Bodo Kacharies of Assam: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The Bodo Community, one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Bodo-Kacharis group, has carved a niche on the annals of Assam history. With its unique socio-cultural and economic identity, the community opens up new vistas of observation and research. This aspect is likely to unearth the hitherto unknown facts and issues relating to the community.

In this paper, an attempt is made to look at the community right from their advent to the extent of the Bodoland Movement. In between, a cursory look is also given at their many and varied problems leading to the rise of their struggle for self-assurance in Assam.

KEYWORDS: Bodo Kachari, Ethnic group, Bodoland Movement.

1. Introduction:

Among the ethnic groups in Assam, the Bodos are credit with having in possession a rich heritage that dates many years back. It is because of the sheer lack of the written records of historical development that the early history of the Bodos is largely unknown. Unavailability of sufficient data and adequate analysis is one of the areas to be given due attention. On the basis of the availability of materials, it comes to our notice that the Bodos formed a large group of Mongoloid people living in Mongolia. Then, as usual, migration started and some parts China, Hwangho valley and Tibet were occupied by them. In course of time, they shifted their habitation to different parts of the North-East India. They led their own life touching upon their unique language, customs, myths, legends etc. Simple and easy-going by nature, the Bodos could easily mix up with other ethnic groups in Assam. But their natural self and self-assured identity underwent many upheavals as time passes on. Under, the Ahoms, the British and more poignantly the so called mainstream Assamese society, marked changes took place in their pattern of life. History, being a living witness to happenings, unveils the picture of the community. It is the picture which is at once grim and serious. Despite inheriting a rich social and cultural legacy, we find the Bodos struggling, particularly in the post independence period, to liberate themselves from the clutches that have proved determined to their overall progress. After their struggle, the community has reached a phase which seems to bring a rapid change to every sphere of the Bodos.

2. Materials and Methods:

The study is completely descriptive and theoretical. It is based on secondary data collections from article, magazines, research papers, books, journals, government publications and Internet.
3. Discussions:

**Bodo-Kachari** is a generic term applied to a number of ethnic groups predominantly in Assam speaking Tibeto-Burman languages or claiming a common mythical ancestry. They have prominent Mongoloid features with high cheek bones, slit eyes and a slight growth of hair in the body and scant beard.

**Origin:** They were first classified by S. Endle as the Kacharis. Here Bodo is derived from "Bod" which is Tibet and Kachari is derived from "kassar" meaning the foothills of the Himalayas. They are considered to have reached the Brahmaputra valley via Tibet and settled in the foothills of the eastern Himalayan range which includes the whole of Assam, Tripura, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. That the Bodo-Kacharis were early colonizers of the river valleys is taken from the fact that most of the rivers in the Brahmaputra valley today carry Tibeto-Burman names---"Dibang", "Dihang", "Dikhou", "Dihing" etc.---where "di-" means water in Tibeto-Burman. **The Bodo-Kachari:** The Bodos, previously known as Kacharis or Kirata had close affinity and was related by blood with the races termed as Deori, Barman, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa, Mech, Lalung, Motok, Garo, Hojai, Chutiyas, Moran, Sonowal, Tippera, Mahaliya, Koch-Rajbonsi, Sarania Hajong, Thengal etc. Man by nature is adventurous and try ever to hold a better life then their present one. For this reason, in the past migration became a general tendency of man and it was very much easy to man for abundant soil, less political resources by such urgu the Bodos, a large group of Mongoloid people who lived in Mongalia around 2000 B.C. came and settled in some parts of China and gradually extended their dwelling in the Hwanghovelley and Tibet for many centuries. Again, charged by their adventurous zeal, some of them migrated to the plain area of Bhutan. Though they settled in an wide area of Bhutan yet some of them were in search of fortune and came Bhutan and lived in the Koach Behar, Rangpur, West Bengal, Nepal, Bangladesh etc. Thus, this Mongolian race divided in to different sections in the course of time took different name and like to identity themselves differently either by the process of assimilation with the people lived before their settlement or by their adjustment the new environment. Rivers, mainly the Brahmaputra and Barak in the NE had a great role in moulding the life of these people. Most of the groups hailing together adopted the name of their residing place after the name of the rivers and mountains, i.e. the Morans and the Borahis settled on the banks of the Dikhou and Disang. But it was in 1228 AD that Sukapha made his campaign to this land from Burma. He defeated and invaded on the wide territory of the NE which was previously attached with some parts of the greater Naga Hills. Then he defeated the Morans and Borahis and occupied the land. Sukapha with his followers tried to assimilate with these people to increase his strength with a vision to win over the Kachari kings who ruled upon nearly all the groups included in to the greater Bodo race.

