From 2 March 1987, the Bodos of Assam started a vigorous mass movement demanding a separate state in the north bank of river Brahmaputra under the leadership of All Bodo Students' Union and Bodo People’s Action Committee. The movement attracted nationwide attention with both its integrationist and secessionist assertions. Hence a complete understanding of the movement becomes important. While discussing the causes it has to be kept in mind that the Bodo movement did not take place due merely to the existence of cultural differences nor for the socio-political domination and subordination by the culturally different ethnic Assamese. Certain circumstances and events within the community affected the collective existence of Bodo people leading finally to a massive assertion. This chapter aims to unveil the background and immediate circumstances leading to the Bodo movement for a separate state.

Before discussing the immediate circumstances of the Bodo movement a brief history of Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam is necessary.

**Comprehensive history of the Bodos:**

The Bodos are of Tibeto-Burman origin and belong to the *Tibeto-Chinese* linguistic stock. They constitute a very important section of
Assam being the largest group among the Plains Tribal population of Assam today.

Racially the Bodos of Assam belong to the Mongoloid stock. S.K. Chatterjee refers to them as ‘Indo-Mongoloid’ and the term “defines at once their Indian connection”. Some other scholars prefer to use the term ‘Indo-Tibetan’. The physical features, such as snub nose, wide forehead, round face, scanty body hair, and high cheek bones, slit eyes and yellow skin colour points to their Mongoloid origin. This seems to pointing to Tibet and China as the original home of the race. S. K. Chatterjee locates North-West China as the original homeland of Sino-Tibetan speakers. According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India, the upper courses of the Yangtsi-kiang and the Huang-ho rivers in the North-West China were the original home of the Tibeto-Burman races. It can be suggested that the original homeland of the Bodos was in the Bod country, now known as Tibet. Ajoy Roy believes that the name ‘Bodo’ was derived from ‘Bod’ from where they migrated. Most of the scholars have used the term to denote a community speaking the Sino-Tibetan Bodo languages rather than to denote a race. The generic term ‘Bodo’ was applied first by T.C. Hodgsons to Bodo group of languages and includes Kacharis

1 Chatterjee, S. K. Kirata Janakriti, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1974, p.38
2 Endle, S. The kacharis, Cosmo, Delhi, 1975, p.3
3 no 2, p.13
4 Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. xiv, 1908, p.224
5 Roy, A. The Boro Imbroglio, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1995, p.2
According to Endle, there are possibilities of two migrations of the Bodos from the North and North-East into the rich valley of Brahmaputra. One group entered North-East Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sonkosh, and founded the powerful kingdom of Kamrup. The other made its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into Eastern Assam and laid the foundation of Chutiya kingdom. Historians like Gait and P. C. Chaudhury have unanimously accepted that the Bodos filtered into the Assam valley cutting across various mountain passes and river courses from the North.

They migrated in successive waves and settled down at different locations in the Brahmaputra valley. Since they were nomads, they keep moving within the valley. Further, the pressure from new settlers forced them to penetrate deep into the valley. Hence, their population is scattered all over Assam and even beyond its fringes. A faction of the Western migrants settled in the Jalpaiguri and Koch Behar districts of West Bengal, while another faction of the same flow settled in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara districts of Assam. It further spread out in the districts of Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang and Sonitpur. In course of time these scattered groups acquired variations in language, customs, and culture and even, to some extent, physical

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7 no2, p.4
features, through inter-marriage and close association with other inhabitants of the region. Ajoy Roy suggests that this is the reason why one finds Lalungs, Rabhas, Koches and Sonowals in the Brahmaputra valley, Dimasas in North Cachar Hills, Burmans in Cachar Plains, Tripuris and other allied tribes in Tripura, Garos in Meghalaya, Hajongs in the adjoining foot-hills of Bangladesh, Meches in Lower Assam, North –Bengal and South-Eastern Nepal.9

Anderson, in his introduction to Endle’s book, *The Kacharis*, observes that no one who has heard the Kacharis, the Garos, the Meches, the Rabhas, and the Tipperas of the Bodo race speaking their own language can ever fail to recognize that they belong to the same linguistic group.10 Endle has divided the Great Bodo race under two sections: the Bodo-Kacharis or the Plain Kacharis and Dimasas or the Hill Kacharis. In his division he has kept the Brahmaputra as the dividing line partly because he was influenced by the tradition he had narrated in his monograph. The tradition describes the prolonged struggle between the Chutiya Kacharis and the Ahoms and its aftermath which was responsible to a large extent for the wide division of the above mentioned two sections.11 He, however, believed that despite the separation, the two sections are of the same origin racially. Endle writes that the people known to us as Kacharis and to themselves as Bada (Bara) were in early days the dominant race in Assam.12 In ancient Sanskrit literature the Indo-Mongoloids or Kacharis or Bodos

9 no 6, p.4
11 no 2, pp.8-10
12 *ibid*, p.4
were known as *Kiratas* or *Mlechchhas*, a people outside the *Varna* fold. It is believed by historians that this tribe must have covered the whole of Brahmaputra valley as is evident from the Bodo syllable ‘*di*’ meaning water in the names of the rivers such as Dikhu, Dibong, and Dibru etc. Undoubtedly the Kachari people were very widely distributed.

During the legendary period *Kiratas* have been mentioned being rulers of ancient Pragjotishpur. The oldest legendary figures in history of Assam, Mahiranga Danava, Ghatakasur and Naraka were all *Kiratas*. Mention about them in *Puranic* records, *Ramayana* etc proves their contact with the Aryans. In *Mahabharata*, references have been made about Bhagadatta, the ruler of Progjyotishpur, who might have had some sort of tributary relation with the powerful Kaurava kings till 650 A.D.¹

There is no definite record available about the Kings of Assam. The first epigraphical record of any royal kingdom in Assam is found in Allahabad Rock Inscription of the powerful North-Indian King Samudragupta (335-376 A.D), wherein Kamrupa is mentioned as a frontier kingdom paying tribute to Samudraguprta. Pushya Varman, who claimed his lineage from Bhagadatta, was a Bodo king who laid the foundation of Kamrupa kingdom in the North-East of Brahmaputra. It was the time when the power of Pragjotishpur was declining. To protect himself from the wrath of the powerful North Indian King, whose territory was extended up to Bengal, the Kamrup King might have entered into the above mentioned tributary relation.¹² It is

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¹³ *ibid.*, p.62
¹⁴ no.5, pp.8-9
probable that by that time a process of Hinduization and Sanskritization had started among the Bodo royalty.

From the middle of the seventh century A.D., source materials in the form of epigraphs are available for the reconstruction of the history of Assam. E. A. Gait states that there are properly speaking no historical data available till Hieun Tsang wrote his travelogue. He further remarks that from the stories narrated by Tsang, all that one can gather with certainty is that the Brahmaputra Valley was known to the Aryan invaders of India at a very early period and that the process of converting the aboriginal tribes into Hinduism is much older than existing records on the subject.  

It was during the reign of Bhaskar Varman that Hieun Tsang visited Kamrup on the former’s request. Bhaskar Varman was a great ruler of Assam and he maintained friendly relations with the greatest contemporary ruler of North India, Harshavardhana. His dominion had spread over a considerable part of North Bengal. Thus, a Hinduised Indo-Mongoloid empire was built by the middle of the seventh century A.D.  

After death of Bhaskar, the Salstambha and the Pala dynasties ruled Assam till 100 A.D. Salastambhas have been mentioned as Mlechchhas in the Borogaon Copper Plate Inscription of the eleventh century and it is a fact that they are Bodos. So far as the Palas are concerned historians differ in opinion. S K Chatterjee puts them as

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17 no2, p.63
separate entity from the Bodos while B. K. Baruah does not consider them as being separate from the Salstambhas.

In 1205, the Turks under Muhammad Bin Bakhtyar Khilji invaded Kamrup with an intention to conquer Tibet. According to the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, of Minhaju-s-Siraj, at that time the inhabitants of Kamrup belonged to the Koch, the Mech and the Tharu communities.¹⁸ The Turks were defeated but in the beginning of the thirteenth century the Turks again attack Kamrup and occupied the kingdom for some time until the Kamrup King fought back and defeated them.

