Sidli, Bijni, Barama, Tongla, Udalguri and Rowta formed the southern limit of that belt.10 About eight decades later the Bodos have demanded creation of the state of Bodoland stretching from Sonkosh River in the west up to Sadiya in the East.

10. no4, p.121
One of the earliest colonial texts to refer to the Bodo inhabitation is Pamberton’s *Report on Bhutan*. Pamberton wrote “the Kachari tribe, by which these *duars* are principally inhabited, appear to be a quiet race distinct from the aborigines of the valley; they are muscular in appearance, though small in stature, and speak a language peculiar to themselves; they are found within the British limits, as well as in those *duars* over which the Bhutan government exercises control.” While Pamberton noticed the Bodos in a region where they are concentrated, later observers, equating language family with shared race, noted that they are much more spread out in the region than the *duars*.  

The Bodos have been on move over the last hundred years. In contemporary demographic context there is Bodo population outside the Endle area including Karbi-Anglong district well as on the South bank of the river Brahmaputra. They are settled even in reserved forest areas along the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh stretching from the Poba reserve forest in the east through Gali, Subansiri, Kakoi and Ranga Reserve Forests to Gohpur Reserve Forests. Watson has observed that “The Kacharis of Assam never cultivated the same land beyond the second year, nor remained in the same neighbourhood after the fourth or fifth year. After four or five years, to allow the jungle to grow and the land to resume its former high productiveness, they return, unless forestalled by others, and resume identical fields they tilled before but never the houses or site of the old settlement, that being

12. no.2, p.178
13. *ibid*
thought unlucky....therefore who inhabit the territories of native states retain their migratory habits...." 14

Some of the Bodos still continue to be migrants. In 1950s and 1970s the Bodos moved in the north-eastern direction, felled trees reclaimed land in what were Reserved Forests. Today, the Bodo population is scattered all over Assam and even beyond its boundaries. Hence, their demand for a separate state was entirely based on a distant past and not on present—day settlement patterns.

The Bodo language shares some common features in respect of vocabulary, phonetics, morphology and syntax with sister languages of the Bodo group. 15 A comprehensive Bodo history has been reconstructed on these linguistic similarities. In this respect the opinion of ABSU and BPAC is noteworthy. It observes:

“Whosesoever and by whatsoever name the Bodos may be known to others, now, after all, the allied tribes belonging to the great indo-mongoloids living in the proposed Bodoland territory are often same Bodo ethnic groups. Ethnically speaking, the majority population of the proposed Bodoland territory is composed of the great Bodo origin. The proposed Bodoland territory has got its own distinct and quite separate ethnic identity and background which is completely different from that of Assamese.” 16

Evocation of shared historical consciousness seemed to be important while projecting it for nationalist aspirations and also for power and representation. It is, however, natural that such evocation of history invariably told the story of successful existence of distinctive identity of an ethnic community aspiring for power.

15. ibid., p8
16. A memorandum to Three Member Expert Committee by ABSU and BPAC, 1991, p2
The ABSU in its *Why Separate State?* document, stated clearly that the problems of Bodos and the other downtrodden Plains Tribes of Assam are nothing but a nationality issue. The Bodos have genuine aspirations to establish a distinct Bodo nationality and to get recognition in the world as a civilized and advanced nationality. Without a separate state this would not be possible. In this document taking references from historians like N. N. Acharya, S. K. Bhuyan and colonial writers such as Endle, Captain Fisher, B. C. Allen a picture of enduring Bodo history has been presented. This history narrates a saga of Bodo race as the earliest settlers in Assam and their transformation over different times and space.

**Interpretation of history to construct boundaries between Bodo and Assamese:**

Central to the process of Bodo identity formation has been an attempt to construct boundaries and demarcations between an ‘us’ and ‘them’. Dela Porta argues that identity formations are socially constructed realities shared by members of a distinct collectivity. This collectivity is imbued with certain symbols, customs, practices and linguistic modes that serve to differentiate them from other, often antagonistic groups. Central to this notion of ‘othering’, include stigmatization and emulation of rival groups, and relations of power and dominance.