In the ancient Indian Vedic literature and the Mahabharata, Pragjyotishpur was the capital of the greater undivided Assam. The mighty Danava or Asuras or Mleches or Kiratas ruled for a long time. The ancient mighty kings like Mahiranga, Narakasura, Ghatakasura, Bhuluk etc. belonged to Mleches. These kings were related with the place presently known as Gauhati, Shillong, Sonitpur, Bhulukpung, Sibsagar etc. So, in this long period the Great Bodo race passed many Great Bodo race passed many generation leaving their offshoots in different parts of the NE. They adopted new customs, religion, language, habits in their process of assimilation in time to time with the peoples, they came in to contact in various affairs of their life and customs to adjust
and regulate their life. Here, took the difference in end some other remained far behind or as backward. Thus, all the greater Bodo race and in the course of time divided in to some sects and giving the name as mentioned above they confined themselves with few variations. Thus, the present Bodo communities includes only the persons, bearing the surname as- Basumatary, Bodosa, Boro, Bargayary, Bhrama, DaimaryGoyary, Narzary etc.

The Bodos were once a powerful race. They are said to have ruled over the whole of Kamrup. Just, before the arrival of the Ahoms in the 13th Century, the Kacharis and the Chutias(including Maran and Motak) two branches of the Bodos ruled over a large part of Eastern Assam. Moreover, the Bodos had royal glories and occupied the thrones of Koch Behar, Bijn, Darang and Beltola at Gauhati. The Bodos of the eastern part established a powerful kingdom with its capital near Sodia and also at Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur against the continuous invasion of the Ahoms and neighbouring kingdoms till the time of the British rule in Assam. The history of the Bodos at present is a history of struggle- social, political, religious lipeary since the beginning of the 20th century. It is now clear that they were misused by subversion, conversion, division and sub-division in such a way that some of them have already forgotten their fore-fatherly culture, language and literature. The divide and rule policy of the British, was not an exception in the case of Assam, which affected the Bodos in the beginning of the 20th century British rule in Indian may be said to have started from A.D. 1757 when the forces of East Indian Company defeated Sirij-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of palassey. Thus, in the later years stirred people to leave a powerful national struggle against British Imperialism during the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century.

The Bodo people could not develop much under the British rule. During that period, large numbers of the Bodo people were converted into Christianity. Their social, political, economic and cultural sides remained neglected. This grim picture continued ever after Independence. People taking the upperhand in the so called Assamese society did not accord equal position to different ethnic groups to which the Bodos were no exception. Multifarious issues and problems remained unaddressed. They looked for some one or some organization to stand for their cause.

Bodo Movement:

Looking at the age-old negligence and apathy shown to the Bodo people and other tribals of Assam, the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in the early 1960’s. they demanded a Union Territory called Udayachal to safeguard the tribal belts and blocks which were being encroached by rich landlords and new immigrants through illegal means. Education, health, transport, communication were some other areas raised lay the Council. But the demand remained far from being materialized. UpendraNath Brahma, the Bodofa of the Bodos advocate strongly equal rights and status. For all human beings and wanted to lead his community to the portals of highly accomplished world community in which no social barriers and prejudices exist. When he was the President of ABSU, he saw fractured loyalties of people with different interest and opinions. Those who opposed his views initially, started respecting and favouring him after the long meetings of the delegate sessions conducted by him. Soon, the opponents in the PTCA too, supported him and joined the subsequent movements.
Bodoland Movement:

In the late 1980’s, All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and Bodo political parties jointly moved and demanded a separate state, called Bodoland. Given the decades-long unaddressed issues and negligence to them, the Bodoland Movement was in the right direction. Under the leadership and relentless effort of Upendranath Bhahma, the Bodofa of the Bodos. The Movement was also joined by an armed militant group called Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). During the time of Mr. Hiteswar Saikia, the Chief Minister of Assam, the Bodo Accord was accepted and thereby a glimpse of hope for the upliftment of the Bodos came into being. Under Hagrama Mahilary, the former BLT members formed an alliance with the Indian National Congress and came to power in Dispur in 2006 Assam Assembly elections.