In the thirteenth century it would seem that the Kachari kingdom extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra, from the Dikhu to the Kallang, or beyond, and included also the Valley of Dhansiri and the tract which now forms the North Cachar Sub-division.¹⁹ It was the time when the Ahoms appeared in the political scene of Assam and laid the foundation of Ahom rule of long six hundred years. They found the Kacharis as the most important and prominent of their western neighbours. Historical records of the eastern branch of the Bodos show that under the name of Chutiya they had established a powerful kingdom in the eastern corner of the province, at or near Sadiya. They were engaged in prolonged wars with the Ahoms. The Ahoms subsequently subdued the Morans, Borahis and other Kachari tribes living in the northern slope of these hills.²⁰

With the establishment of Ahom rule, the political history of the Bodos became clear. The first collision between the Ahoms and the

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¹⁸ no.1,p.54
²⁰ no.2,p.6
Kacharis occurred in A.D. 1490, when the Ahom king Sudangpha was defeated and driven across the Dikho. This defeat made them cautious and later they handled their turbulent neighbours with greater wisdom and care. In 1536 the Kacharis were defeated by the Ahoms and their capital Dimapur was annexed. They removed their capital first to Maibong in North-Cachar Hills and then to Khaspur on the southern Barail. From that time onwards the Kachari princes were regarded as "feudatory chiefs" of Ahom King. But, the Kachari Kings resented this very much and tried to regain their independent status whenever the Ahom government was involved in some sort of trouble. The tributary capacity of the Kachari kings helped them retain their hold over some selected tracts like Kapili valley within the fringes of Ahom territory even till the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the reign of Kamaleswar Singha, the Kacharis and Moamorias attacked the Ahoms near Raha in the Kapili valley which was described as Kachari territory. So, despite Ahom subjugation, the Kacharis had been able to retain certain territories under their control.

The only branch of this widely spread race with authentic history is that of the Koches. In 1515 A.D. Bishwa Singh laid the foundation of a powerful Koch kingdom that extended from river Korotoya in the west up to the river Barnadi in the east comprising a greater part of North Bengal and Western Assam. The sixteenth century Assam was

22 ibid, pp.42-43
23 Devi, L. Ahom Tribal Relations, A Political Study, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1968, p.102
24 ibid,p.121
dominated by Ahom-Koch relations. The reign of Koch king Namarayana (1533-1540) represents the zenith of the Koch power and his armies which were led by his brother Sukladhwaj or Silarai, met with almost unvarying success. Nara Narayana entered the Ahom capital Gargaon (modern Nazira) and did not leave till he had received the submission of the Ahom king. The Kachari Raja and the Raja of Manipur were reduced to the position of feudatory chiefs. After his death, the Koch Empire was divided into two states – Koch-Hajo in Goalpara and Koch-Behar in North-Bengal. This division eventually weakened the Koch power.

Ahom-Kachari clashes continued with intermittent breaks only during the Muhammadan invasions. Even then the Kacharis were regarded as subjugatory or *thapita sanchita* in their dealings with the former. Rudra Singha (A.D. 1696-1747) brought the Kacharis under his jurisdiction. He then compelled the Kachari kings to cede further plains territories in the southern part of the present Nowgong district. The Ahoms subsequently occupied the whole tract from Sibsagar to Nowgong. They allowed the Kacharis to retain a small portion of the southern part of Nowgong and the hilly tracts on condition of payment of an annual tribute to the Ahom kings.

Though circumstances compelled the Kacharis to recognize the hegemony of the Ahoms and abandon their plains territories to them, they did not give up their hostile attitude towards the Ahoms till the

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25 no23, p.29  
26 no.1, p.113  
27 no23, pp.102-103
End of Ahom rule in Assam. As the Ahom kingdom started to decline, the Kacharis too were losing their strength. Towards the later part of the eighteenth century the Bodos had fallen so swiftly on the slide of history that for more than a century the Bodo-Kacharis were left in complete oblivion.

The Bodo had exercised sovereignty in Assam under different names at different times. The western section of the old Bodo (Kacharis) occupied the thrones of Koch Behar, Bijni, Darrang and Beltola. An eastern branch in the name of Chutiya also established a powerful kingdom with its capital near Sadiya and then a section of eastern Bodos maintained their kingdom with capitals at Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur in the face of continuous invasions of the Ahoms and neighboring powers till the advent of British rule in Assam. This section of Bodos is known to us as Dimasas or Dimasa kachari (hill Kacharis). The last migration of Bodo King from Maibong (N.C. Hills) to Khaspur (North-Cachar) made Cachar Valley the ultimate seat of Bodo royal power. Eventually, the kingdom disintegrated beyond repair under the regime of Govinda Chandra Narayan into two parts: one under Govinda Chandra and the other comprising Northern and Central portion of the kingdom was taken over by Tularam Senapati with the help of British intervention. Govinda Chandra was murdered on 24 April, 1830. Following which his kingdom was temporarily placed under Lieutenant Fisher, who was entrusted with the power of a

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3\textsuperscript{2} ibid, p.105
3\textsuperscript{5} no.16, p.68
3\textsuperscript{5} Bhattacharjee, P. C. A Descriptive Analysis of the Boro Language. G.U. Publication Department, Assam, 1977, p.16
3\textsuperscript{5} no23, p.29
Magistrate and a Collector. Finally on 14 August 1832, the Governor General-in-Council annexed the plains of the Bodo kingdom of Cachar to the British dominion. Tularam Senapati who had been allowed to retain his dominion was pensioned off in 1854 and his dominion annexed to the paramount power.32

S. K. Bhuyan states that the kingdom of Cachar was only one of the numerous states set up by the political genius of the Kachari people.33 The Kacharis living outside the fringes of Cachar remained loyal to the Kachari monarch and the bonds of union among the Kacharis, whether within Cachar or outside, were very strong. There is no record of any attempt to fuse the scattered Kacharis into one political unit. The Kacharis living in Assam could never dream of transferring their allegiance from the Ahom monarch to the Kachari king at Dimapur or Khaspur, though the latter belonged to their own tribe.34

Conflict and assimilation are part of any living society. No society can remain static. The Bodos went through both conflict and assimilation throughout their existence in the Brahmaputra Valley. Their socialization with various other communities has greatly metamorphosed the language and culture they brought with them from their original habitat. But, despite interaction and assimilation they have retained some aspects of their cultural identity intact over the ages, i.e. language, religion, way of living etc.

Aryan influence over the Bodos remained confined mostly to the Bodo royalty. Although the process of Hinduization continued till the advent of British in Assam, the masses remained untouched. No

32 *ibid*, p.29
33 Bhuyan, S. K. *Kacharir Buranji*, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 1951, pp.iii-vi
34 no 33, pp. iv-v
attempt was made before the *ek saran* dharma of Sri Sankardev to draw the masses into the pale of Hinduism.

The early Bodo settlers of Assam had spoken their own dialect. In course of time, the interaction, assimilation and integration of various cultures, religions, races and civilizations produced a distinctive synthesis of the Valley’s culture, economy and polity. As a result, Assamese language developed as a link language among multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-caste, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society of Ahom Assam and in its adjacent areas of influences. The Bodo language, along with other tribal languages contributed greatly to the development of Assamese language.

The traditional religion of the Bodos is *Bathou* which is worshipped once in a year by the entire village community which is known as *Kherai*. The Aryan influence has definitely caused some changes in their social as well as religious life. They practice patriarchal system of descent and inheritance.

Traditional Bodo economy is agro-based. Before practicing settled cultivation the Bodos used to be *jhum* cultivators. Rice is their main food. Rice beer or *zou* is their traditional beverage. Apart from consuming regularly this *zou* is used in almost every religious and social ceremony. They are very fond of chewing betel nuts. Weaving is ingrained in the blood of a Bodo woman.

**New regime, new complexities:**

A very complex economic situation had developed in the societies of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with the taking over of power by the British imperialists. The pre-colonial society in Brahmaputra Valley
was semi-feudal and semi-tribal in nature hence a mixture of more than one classical mode of production prevailed. The economy was largely self-sustaining in those days. Colonial penetration into Brahmaputra Valley and British administration thereof linked it with the capitalist world economy. This new form of economy unfolded new complexities with serious socio-economic and political ramifications into the medieval society of the Valley.