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17. no3,p.330
collectively referred to as hegemonic project. This is a process by which groups try to establish a degree of dominance over social, cultural and material resources of a given area and people. This may also be called the hegemonic project.

In case of Bodo hegemonic project their antagonisms against the Assamese political mainstream in the years of freedom led finally to their ‘othering’ of the Assamese. In this process of distancing themselves from the Assamese composite society and culture, of which they were a part until recently, the following aspects of culture have been used as marker of differentiation:

Religion emerged as the strongest form of difference with revival of the worship of “Bathou” during the Bodo Movement. The educated Bodos seemed to return to the practice of Bathou worship. This is an attempt to differentiate themselves from the Assamese vaishnavite Hindu practice. So far as Shaivism is concerned the Bodos tried to establish the superiority of Bathou. The relation of traditional Bodo religion to Sakta Hinduism or Shaivism is a complex one. The history of Bodo interaction with Hindu culture precedes their conversion to the Vaishnava fold that started only in sixteenth century. Some Bodos refer to their deity Bathou as a name for Hindu God Shiva. One document of ABSU state that the original religion of the Bodos is Bathou, i.e. worshiping Shiva.\(^{19}\)

The strength of Bodo politics rests mainly on the cultural and linguistic differentiation from the ethnic Assamese. To give their movement the vigour of ethnic element and also to show how much the Bodos differ from ethnic Assamese in culture and language every

\(^{19}\) ABSU 1987, p.15
effort has been made by Bodo intellectuals, artists and activists to recreate their culture. The Bodos showed that they were fully aware of their culture and are very much keen to preserve it. The Bodo intellectuals, artists, activists endeavoured to recreate culture, their distinctive way of life. They presented a vibrant demonstration of it at the two large exhibitions they had organized at Kokrajhar and Udalguri. Bodo culture was presented in a holistic frame. In fact, every aspect of Bodo life was recreated, its material culture including house type, technology and means and modes of production, food and food habits. The Bodo heroes who had distinguished themselves in various walks of life were also represented. Above all, the presentation of music and dance of the Bodos together with performances by other tribal and non-tribal groups at these two exhibitions and elsewhere high lighted the fact that the Bodos were fully conscious of their identity and that they were very keen to preserve it. They also saw their culture in a multi-ethnic situation.  

They even tried to go back to their pristine culture disregarding centuries of cultural give and take relations with the Assamese people. They showed preference for Bodo names over Assamese and burial over cremation. Bhaben Narzi, a renowned Bodo writer, wrote that the

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20. The Expert Committee on Plains Tribes of Assam was set up in 1991 by the Ministry of Home Affairs to determine the area of Bodos and other plains tribes to the north bank of river Brahmaputra and make recommendations as to the autonomy, legislative, administrative and financial powers that may be given to the Bodo people. During the committee members’ exclusive visit to north bank of Brahmaputra to grasp the ethnic situation in north bank of Brahmaputra the Bodo activists organized the above mentioned two exhibitions.

21. The example is the grave of Bodofa Upendra nath Brahma.
common traditional practice of the Bodos was to leave the dead body for wild animals, vultures and birds. Cremation and burial were both rare. Cremation was the result of Assamization which the Bodos seek to reverse.