Religion:

In the past, Bodos worshipped their forefathers. In recent years, Bodos practice Bathouism, Hinduism and Christianity. In November of 2006 the Bodo Religious Bathou ejected seven Christian families from Haldibari and surrounding villages. Among Christian groups that some Bodo belong to is the Bodo Evangelical Lutheran Church. Bathouism is a form worshipping forefathers called Obonglaoree. The stju plant (belonging to the Euphorbia genus), is taken as the symbol of Bathou and worshipped. In the Bodo Language Ba means five and thou means deep. Five is a significant number in the Bathou religion. A clean surface near home or courtyard could be an ideal for worship. Usually, one pair of Betelnut called ‘goi’ and betel leaf called ‘pathwi’ could be used as offering. On some occasion, worship offering could include rice, milk, and sugar. For the Kherai Puja, the most important festival of the Bodos, the altar is placed in the rice field. Other important festivals of the Bodos include Hapsahatarnai, AwnkhamGwrlwiJanai, Bwisagu and Domashi.

Language and Literature:

Bodo language, a branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, is a language of the Bodo group under the Assam-Burmese group of languages. It is closely related to the Dimasa language of Assam and the Garo language of Meghalaya. It is also a very closely related language of Kokborok language spoken in Tripura.

In the aftermath of socio-political awakening and movement launched by the Bodo organizations since 1913, the language was introduced as the medium of instruction (1963) in the primary schools in Bodo dominated areas. Currently, the Bodo language serves as a medium of instruction up to the secondary level and an associated official language in the state of Assam. The language has attained a position of pride with the opening of the Post-Graduate course in Bodo language and literature in the University of Guwahati in 1996. The language is officially written using the Devanagari script, although it also has a long history of using the Roman script. Some researchers have suggested that the language originally used a now-lost script called Deodhai. But there is a difference in using the letters in Bodo than the Devanagari. The Bodo language, recognised constitutionally in 2003, has now become a national as well as an international language at present.
Musical Instruments:

Serja, Siphung, Kham, Jotha, Gongwma, Gorkha etc. are the main musical instruments of the Bodos. They play the musical instruments in the ‘Kherai’, ‘Garja’ and ‘Baisagu’ particularly in celebrating their multifarious festivals.

Dress and Ornaments:

In their mood of dress the Bodo do not differ from their Hindu neighbours, but they show certain fondness for the coloured garment and are aware of natural art of dying, the materials for preparing the dying (usually blue and various shades of the red) being derived generally from the leaves or roots of trees. The male persons, both young and the old put on ‘Gamocha’ when they are at home, which hangs down to the knees from the waist. The women generally tie a cloth round the chest just bellow the arm pit that hangs to the toe. It is called the ‘Dokhona’. And if it is plain, it is called ‘Salamath’ and if ornamented it is called ‘Dokhona Thawshi’. The Bodo women also wore ‘Pasra’ or ‘Jwmbaigra’ along with Dokhona. The women use very few ornaments made of silver and gold namely ‘Khera or Kheru, Jabkring, Putty, Nak-Phul for the nose. For the neck Chandrahar, Thanka-Siri, Jibou-Zinjiri. For the hands Ashen, Mutha.

4. Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it comes to over view that the Bodos passed through different phases of turmoil and suffering. Their problems and the issues related to social, political, economic and cultural spheres could not reach the table of negotiation and solution for a long time. Even after the assimilation with the larger mainstream Assamese society, they had to sustain the life of alienation and isolation. Their identity of being the ‘other’ has led them take resort to the struggle for self-determination. Despite being the descendents from a rich heritage, their quest for self-identity and self-affirmation bear the veil of irony to some extent. However, it is to be mentioned that despite the establishment of the BTC and different organizations, scores of issues and problems of the Bodos are yet to be addressed. Still there are people in the remote areas reeling under the sheer absence of the basis amenities of life. Hope, coming days would lead them on the ladder of prosperity. Besides, more research works are to be done on the community so that its rich heritage is kept intact. Moreover, they would show new areas and issues to be developed in near future.

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