Much of the 19th century was a time of economic degradation, displacement and land alienation for the Bodo people. This may also perhaps be seen as a corollary to the loss of political power of the Bodos. The ruling class and aristocracy dissolved into the un-classed sections of people of Assam Valley. The common Bodos continued their age old practice of shifting cultivation. But here also they had to face economic hardships. The new land revenue system required payment of taxes in cash of which they had very little amount.

The border trade along the foothills of Bhutan used to be the exclusive preserve of the Bodos since ancient times up to 18th century. The Bodos maintained trade links with the bordering hill tribes on the North and with Tibetan and Chinese traders though the Kachari-Dooars or passes or routes. The most famous among these trade routes was the Lhasa-Tawang-Udalguri and via this route a considerable volume of barter trade between the Tawang hill tribes and the Bodos of Udalguri were carried on. During the days of Moamoria rebellion this route became redundant. The British after taking over of political charge of Assam reopened35 this route and resumed trade. They started

35 According to A.J.Mills Report on the Province of Assam, Captain Gordon on 5th February 1844 on behalf of the British Government signed an agreement with
organizing a Bhootiya Mela annually at Udalguri. As monetary system replaced the old barter system the Bodo traders could not cope with the requirement of capital in minutest transactions. This requirement was met by a section of hardworking and people with business acumen - traders from Barpeta. By the end of the 19th century the total volume of the border trade in Udalguri area practically were out of the grip of the Bodos. This resulted in the total peasantization of the Bodos of Lower Assam. In Goalpara, a section of the Bodo who became zamindars oppressed their fellow Bodos.

The Bodos in general suffered economically due to the British land-revenue policies which made payment in cash mandatory. The Bodo cultivators soon became indebted to Barpetiah and Marwari traders and their land alienation started thereof. In order to avoid taxation many Bodo peasants engaged themselves in wage-earning jobs in the tea plantations or in oil fields initiated by the British.

Bhootiya chiefs known as ‘Sat Rajas’ and representatives of Twang and Lasha authorities at Balipara near Tezpur. There upon the trade route was reopened. The possibility of serving as trade link with interior of western china increased its importance as British territory by the end of the 19th century. A vast part of China was never made accessible to the British traders stationed at Macao and Canton on the eastern coast of China. The British traders in China had to undergo lots of restrictions imposed on them by the Chinese Imperial Authority. Their flourishing China trade in opium and tea was being badly affected by these restrictions. Under such circumstances a bright possibility was offered by the already existing albeit long out of use Udalguri - Twang - Lasha and China trade route. But, the lawlessness along this area stood as a formidable hindrance. In order to establish law and order the above agreement was entered upon. An annual amount of Rs5000/- would be paid to Bhootiya Chiefs as a Guarantee for maintaining safety and peace in all along the route.
Socio-economic grievances of the Bodos:

There were two prime reasons behind the Bodo demand for a separate state. One was the matter of economic under development of the community and the other of course was the rising political aspirations of the Bodo leaders. The policies and developmental activities of the Government could not bring the desired socio-economic development for the Bodo community. This impacted immensely on the Bodo psyche. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in its 92-point charter narrates how the Bodo and other Plains Tribes have suffered from wants, discrimination, injustices, insecurity and tortures and why they need a separate state.

In the years, following independence, most of the Bodo grievances remained unattended to by the Government. As a result problems of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, severe unemployment, economic exploitation and cultural and political neglect became increasingly acute among them. The schemes of Tribal Sub-Plan, the Tribal Development Corporation, Tribal Development Authority, Integrated Tribal Development Project, Welfare of schedule Tribes and Backward classes, Tribal Research Institute etc meant for the development of the tribals measurably failed to protect the interests of tribals of Assam.\(^{36}\) The Bodo middle class got alarmed and tried to draw the Government's attention to their plight on issues of land, language and employment through different memoranda and agendas of the Bodoland Movement.

\(^{36}\) ABSU document *Why Separate State?*, 1987, p.312
The greatest economic issue for the Bodos has been the question of giving adequate protection to their land and the maintenance of their economic stability. Ever since the introduction of capitalism the Bodos have had to struggle hard for maintaining their economic stability. Till the coming of the British they had practiced communal mode of production and enjoyed land under their tribal rulers. They even had trade relations with Tibet and China. The new administration under colonial regime brought with it money-economy, private ownership of property, taxes, exposure to the world market and commercialization of agriculture. These changes affected not only the Bodos but all the indigenous communities of Assam alike. The new tax system payable in cash and immigration of large number of people from East Bengal led to large scale rural indebtedness and land alienation. In the circumstances, the Bodos became economically and socially backward. The community was also slow in taking to modern avenues of employment opened by modernization. They have been easy targets for many glaring exploitations and injustices for decades due to their illiteracy and simplicity. It is observed that 90 per cent of the Bodos live below the poverty line even today, while a small group of educated elite amongst them have cornered the crumbs of Assam’s miniscule economic cake. 98 per cent of the Bodos live in isolated villages that are largely inaccessible from the main townships due to the poor communication network: an indication of the long neglect they have suffered. The Bodos are mainly agriculturists, who have not branched out into professions other than petty government jobs. A study of villages in tribal areas shows that their market economy centers round a meager sale of vegetables, mustered seeds and jute.
Most of the paddy grown is used domestically. Within themselves the Bodos continue to practice the barter system.\(^{37}\)

In such a situation, land continues to be an important factor for the stability of the Bodo economy. Their cropping technique has remained traditional. Low productivity of land has added to their economic hardship by making them indebted to rural moneylenders. Indebtedness in turn has resulted in landlessness. The Bodo peasants borrow money in times of flood, death of cattle and illness. In Goalpara district alone 53.2 per cent Plains Tribes were indebted to \textit{Kabuliwalas} who provided them more than 70 per cent of the loans at the interest rates ranging up to 100 per cent. Failure to refund loans eventually resulted in losing their land. Thus, the curve of landless peasants and unemployed youth among the Plains Tribes grew in number.\(^{38}\)

The Government efforts to redress their grievances under the Five Year Plans and financial assistance have yielded little results in safeguarding tribal interest because of the slow –implementation and in some cases, non-implementation of policies.

The question of loss of land is very serious for tribes since in the absence of diversification of their economy, loss of land practically means loss of the only means of livelihood. Rural indebtedness, illegal occupation of tribal lands by immigrants, urbanization, industrialization and Government declaration of reserve forests as wildlife sanctuary have caused large scale land loss among the tribes of Assam.

\(^{37}\) Nambudiripad, E.M.S. in "Assam X-Ray", Social Scientists, 1989, July-August, p.28

\(^{38}\) Government of Assam, Draft outlines Fifth Five Year Sub-Plan for SC, ST and OBC, 1974, p.4
In an annexure to their memorandum dated 8.4.1991 the All Bodo Students’ Union and Bodo Peoples’ Action Committee indicates the following figures of land alienated up to 31.3.1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Type</th>
<th>Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual Patta land</td>
<td>4065 bighas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lease terminated in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect of annual land</td>
<td>376 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periodic Patta land</td>
<td>13,625&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khas reserved land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encroached by non-tribals</td>
<td>61,527 &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>79,594 bighas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has further been stated that an area of 2, 81, 007 bighas has been de-scheduled and denotified from tribal belts and blocks. It is the Government’s responsibility to preserve tribal majority in tribal belts and blocks. In reality this is not so. 39 Land alienation in tribal belts and blocks is much higher than in of tribal villages outside these protected areas. The economic conditions of the tribal families living within tribal blocks and outside them were also found to be different. The former were better off then the latter. 40 Tribal land alienation, however, is not the result of improper Government protection alone. Lack of awareness on protective laws among tribals and their bad economic condition is also responsible for it.

40 Ibid, pp. 80-81
There is a very close relationship between immigration of Muslim from East Bengal and tribal land alienation. The creation of tribal belts and blocks owes its origin to the influx of people from outside, particularly from East-Bengal. The Census Report of 1911 first mentions influx of immigrants, mostly Muslims, in the riverine area of Goalpara. In the decade 1911-1921 there was increase of more than 1 1\2 lakhs of population, constituting 20% of the total population of the district. It was also mentioned that 5\7th of the increased population in Darrang and Nowgong district was due to immigration from East - Bengal. According to the 1931 census the number of the East- Bengali immigrants was half a million. According to this report, this was an event "which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assam's culture and civilization." 41 This premonition later proved to be true.