Language played an important role in projecting a distinct Bodo identity. Arena of language happened to be the most important ground in context of the Bodo’s endeavour to construct boundary against the Assamese. Language is important for its being the most visible symbol of differentiation. It also combines a community of people at emotional level. Bodo was not a written language until Sydney Endle first wrote the grammar of Bodo language. After that a small section of Bodo educated elite having modern education endeavoured to enrich the language as a written language and thereby tried to create a lingocultural identity of the Bodo people following the footsteps of "Jonaki" intellectuals. They used both Assamese and Bengali scripts for writing Bodo. After the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 the search for identity assumed a concrete shape and the Bodos struggled for introducing Bodo language as medium of instruction. In 1963 it was introduced in the primary stage and in 1968 it was introduced as the medium of instruction at the secondary level. In 1974-75 the Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched agitation demanding recognition of Roman script for Bodo language to perhaps consolidate the position of Bodo language. But, the script movement of Bodo Sahitya Sabha was viewed detrimental to Assam Governments’ nation-building endeavours. Hence, the Government became repressive. The demand of separate

Bodo political identity in fact came out of this language stir.\textsuperscript{23} The Bodo youths prefer not to speak Assamese. Bodo activists clearly expressed their dismay over the language issue and they raised questions as to why “the Assamese people” did not read, speak and accept Bodo as a link language in the interests of the integrity of Assam?\textsuperscript{24}

The naming of annual meeting grounds of \textit{Bodo Sahitya Sabha} in Bodo showed their preference over Bodo names to Assamese. Since 1996 this trend has become a tradition. Bodo language is exclusively used in the meetings and in their proceedings.

Dress is another form in which identity is asserted. It has been observed that most Bodo women especially activists of the movement and educated section wear the traditional Bodo attire i.e. \textit{dokhana} instead of the Assamese traditional \textit{mekhela-chadar} or Indian \textit{sari} and many men use the \textit{Aronai}, the traditional Bodo Scraf.

Klicharan Brahma had tried to reform the Bodo society with regard to food habits. But, now a days they have switched back to their age old food habits. Today, the Bodo people proudly consume pork and other traditional Bodo foods without least hesitation.

\textbf{New traditions invented:}

Like the Assam Movement, the Bodo Movement also shows the power of cultural and historical symbols and of societal networks in being able to mobilize large number of people behind a political demand.

\textsuperscript{23} no.2,P185
\textsuperscript{24} ABSU, 1987, pp.31-32
Neither Sukapha nor Sri Sankardev and Madhavdev are considered as national heroes of the Assamese nationality in their contemporary literatures. No Ahom Chronicle and Buranji has clearly mentioned Lachit Barphukan as a national hero, since the concept of nation-building was alien then. Later, in order to project a national symbol of courage before the Assamese masses Axam Sahitya Sabha in 1954 declared Lachit Barphukan as a national hero. This had enthused the masses with nationalism. This may be regarded as invention of tradition at the cost of history. And it has been observed that history has been forced to take the role of legitimizer of new traditions invented mainly as emotional wagon in a very clever and systematic manner in politics of identities.

The same had been done by the activists of the Bodo Movement. They have explored history and heroes like Zaolia Dewan, Zoholao Daimalu, and Sikna Bir etc to fill the masses with the sense of pride of their glorious exploits and also with nationalistic feelings. The Bodos identify themselves with the Kachari kings who ruled over the entire Kamrup or ancient Assam before the advent of the Ahoms. If one considers the Bodo oral traditions they do not contain references of Bodo kings as such but of heroes and heroines and chieftain. Under such circumstances the legendary accounts of these heroes are used to rouse people during the high days of Bodo Movement. Zaolia Dewan was appointed Dewan under the king of Bijnri and his legendary account tells his heroic fighting with Bhootiya king. Sikna Bir ruled over a kingdom towards the north of Kokrajhar while Daimalu was a

25. Revealed by Pramila Rani Brahma during interview
26. Boro, A The Flute and The Harp, GBD, Guwahati, 2004,p.84
warrior in the royal court of the king of Dimapur and won battles against Burma and Manipur. The glorious royal symbol of Dimapur and the saga of Bodo heroes and heroines like Daimalu were used to rouse Bodo people to fight for their right.

**History of Assamese nationality formation and Bodo politics of identity:**

The historical process of Assamese nationality formation had been contested to accommodate Bodo identity and politics. The whole project of separate Bodo political identity rests on denouncing the historical process of socialization that led to the formation of Assamese identity.