Immigrants in fact, were encouraged to come and settle in Assam by the British Government itself. The colonial administrators saw Assam as sparsely populated and its resources ineffectively used. They thus, introduced the tea -plantation and reserve forests in order to utilize the timber and other forest resources and encouraged settled cultivation through the large -scale immigration of peasants from East Bengal. All these events led to the decline of tribal landownership and land rights were rarely taken into consideration unless there was fierce resistance from local population. By the thirties, the problem of land alienation of Assam's tribes increased to such an extent that the British Government had to introduce the Line System as the first protective measure. Even

\textsuperscript{41} no 39, pp.82-83.
then their pressure was affecting tribal villages. In 1936 the Line System Review Committee reported tribal villages being worst victims of unregulated encroachment of vacant land by the immigrants and disappearance of many tribal villages. The tribal inhabitants then moved further into sub-mountane zones.\(^{42}\)

Within a short period of time the immigrants gained economic stability and some even turned out to be moneylenders. The immigrants lent money to the Assamese without any signed bonds and the Assamese having no means to pay back the money ultimately gave their lands to the immigrants absolutely bona fide.\(^{43}\) To protect tribal land interests one new chapter was added to the Assam Land Revenue Regulation 1886 entailing the creation of the Tribal Belts and Blocks in 1947. The Act of Assam Land and Regulation (Amendment) of 1947 clearly stated that no person shall acquire or possess by transfer, exchange, lease, agreement to settlement any land in any area or areas constituted in Tribal Belts and Blocks.\(^{44}\) But, the reality was quite the reverse. There were numerous cases of tribal land encroachments both according to Government documents and public testimony. In its *Why Separate State?* document, ABSU alleged that the so-called protective measure of Tribal Belts and Blocks in practice proved inadequate to protect the interests of the tribals since all the villages and areas populated by plains tribes have not been covered by tribal belts and blocks. In Assam there are as many as forty five (45) tribal belts and

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\(^{42}\) *ibid.* p.84

\(^{43}\) Report of the Line System Committee 1938, p.18

blocks now covering an area of total 1,25,28,320 B-1k-10I.s of land but nowhere have they been preserved by the enforcement of law. 45

There is also resentment about the immigrants' occupation of *patta* lands (Government waste land), unclassified forests and even reserved forests of the entire northern bank of the Brahmaputra. Attempts to evict these immigrants have so failed because of their strong financial standing and the long litigation process. The Bodo leaders even suspected political foul play behind this issue and in this context the ABSU had pointed out how the State Government had rejected U.N. Dhebar’s suggestion to cancel the illegal alienated land pattas and restoration of those to the original land-owners in case of tribal belts and blocks with effect from 26 January 1950.46

Apart from encroachments, urbanization and industrialization have also posed as problems to the economic stability of the Plains Tribes of Assam. The peace loving tribes have a closer affinity with nature. It is seen that when their habitat is urbanized the tribes leave their own lands. Uprooted by urbanization and industrialization, they move from place to place, jungle to jungle in search of new settlements. These landless tribes encroach upon the reserve forests and all other Governments’ *khas* lands. For example, during expansion of Guwahati city the South Kamrup tribal belts, which were constituted by the Government notification no.R.D. 74\46\172 dated 27\02\50, covering 7, 72,464 bighas of land 47 have been shattered. It has been alleged that in order to obliterate the predominance of the Plains Tribes, the Assam Government abolished this tribal belt on the pretext of

45 No36, P.313
46 *ibid.* 317
47 no36, p312
extension and industrialization of the Guwahati city and as result most of these tribes were completely uprooted and became landless. For development of North Lakhimpur town some areas of sub-montane North Lakhimpur protected belt had to be denotified in 1969. Against this backdrop, in a memorandum to the Prime Minister (1972) the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) complained that the Plains Tribes had been uprooted in a systematic and a planned way from their own soil and that the step-motherly treatment of the administration, dominated by the Assamese-speaking people, has reduced them to the status of the second class citizens of the state.

Planning for industrial set-up also displaced thousands of tribal peasants from their land. Most of them were forced to live nomadic life without rehabilitation in other alternative settlements. For example, the Bongaigaon Petro-chemical Complex encroached and alienated thousands of acres of tribal lands. Certain section of Bodos continued their nomadic lifestyle until recently although the recorded land proprietary system had been introduced long time back. These people along with those uprooted from their lands, settled mainly in reserved forest areas. The AGP Government evicted a large number of unauthorized encroachers from forests and other Government lands all over Assam. According to ABSU, about 70% of tribal families have become practically landless. Illiteracy, lack of social awareness, excessive use of traditional country liquor, economic backwardness all

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48 no 39, p95.
49 Singh, K.S. *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol-1, Delhi, Manohar, 1982, p.301
50 Paul, M. C. *Dimensions of Tribal Movements in India: A study of Udayachal in Assam Valley*, Inter-India, New Delhi, 1989, p.74
combined made them easy prey to the systematic exploitation of the more advanced, shrewd and privileged section.

Issues of education and employment are related since degrees are the key to employment whether in the Government or private sector. The condition of education was quite poor among Bodos till the early 70s. The Bodos themselves were to blame partly for this state of affairs. The major section of the Bodo society never exhibited much enthusiasm for formal education even though Bodo populated areas had school facilities for primary and secondary education. The condition of Bodo medium schools was decidedly pitiable and little effort was put in by qualified teachers. This factor also was responsible to a certain extent for the low literacy rate among them. The Bodo literacy rate as per the Census Report of 1971 was: male - 19.75 and female – 11.06, less than half of the literacy percentage of the Assamese population.

But, by early 80s spread of education to the interiors led to an increase in the number of educated persons and skilled labour among the Bodos. Science and technology and the role of electronic media also had far reaching consequences in bringing about change in their socio-cultural life and outlook. No longer contented to be farmers they looked to the Government for jobs. But, the paucity of Government jobs led to an increase in the number of educated unemployed.

The 10% reserved seats for Plains Tribes in Assam has not been fully utilized ever. The statistics available in the communications of

52 As per Census Report, 1971.
Personnel Department of Assam Government show that as on 6.6.86 the backlog of Plains Tribal employment even in Grade IV of the Assam Secretariate Staff was as high as 66.20% in consideration of the 10% reservation quota for the Plains Tribal community. In 1975, of the total 100,660 employees of the Assam Government only 5,488 were Plains Tribal people which were almost half of the required 10% quota.53 The Plains Tribes have been already unhappy with this. In addition, the requirement of a knowledge of Assamese language for many jobs and stiff competition with the educationally advanced non-tribal Assamese have left many educated tribals unemployed and embittered. A growing feeling among the educated tribal youth is that they have been left out in cold with the Assamese having cornered the lucrative administrative posts.54 Out of this frustration perhaps ABSU, in its 92 Point Demands, includes a whole rage of demands centering round language, such as implementation of Bodo as an associate official language in Bodo areas, introduction of the Roman script for Bodo, the teaching of Bodo in schools and universities, Government support for cultural projects such as Bodo filmmaking, the establishment of a museum and television stations focusing on Bodo programming, expansion of Bodo programmes on existing state-owned radio and television networks and the abolition of the language requirement of Assamese for state government employment. They also alleged that the Assamese people are chauvinistic in their attitude and

54Gohain, H. “North-East: Roots of separatism”, Mainstream, 9 January, 1988,p.32
that the Assam Government is for the Assamese alone and not a Government of the people of Assam.55

The Plains Tribes feel that all these have resulted because of their inability to get protection under 5th and 6th Schedules of the Indian Constitution. The Schedule Tribes living in the states other than Assam enjoy the benefit of the 5th Schedule which safeguards the interests of the land of the tribal population, gives them protection against exploitation by money-lenders and protects the tribal way of life. The hill tribes of Assam enjoy protection of their customs, practices and identities and the opportunity of growth and progress under the provision of the Sixth Schedule. But, the Plains Tribes of Assam do not enjoy the protection under either of these clauses.

This discrimination towards the tribal population of the Plains of Assam was made because initially they were regarded as being part and parcel of the Assamese population. Gopinath Bordoloi stated during debates on the subject of tribal protection that “the plains tribal people are being gradually assimilated to the population of the Plains and should for all practical purposes be treated as minority.”56 This explains why the Plain Tribals were omitted from protection of Constitutional provision.

On various occasions demands for protection has been made by various Plains Tribes organizations since 1947. The Tribal League submitted a memorandum in this regard before Constituent Assembly and Minority Advisory Committee on 20 March, 1947. In 1960, the Assam Tribal Sangh also submitted another memorandum before the

55 ABSU Memorandum to Rajib Gandhi, 28 August, 1989, Kokrajhar.
56 Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. 7, 1946, p.121
Dhebar Commission. PTCA in its memorandum to the President of India reiterated that the Plains Tribals of Assam enjoy the minimum constitutional safeguard among all the Scheduled Tribes in India. The petitions yielded no result.

The long standing socio-economic grievances of the Bodo community coupled with a rise in political consciousness amongst the educated Bodos provided an ideal setting for the tumultuous Bodoland movement in the mid-eighties.

**Christian Missionaries' contribution to the construction of Bodo ethnic identity:**

In an effort to adjust to the new politico-economic changes generated by British regime the leading members of Bodo community realized the need for education and development of the Bodo language with British assistance. A letter written by Rev. Miles Bronson on September 1, 1844 to the Corresponding Secretary of the Baptist Mission, Rev. Solomon Perk, stated that a number of Kachari chiefs living on the Bhutan frontier had expressed their wish to have schools established in their areas. This realization perhaps was an outcome of their endeavour to cope with the changing politico-economic situation. The American Baptist Missionaries were the first to evangelize the Bodos; soon they were followed by other missions. The need of the Bodos for education had been seized as an opportunity to further the missionary agenda. But it can not be denied that these missionaries were largely responsible for awakening the Bodos and

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the pioneering studies on the amalgamated Bodo people and their languages.

British officials and missionaries saw better opportunity of evangelical work among the Bodos of North Kamrup and Darrang as revealed by William Robertson, Inspector of Government Schools, when he wrote in 1855 that the Cachari (Bodo) population inhabiting the Chatgiri division, situated between Desh Durrang and Bhootan Hills present an interesting field for missionary labour (obviously meaning Uldalguri belt). This section of Bodos was left out side the ongoing ethnic process in Ahom Assam. The missionaries hence found in the non-Hinduised Bodos a better opportunity to spread the gospel. Apart from this Bronson could see more opportunities for British exploitation in Dooar areas of Darrang. He could visualize the possibility of an inroad via Tibet to reach even China with the opening of the Bhootiya Mela at Uldalguri.

The discovery of tea plant by Robert Bruce in 1823 in Upper Assam led to developments that had significant implications on the Bodo people, including, indirectly, on the writing of the first grammar book of the Bodo language. The British planters employed local Bodo workers to reduce tea producing cost. But the free willed Bodo workers were not willing to work under terms of the planters. They had even rebelled against their garden owners on several occasions. And the planters had been cautioned by the then Commissioner of Assam not to appoint large numbers of Kacharis together. This, however, brought a

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68 Barpujari, H. K. *The American Missionaries and North- East India.* Guwahati. 1986, pp.40-41
69 no 57,pp. 73-74
serious social implication for the future with the recruitment of tea labourers from outside Assam. The tussle between the British tea planters’ labour policy and the uncompromising, fighting spirits of the Bodos helped in increasing of the latter’s social bond.

In 1855 the Baptist Missionaries took a decision to work for the development of certain tribes of colonial Assam and thus they also started working for development of Bodo languages. The missionaries and the East India Company had no real enthusiasm for the creation of a written Bodo language and literature. Whatever move the missionaries had taken in this regard was solely based on the need for spreading the gospel and the consideration of trading benefits. Endle’s *An Outline of Kachari Grammar With Special Reference to Durrang* (1884) was supplied by the desire to have a manual to understand the psychology and social behaviour of the Bodo workers engaged in British tea plantations. Nevertheless, the missionaries helped in spreading education and the Anglican Church did commendable work towards the development of Bodo language and literature. Many important books were written and published by other missionaries i.e. *Short Grammar of Mech Bodo language* by R.L.O Scraf Crude. *Dimacha Vocabulary* (1895) by J.D.Anderson, *A Christian’s Grammar and Dictionary of Kachari Language* (1904), *Dimasa Grammar* (1906) by Besold among others. These colonial works contributed greatly to the development of Bodo languages and growth of ethnic and racial consciousness among the Bodos.

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60 *ibid*, pp77-78
Socio-religious and literary movements of the 20th century and its implications in formation and assertion of distinct Bodo identity:

The effect of education and modernization introduced by the colonial rulers was remarkable. During the first half of the twentieth century, equipped with colonial modern education, a very small section of Bodo elite grew out from the hitherto medieval Bodo society. They initiated some positive changes to transform the Bodo society from within to save it from complete peril and extinction. Socio-religious reform movements of Klicharan Brahma may be regarded as the pioneering move in this direction.

Klicharan Brahma was born in April, 1860 at Kazigaon in Dhubri sub-division. He had primary level of education. His father was a timber trader and after leaving school he helped his father to run the business. Soon he shifted his attention to the welfare of the Bodo community. Klicharan Brahma during his visits to Calcutta came in contact with Srimat Param Hansa Sibnarayan Swamy and was finally initiated by him sometime in 1907. On his return from Calcutta, he began to preach Brahmaism. 61

It was a time when the Bodo community was on the verge of complete decay. A large part of the community was living on the fringes of Hindu religious and social spheres. Considerable numbers were getting converted into Christianity for Christianity was considered as a better alternative for social upgradation. In short, the

Bodo community was in transition, partly relinquishing their traditional customs and culture. Their extinction seemed evitable.

At such a critical point, Gurudev Klicharan Brahma came forward as a savour of the community. It was he who directed his attention to reform the Bodo society out of its evil practices for which they had been looked down upon by their neighbours. Through preaching of the Brahma religion among the Bodos he tried to do away with the malpractices like consuming of rice beer, rearing of pigs and abuses of the Bodo society like the dragging and stealing of the Bodo girls for marriage. He stressed on education as a means to enlighten the community. He not only opened schools but also tried hard to make education compulsory by pressuring the reluctant guardians to send their children to schools. A.J. Larine, the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, helped him tremendously in the setting up of schools for the Bodos. He also founded a boarding place for the convenience of Bodo students studying at Dhubri Government High School. This school produced some intellectual Bodos with progressive outlook who brought new hope for the Bodo community. The importance of Brahma lies not as a religious preacher but as a social reformer. He initiated many social reforms and a literary movement. In fact, the Bodo language took the shape of a standard language, mainly modelled on the Bodo language as spoken in Kokrajhar area. Assamese script was adopted by him and his followers to enrich Bodo language.

The socio-religious movement carried on by Gurudev Klicharan Brahma contributed immensely towards the formation and consolidation of the Bodo identity. Though in the field of religious

\[\text{footnote: no5.p.39}\]
propagation the Brahma religion was not very successful, yet his role in uniting and generating a new confidence and consciousness among Bodos, especially the Brahmas, can not be overlooked. He prepared them to take the leadership of this community.

Unifying and reforming Bodo society had been Brahma’s primary aim. Along with other leaders and prominent personalities of the community who thought on similar lines, he convened the first *Bodo Maha Sanmilani*. The Bodos living in different corners of Assam assembled for the first time to discuss their various problems under the banner of this Sanmilani. In 1921 the first conference of the *Bodo Maha Sanmilani* was organized at Goalpara district. Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, its first President, articulated for the first time the unity of Bodo society and regretted the community’s deplorable situation. Resolutions were adopted to stop malpractices prevalent among Bodos and to raise its position.

They visualize the role of socio-literary organizations in the development of their community. Many youth organizations like *Kachari Chattrsa Sanmilani* (1919), *Kachari Yuva Sanmilani*, *Boro Charta Sanmilan*, *Boro Maha Sanmilani* etc. were founded in the second decade of the 20th century. And in course of time these organizations played very important role in awakening the Bodo community with their socio-literary movements.