Nations and nationalities are “imagined communities”. Constructing nationality involves projects of cultural hegemony. A group sitting at the social hierarchy exerts its hegemony over other subordinate groups. These groups either were assimilated or destroyed or assigned to ghettos. By the mid 19th century a conscious attempt on part of Assamese people to assert themselves as nationality could be seen. In this attempt as was obvious the Assamese language and middle class took the leading role.

The linguistic reorganization of Indian states in post-independence period enabled the majority linguistic groups of respective regions to assert hegemony in state affairs. In Assam, the Government tried to make Assamese the Official Language of the state in order to integrate...

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the different communities living in Assam. This policy was viewed as a means to completely assimilate the other indigenous minority groups of Assam and the effect of this could be seen in immediate separation of hill tribals from Assam. The plains tribals especially, the Bodos of Assam also raised their heads for the same fear.

"Although the perception of the Assamese was that they had attained an Assamese personality with coming together of different ethnic, religious and language groups, this was not quite the picture. An identity crisis prevailed demanding individual expression. This process instigated sub-groups to rediscover their past identities. The effect was direct on the Bodos who are a sizeable population among the plains tribes in Assam and who inherit a long time heritage and tradition easily definable as their own." 28

Till the end of the nineteenth century assimilation of Bodos into Assamese formation was going on in such speed that E. A. Gait analyzing the language data of the Census of 1891, wrote that the Bodo groups of languages were dying out and the entire extinction of these languages was probably only a matter of a few years. 29 He was commenting on the decline of the number of speakers of Bodo languages from the 1881 to 1891 Census and to his understanding it was happening because of the process of ethnic change.

The Bodos had historically considered themselves a constituent part of the Assamese nationality formation. No doubt the first generation of Bodo elite had full knowledge of their separate ethnic identity and glorious past. At the same time, they were also aware of the ongoing process of Assamese nationality formation. For instance, the words of

29. Census of India 1891, p.163
Rupnath Brahma stated, "If the educated Assamese classes ignore them and leave them alone in the darkness of ignorance and content themselves in reaping the benefits of modern education, the whole project of constructing a new Assamese identity would collapse" 30.

Later Bhimbor Deori31 in the very first session of the Kamrup District Tribal Sanmilan (1938) made it a point that while making demands we should not forget that we are part and parcel of Assamese nationality and our progress is tied with the progress of the Assamese nationality. Hence, our motto should be to strengthen the Assamese nationalism. He also expressed that if the economic development was not equal among the various groups comprising of the Assamese nationality, the whole process may reverse in any time in future. That did not take long time to happen in reality. Economic inequality coupled with other factors led to contestation of Assamese nationality by many of its component elements soon after independence.

The question of claim to Assam’s resources has been persistent issue in her politics. The intense competition for acquisition of limited resources led to ethnic identity movements and contestation of Assamese nationality formation here. The Bodos did not see themselves as Assamese and disregarded the Assamese nationality formation. This new generation of Bodo leaders even questioned.

"So what constitutes the pure Assamese community? The main constituents of the Assamese are Ahoms, Brahmins, Kalitas, Kaibortas or the fishermen class, Ganaks and the like. The Ahoms are of course not the pure Assamese as they are of Mongoloid stocks and have their own Tai-language. But, at present Ahoms have

30. Brahma, R "Small Request" in Bibar, 1924, pp. 27-31
The term “Assamese people” was being questioned and contested for the first time only after signing of Assam Accord. The Bodo leaders became apprehensive that the clause 6 of the Accord which sought to protect the cultural, social and linguistic identity of Assamese people might give legitimacy to ethnic Assamese hegemonism in every aspect of state affairs and may lead to complete extinction of other linguistic groups. While signing the Accord it must have been beyond the imagination of Assam Movement’s leaders that the word Assamese would mean anything other than indigenous population of Assam.