Imbibed with the idea of an amalgamated Bodo race, the Bodo elite of the period tried to customize social rules with a motive to unite geographically as well as socio-religiously the scattered Bodos of Assam. The first Bodo book printed by the community on its own effort was *Bodoni Phisa o’ Aiyen* in 1915 from south Goalpara. This book was on the customs and traditional rules of the Bodo people.
Again, in 1924 the Assam Bodo Chattra Sammilani published the Bodo journal, Bibar. This quarterly journal edited by Satish Chandra Basumatary was published till 1926. Many Bodo poems, songs, prose and stories were written and produced by this journal, which saw the flowering of Bodo language and literature. Some writers of this period tried to remind the Bodos about their glorious past as the master rulers of the vast Brahmaputra Valley. In 1932, Bitharai, a Bodo journal was published under the leadership of Pramod Chandra Brahma. In 1938, a monthly Bodo magazine, Alhambra, was published and the contributors of these journals created a new dimension in the development of the Bodo language and literature. Many romantic poets emerged during this period. In the artistic hands of these romantic poets Bodo language and literature got a new life and spirit.

The Bodo elite did not confine themselves to socio-educational and literary activities alone. They also encouraged the Bodo people to pursue trade and business for economic betterment of the community. Klicharan Brahma even established a school of handicraft that received government patronage. The purpose was to make the Bodos economically independent and not too much dependent on agriculture. This effort to shape the Bodo economy on capitalist line did not prove very successful.

**Simon Commission and political assertion of the Bodos:**

Towards the end of 1920s the Bodo community started showing signs of political consciousness. Initially the Bodo elite grew with a reformative zeal but very soon they developed a distinct political mind. Their true aspiration was revealed when they stressed on separate
electorates while submitting their memoranda to the Simon Commission.

By 1930s Bodo identity had already taken a definite shape. In the conference of *Assam Kachari Yuvak Sanmilani* held at Titabar, Jorhat on 12 August, 1927, the representatives drawn from all parts of Assam and all tribal communities of Bodo family adopted a resolution to recognize themselves as independent from the Hindu community in all respects, political, social and religious.63 This was indeed a clear indication of the growth of Bodo consciousness. Side by side with their growing self- consciousness they were clear on their will to stay as a part of Assam rather then as a part of Bengal. They wrote “we, the Bodos, can by no means call ourselves other than Assamese.”64 With Assam they felt more akin culturally. In fact, they stated that the question of separate political identity was rooted in the question of livelihood not culture.

When the Simon Commission visited India the aspirations of the Bodo leaders were reflected in the four memoranda presented by different sections of Bodo community from all over Assam. They were Memorandum by the Bodo community of Goalpara district. Memorandum of Assam Kachari Yuvak Sanmilani, Memoranda of Bodos and Rabhas of Goalpara District and Dhubri Boro Sanmilani. They appealed to the Commission to preserve their distinct identity and independence as a community. Other demands included reservation of seats in the local legislature, representation in the government services:


64 Memorandum submitted to Simon Commission by the Bodo Community of Goalpara District, 1929,

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according to its numerical strength and due share in administration, facilities for spread of education amongst them and scholarships and facilities for going abroad for higher studies in agriculture, engineering, commerce and science and creation of a Bodo regiment. A strong resentment against the proposal to transfer the then Goalpara district to Bengal was also expressed.

On the basis of recommendation of the Statutory Commission, the Government of India Act of 1935, awarded separate electorate to the Plains Tribes. In the entire province of Assam four seats were reserved for the primitive and backward classes of Assam. This opened the hitherto closed door to the corridor of political establishment and power to the Bodos along with other plains tribal communities. This political space under colonial rule brought total involvement of all the Plains Tribes in the state politics and contributed towards their solidarity.

Politics of Tribal League and the Bodo experience:

The visit of Simon Commission concretized the desire for political participation among the Plains Tribes of Assam. Driven by the urge for self-assertion, the leaders organized a convention of all the Plains Tribals at Raha on 17 April, 1933. This convention, presided over by Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, gave birth to the All Assam Tribal League, a common political organization of all the Plains Tribes of Assam. Rupnath Brahma, Bhimbor Deori and a few other young educated Bodos took lead in the political activities of Tribal League. Its main thrust was to maintain the tribal identity, continuation of separate electorate, assurance of tribal representation in the Local Boards as
determined by the League, inclusion of all tribes, irrespective of religion or faith, in the schedule of tribal people, treating of tribals as a separate class for Government services and preferential treatment in the matters of appointment, liberal financial grants to the tribals and allocation of maximum amount in the budget every year for the spread of education among tribal communities, settlement of land to landless tribals, induction of one of them in the ministry.

The Tribal League in fact, was formed when the hope of getting a separate electorate for all the tribal population of Assam plains became clear after the visit of the Simon Commission. The League was successful in its movements for separate electorate status for the Bodos and other Plains Tribes of Assam. The Bodos cast their votes on the basis of separate electorate in the first general election held under the Government of India Act, 1935.

During the Bodo leaders' first political experience, the immigration problem attracted their immediate attention. The Bodo leadership, however, could not do much for the development of the community despite their initial reformative tendency. The period from 1937 to 1946 was the period of political activism for the Tribal League. No political autonomy as such was demanded since the political climate of the time was not favourable to make such demand. Their aim was to safeguard tribal interests. In doing so they never hesitated to shift their support from Congress to Muslim League taking full advantage of the prevailing political situation of the time.
Merger of Tribal League into Political Mainstream of Assam:

On the eve of independence, however, the Tribal League leaders decided to join the Congress, giving up their separate political identity. The euphoria of a free sovereign nation engulfed the minds of the Plains Tribe leaders too. Influenced deeply by this new hope, they converted the Tribal League into a socio-cultural organization, the Tribal Sangh. They surrendered all political endeavours to the Congress leadership. But, by giving up their separate political identity and merging into the political mainstream of Assam, they did not give up their separate Bodo lingo-cultural identity. The Bodo leaders thought it wise to take Bodo consciousness to a new level of maturity. Hence, they formed the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 as the custodian of Bodo language and culture. It was the Sabha that took the issue of development of Bodo language seriously and its activities made the young Bodo generation confident and aware about their ethnic identity. Apart from the activities of Bodo Sahitya Sabha the political atmosphere of free India led to a resurgent assertion of Bodo identity to the extent of demanding a separate state out of Assam within two decades of independence. Other socio-economic factors affecting the Bodo community also played a crucial part. The demand for a separate state emerged out of the community’s frustration at not getting political and economic justice from the policy makers. The young leadership realized that without political power development was a distant cry. This, indeed, was a new direction of assertion of Bodo identity. Never ever before had the Bodos living in the Plains of Assam voiced their identity to the point of demanding separate political formation.
It is a well known fact that societies continually change their structure in changing environments. It may be regarded as a survival technique. These changes occur due to the change in the political, economic and other factors. The Bodo community in the years following independence changed in some major aspects along with the advent of democratic polity in India. Some of the changes actually started taking place during the British period. Independence only accelerated the process.

The advent of democracy and spread of the idea of self-determination:

Politics played an important role in the assertion of Bodo identity for statehood. In India the advent of democratic polity popularized the idea of self-determination among ethno-linguistic communities living in a definable territory. Since democracy endows an ethnic community the right to negotiate with the state about the kind of relationship it wishes to have they developed the idea to handle their socio-economic affairs on their own and also to participate in the decision making bodies and processes for their true development. In the Bodo case too, the right of self-determination had emerged as a sacrosanct principle behind their movement. According to Brass ethno-nationalists movements usually derive legitimacy from this principle. 65

The Bodo movement was inspired by the idea of self-determination and a wish also to protect their distinct lingo-cultural identity. They already had the examples of the hill tribes like the Nagas, the Mizos

65 Brass P Ethnicity and Nationalism, Washington, 1991, pp.41-69
and the Khasis and Jayantias of Assam who were able to successfully carve out separate territories for themselves by applying the right to self-determination during 60s and 70s. The Central Government’s policy of reorganizing state boundaries in North-East also played significant role in shaping the demand for a Bodoland.