Portrayal of Assamese as colonizers with reinterpretation of past facts:

According to the Bodo leaders the Bodos are the aborigines of Assam and that Assam originally belonged to the various tribes who had been brought under Assamese domination through a process of silent aggression. In their memo to the Indian Prime Minister of July 1985, ABSU observed that the construction of the Assamese was artificial. It said that the influx of present artificial Assamese into Assam started only in the 13th and 14th century from Kanauj, Mithila and Magadh etc of Central India. Then the process of silent aggression and engulfment started and ultimately the so-called ‘artificial’ Assamese captured Assam and its administration wherefrom Bodos were deprived of political suzerainty in Assam. The Assamese people

32 no 3,p. 286
had been portrayed as outsiders but in reality despite their Indian links most of them – Hindus and Muslims alike have been separated by only a few generations from their ‘tribal’ cousins. Ever since independence the dominant Assamese community had captured the apparatus of state power in Assam, laid down laws and used its control of administration to further its interests. In the process the tribal minorities have been marginalized. They complain of neglect and under development. They rail against non-implementation of policies and programmes in matters of job reservation etc. They speak of neglect of their art and culture, and of attempts to assimilate them.

Their dismay with political mainstream of Assam was so grave that they even questioned, “What is the definition of Assamese?” The Assamese people may define that those indigenous people who live in Assam are Assamese. So, the Bodos, the Mishings; the Karbis all are Assamese. If that be so, it is clear that there are some sub-communities among the Assamese proper? ....then what will be the exact definition of Assamese? Will it be those who speak Assamese? Then Bodo-speaking people cannot be Assamese.”

In its document “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty Question Answers” the ABSU have made it clear that the base of their demand is historical. The Bodos or the Kacharis had kingdoms in Assam. The tribals – the Mongolians – are the original masters of Assam whereas the artificial Assamese have unjustifiably snatched away Assam and its administration.

33 no.2, p.181
34 no 3, p.286
35 ABSU document Divide Assam 50-50, 1987, p.262
No doubt these facts are but real. From time immemorial the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam has been a land of migration. People migrated from east and west and settled down here and in their process of socialization with each other gave birth to a new community of people called Assamese. That is why Assamese are found only in Assam and nowhere else in India. Similarly it is also a historical fact that the Bodos are among the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. Until recently they have seen themselves as part of Assamese nationality formation. Then, why have they tried to revoke it? This is what is important for Bodo hegemonic project. The main strength of Bodo politics lie in their contesting Assamese identity in comparison to what they constructed the Bodo identity.

One of the main features of post 1987 movement is that the Bodo leaders often speak of their affinity with the larger Indian ethos. One of them reminded us of their *Mahabharata* connections and that Rukmini, the consort of Krishna, was a Bodo girl. The attempt to establish linkages with *Mahabharata* and the Puranas could be even seen as revival of historical memory and part of a conscious attempt to seek legitimacy within the larger Indian society and culture for the same purpose of power.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion:

A. To strengthen the Bodo politics the activists of the movement had used the term “Bodo” in a broad sense to mean all the people who speak or used to speak one of the languages of the Bodo group of languages.

B. Geographical continuity is important to fulfill any territorial demand. But, in present day demographic conditions the Bodos hardly maintain such continuity. Therefore, Historical memory
was utilized to justify their demand of a separate state on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra where the Bodos once had enjoyed suzerainty.

C. Further, the ‘othering’ of the Assamese was done through a projection of differences among the Bodos and the Assamese by highlighting the symbols of Bodo cultural like language, religion, customs, dress, food habits etc and showing preference for Bodo name. The sagas of heroes like Zaolia Dewan, Zoholao Daimalu, and Sikna Bir etc have been evoked to fill the Bodo masses with a sense of pride of their glorious past and with nationalistic feelings.

In this way, facts of history have been explored by the activists of the Bodo Movement to manifests the community’s cultural distinctness as well as its differences from that of the Assamese language and culture to accommodate their desire for hegemony.