**Modernization, urbanization, globalization in essentialization of Bodo identity:**

Modernization and globalization have brought about an evolution of Bodo identity. Modernization unleashed an intense competition over access to a range of resources, both educational and material, among ethnic groups. During the 1980s, India was trying to be a part of the global economic power and Assam’s material resources such as gas, plywood and oil were increasingly exploited by the national Government. Assam accrued little benefit from this. This situation encouraged the essentialization of Assamese identity in resistance to an overpowering Central Indian State. Further, this identity was utilized to maintain social dominance of the Assamese over material resources and people of Assam. No doubt globalization, urbanization and democratization have created a social space in which the discourse of Assamese sub-nationalism has been able to develop and evolve, but at the same time Assamese regional hegemonic identity has had to face challenges from other internal groups like the Bodos.

Modernization and capitalist penetration helped in essentialization of Bodo identity. Since the state machinery exploited them in a quasi-colonial manner, they tended to resist the interference of state power. Decreasing economic opportunity coupled increased immigration.
expanded education and intense competition with advanced Assamese
neighbours instigated the Bodos to secure a distinct identity and
thereby to secure a social space for themselves. The problem was
aggravated by the nation-building endeavours of the mainstream
Assamese.

Nation-building endeavours: Assamese political mainstream:

The state of Assam that emerged in 1947 was a multi-lingual, multi-
ethnic state. With independence all the linguistic groups desired to
keep alive their respective ethno-linguistic identities. Their desire
naturally clashed with Assamese sub-national narrative created under
the shadow of nation-province framework. Further linguistic
reorganization of states in 1954, provided the Assamese with the
opportunity to ensure their socio-political domination by implementing
Assamese as the official language as part of Assamese hegemonic
project.

In the past Assamese identity had always been fluid in the sense that
demographic and geographical changes of the colonial period have
necessitated reworking of this identity. At no time was there any
finality in regard to settling of the national question in Assam.
Hence the nation-building endeavours of Assamese political
mainstream in post-independence period alienated Bodos to a great
extent. The Bodos asserted that the Assamese people were in fact
outsiders who have unleashed an anti-tribal policy to arbitrarily cleanse
Assam of its genuinely original and authentic inhabitants. They
accused the Assamese Government of conducting a deliberate policy of
Assamization through an imposition of “Assamese language and
culture upon the tribals undemocratically (and) violating the Constitution of India."66

Language policy:

Assam provides a typical example where the majority and the minority groups are almost equally balanced and where both the groups are struggling for the preservation of the respective linguistic and cultural identity. After linguistic reorganization the Assamese intelligencia and mainly the Asom Sahitya Sabha had made efforts to give recognition to Assamese language as the regional language dominating both the education and administrative machinery. Pressed by their demand, the Assam Government passed the Assam Official Language Act in 1961 making Assamese the only official language in entire Assam. This immediately led to vehement protests from the various non-Assamese linguistic groups in Assam as sufficient knowledge in Assamese language would be now a compulsory requirement for entry into any Government job.

The language issue proved to be the most sensitive and critical issue in Assam in the sixties. Historically, the Assamese language had been used as link language by its different ethno-linguistic groups. But this single factor engendered serious dissatisfaction among the tribal population of Assam. The hill tribes in particular separated from Assam due to this reason.

In 1972 the Universities of Guwahati and Dibrugarh made Assamese the medium of instruction in place of English in their colleges on

demand and movement of All Assam Students’ Union (AASU). The AGP Government just after assuming power imposed Assamese language as the compulsory third language in secondary schools, through a circular given by the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) on 28 February, 1986. These Government policies were viewed with suspicion by antagonistic groups.67

Whenever Assamese leaders equated the territorial identity of multi-ethnic Assam with the ethno-linguistic identity of Assamese speakers of the Brahmaputra Valley, they pushed the other ethnic groups to seek security through own autonomous structures.68

Impact-Assam movement and its aftermath on Bodo psyche:

The movement for a separate Bodo homeland was intensified after the Assam Movement. The objective of the movement was to oust the foreign immigrants with which the question of safeguarding Assam’s identity was involved. In the initial years of the movement the Bodo political leaders, All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and other Plains Tribal organizations extended full support to the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) leaders. The obvious reason for this cooperation was the common interest in driving the immigrants, who were creating economic hazards for the Bodos more than any other sections out of Assam. But in later years when it became clear that the real intention of the leaders and supporters of the movement was to establish

67 no36, p.303
Assamese regional hegemony, the tribal organizations, particularly the ABSU, started disassociating themselves from the AASU movement. However, the final divide was created when the Assam Accord was signed. The Bodos found no specific provision to safeguard their interests; rather clauses 6 and 10 of the Accord were viewed with disregard by the ABSU. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord promised legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. Clause 10 made provision for strict enforcement of all relevant laws to ensure prevention of encroachment on all Government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks.

The Bodo leaders became apprehensive that these provisions would legalize the assimilationist measures of ruling Governments in Assam. The general perception was that the protected forests lands were occupied by foreigner immigrants. But in reality many Bodo families had settled in reserved forests areas after having lost their traditional entitlements. If the first part of the clause 10 of the above Accord was implemented, those Bodo families also would face eviction. At the same time the ABSU leaders were suspicious as to whether the second part of the clause would be implemented because its true implementation would hurt the Assamese interest i.e. the interests of the traders of Barpeta and at the same time would benefit the Bodos.

69 The traders of Barpeta initially came to Bodo areas like Udalguri in lower Assam as mustard seed traders. Due to their acumen in business they soon started career as moneylenders and could easily dominate the poor Bodo cultivators and hold their lands in exchange of a small amount of capital. Later they spread to other Bodo areas in north bank of Brahmaputra as well. The effective policy to prevent encroachments in tribal belts and blocks surely will affect their interests.
When the AASU leaders signed the Assam Accord, by Assamese people they meant ‘all the indigenous people living in Assam’. In absence of any clear cut definition, the (Assam Accord) document itself made the Bodo leaders suspect about possible Assamese cultural domination and loss of Bodo identity. As was suspected, a new wave of enforcement of the dominance of Assamese language in schools, universities, administrative offices and communication systems was pursued to demonstrate that the Assamese people were effective masters in their own house\(^{70}\) by the AGP Government that came to power immediately after the Assam Movement.

The confusion and situation in the post Assam Movement period instigated the emergence of Bodo student leaders who took a new course of action. Under their leadership the ABSU took a hard line and by 1987, they started sponsoring popular movements for the attainment of a separate Bodoland.

The cultural, economic and political policies initiated during AGP’s tenure benefited only one section. In its Election Manifesto of 1985, the party promised to make sure that the implementation of the Official Language Act became effective at all levels.\(^{71}\) After coming to power the AGP Government tried to establish the pre-eminence of Assamese language over other languages. The Government has made the Assamese language the compulsory third language of the non-Assamese medium students in Secondary Schools through a circular given by the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) on 28 February, 1986. Hence in addition to the mother-tongue, English and

\(^{70}\) No68,p.192

\(^{71}\) Das, S. *Regionalism in Power*, Omsons, New Delhi, 1997, p.89.
Hindi, a non-Assamese-speaking student has to study Assamese as a fourth language. The main intention of this was to acquaint the non-Assamese speaking students with the language. The policies taken for the development of minority languages were merely tools of appeasement. In reality no practical measures were provided for higher education in these languages. Knowledge of Assamese was made an important requirement to enable one to get Government jobs.

The policies of this Government were meant to bring an explicit construction of a Greater Assamese Society and on that very attempt they alienated the Bodos. The student leaders of the Assam Movement, who became the leaders of the AGP Government, got caught in their own rhetoric and failed to recognize that Assameseness itself is a contested formation. In failing to select sufficiently inclusionary historical and cultural symbols, and in being insufficiently sensitive to the human impact of their policy demands – as applied to foreigners and indigenous peoples all alike – the leaders of the Assam Movement contributed to the process of ethnicization of the Assamese.72 Hence, AGP had to face a major crisis for survival in October, 1987 in the wake of a rise in Bodo insurgent activities all over Assam.

**Ethno-consolidating role of Bodo Sahitya Sabha:**

The *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* was founded on 16th November 1952 at Basugaon town following the footsteps of *Asom Sahitya Sabha*. The fundamental aim of BSS has been to unite the languages of Dimasa, Tipperah (Borok) and other allied languages and dialects of different

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regions – both plains and hills and thereby to develop and expand a standard Bodo language and to promote Bodo culture. The Sabha has been instrumental in arousing consciousness amongst the Bodos regarding their linguistic and ethnic identity. Since its formation, it has been holding annual sessions at various Bodo majority areas and has been organizing meetings and seminars to encourage Bodo writers and scholars. It also arranges publication of Bodo literary works. Under Sabha’s guardianship, the Bodo language has developed considerably.

The Sabha played very crucial role in legitimizing Bodo identity among its masses. The phase of constitutional politics carried on by the Tribal League during the 1930s and 1940s was followed by the cultural activism of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha from the 1950s onwards. After the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha the search for identity assumed a concrete shape. The Sabha took remarkable steps for the development of the Bodo language and preservation of the Bodo culture. The Sabha opposed the implementation of Assamese as the Official State Language of the province and advocated Hindi as the Official Language not only in Assam but for everywhere in India. The Sabha also expressed the sentiment that since the Bodos has their language and culture their children must be given education in their mother-tongue so that their distinct identity can be maintained. Realizing the need of imparting education in the mother tongue the Bodo Sahitya Sabha started its movement for the implementation of Bodo language as the medium of instruction in schools in the early sixties. Accordingly in 1963 Bodo language was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary stage and in 1968 at the secondary stage.

73 PTCA’s memorandum to the President of India, 1967, Appendix G, Pp.249-250
In 1974 the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* launched a Movement for the adoption of the *Roman* Script. Bodo was not a written language in the past and till that demand, the Bodo language had been written in the Assamese script. The Assam Government instead of conceding the demand of the Sabha took repressive measures to suppress the movement. In their memorandum to the Three Member Expert Committee ABSU stated, "*The Bodo Sahitya Sabha* and the All Bodo Students’ Union jointly launched a vigorous movement for getting *Roman* Script for Bodo language during 1974-75 and the Assam Government tried to crush down that peaceful mass movement in which 15 Bodo people lost their valuable lives in police firing, many Bodo villages were raided, Bodo houses were burnt, properties either damaged or looted; not less than 50 thousand Bodo people were arrested and put into jails. Ultimately, *Devanagiri* script in lieu of Roman script was accepted by the *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* at the intervention of the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. thereby establishing a link with pan-Indian languages. The attitude of the Government alienated the Bodos from the Assamese political mainstream and made them restless. Consciousness of Bodo identity became stronger among masses.

Since its inception, the Sabha has been working for the development of a pan-Bodo sentiment and for the creation of a common Bodo language which would unite all the people of Bodo origin scattered all over North-East India. This embryonic idea could be seen turning into action when Joybhadra Hagzar, a Dimasa Kachari from North Cachar district, was elected as the first President of *Sabha*.

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74 ABSU memorandum to *Three Member Expert Committee*, 8 April, 1991, p 77
Assertion of Bodo identity under ABSU:

Bodo political aspirations reached a new height during the eighties of the nineteenth century. The phenomenal growth of ethnic consciousness after the Roman Script Movement of *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* and the changing political orientation of new Bodo leadership i.e. ABSU leaders, particularly at the end of Assam Movement led to a radical outbreak for a separate Bodoland.75

In the 18th conference of ABSU held at Rowta in May 1986, U. N. Brahma was elected as President. With his election ABSU activities took a new turn. ABSU decided to include political issues as part of their agenda and started the successful mobilization of a large number of Bodos in support of their demand for a separate state. The older generation of the Bodo politicians went back stage with ABSU taking the center stage of Bodo Movement. Since most of the Bodo leaders happened to witness AASU activities from close quarters it became

75 The first demand for a separate state for Bodos along with other plains tribals of Assam was made by Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967. That was after the formation of Nagaland. The structure of political rivalry in Assam and the shifts in the federal government’s strategies in the 1960’s encouraged Bodo leaders to intensify their organizational efforts and PTCA was formed. But PTCA leaders could not realize their political goal. In 1987 during the first AGP Government, the ABSU leaders began to mobilize Bodos in support for a demand of separate state. The circumstances and events taking place in and around Bodo society from 1952 to 1986 forced ABSU to acquire a kind of hegemony over the Bodo community. ABSU was formed on 15th February, 1968 at Kokrajhar. Although a student organization it has been working for the development of Bodo community. From the beginning it also gave support to PTCA’s Udayachal movement.
easier for them to emulate their movement tactics. Like the AASU leaders, the Bodo leaders also used cultural and historical symbols to inspire nationalistic feelings among the Bodos. They were confident that Bodo demands for greater public recognition of Bodo language and culture and for economic and educational opportunities could be best met with the creation of a separate state only. Hence, they articulated a radical agenda and focused on exclusive Bodo identity. They realized that the earlier leaders had failed due to lack of mass support and they made the ideology of the Bodoland Movement entirely mass-based. To reach the masses, the ABSU opened branches at the Anchalik levels to organize volunteers prior to the formal commencement of the movement on 2 March, 1987. This very fact proved to be a major yardstick for the success of ABSU campaign. And when the movement started, the Bodo masses overwhelmingly supported their leaders.

Their radical agenda and mass mobilization sidelined them completely from the PTCA leaders who had proved to be weak and individualistic. The political activities of the PTCA remained limited to a barrage of memoranda. Moreover, they failed to connect themselves to the pulses of the common tribal population. Like their predecessors, the Tribal League leaders, they also kept changing their loyalty in favour of the party in power. They disappointed the Bodo people most by joining the Janata Government after the declaration of emergency in 1975-76 and finally on 4 April, 1977 when they treacherously gave up Udayachal demand. Considering the ineffectiveness of the PTCA leaders the Bodo masses came out in full support of ABSU. The efforts of Bodo Sahitya Sabha had already resulted in the desire to preserve Bodo language and culture and work together for the community rights
among the Bodo people. ABSU leadership ably utilized that sentiment in favour of the Bodoland Movement.

From the above discussion the following conclusions can be drawn:

A. The Bodos are among the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. They enjoyed royal positions in Assam in ancient and medieval periods and established kingdoms under different names, at different points of time. The most famous among those kingdoms are the Chutiya kingdom, the Dimasa kingdom and the Koch kingdom. The pouring of Imperial British into the Brahmaputra Valley in the eighteenth century changed the destiny of the communities living in the Valley all of a sudden.

B. Most of the 19th century history of the Bodos was a history of displacement and degradation. The Bodo Royalty lost their territories and went into oblivion. Under the alien politico-administrative arrangements the Bodo masses had to face economic hardships and land alienation.

C. By the beginning of the twentieth century some momentous events took place in the Bodo society. They started becoming aware about their ethnic identity as a result of the spread of modern education and socio-educational reform movement of Klicharan Brahma. This further initiated the growth of a small number of politically conscious Bodo elite. This section participated actively in the constitutional politics of colonial Assam and worked for socio-educational development of their society. The Bodo language and literature also developed to a great extent during that period.
D. With the attaining of independence the Bodos gave up their separate political identity and merged into the Congress. But, they did not give up their lingo-cultural identity and tried to maintain it through the activities of Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1952). The Sabha has been instrumental in implementing Bodo as medium of instruction in schools in Bodo dominated areas and thereby took the Bodo identity to a new height among its masses.

E. Language issue dominated the political scene in politics of post-independence Assam. The endeavours of the mainstream political leaders to make Assamese the sole official language of the region in the greater interests of unity among its different ethno-linguistic communities finally alienated large sections of them including the Bodos.

F. Moreover, the policies and developmental activities of the post-independence Governments did not bring the desired socio-economic developments to the Bodo community. Their problems of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, severe unemployment, economic exploitation and cultural and political neglect became increasingly acute.

G. Under the circumstances, the political orientation of the new Bodo leaders i.e. ABSU changed completely by the late 1980s, who realized the necessity of political power to overcome the socio-cultural, economic and political hegemony of the Assamese.

All the above developments led finally to the Bodo Movement for a separate state.