

## CONTEXTUALISING BODO MOVEMENTS WITH OTHER TRIBAL MOVEMENTS OF INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The Bodos and other tribals of India, as witnessed, in most cases, traditionally lived in their ancestral habitat dependant on nature, and having meager wants, they were complacent with their life. Even when there were intrusions in their areas and exploitation by outsiders, they were slow to react. However, as and when the atrocities of the money-lenders, the confiscation of their lands by the landlords reached unbearable heights they reacted, at times violently, against those established interests who had the backing of the Government. This ultimately, became a fight against the Government or political power which represented the status-quo. The Bodo movement was the product of a long historical process of identity formation among the Bodos that started in the colonial period and became gradually assertive in the post-independence period. The entire parameter of social changes and the consequent emergence of these Movements for survival of identity, equality, political and civil rights, economic and social justice, right to land; language and culture, refinement of custom and traditions, awakening of national consciousness of the Bodos bear the same testimony and affinities of other tribal movements of mainland India in general and North-East India in particular.*

*Keyword: Bodo, tribals of India, Bonded-labour practices, land alienation, economic exploitation.*

### INTRODUCTION:

The Bodos-Kacharis, the plains tribals as an ethnic groups display a distinct cultural and demographic position in Assam Valley of North Eastern India. Despite their comparative insulation they have maintained a unique in the Indian history and civilization since time immemorial. The Bodos, like other Indian tribals have been in general a peace loving people. The Bodos and other tribals of India, as we witnessed, in most cases, traditionally lived in

their ancestral habitat dependant on nature, and having meager wants, they were complacent with their life. Even when there were intrusions in their areas and exploitation by outsiders, they were slow to react. However, as and when the atrocities of the money-lenders, the confiscation of their lands by the landlords reached unbearable heights they reacted, at times violently, against those established interests who had the backing of the Government. This ultimately, became a fight against the Government or political power which represented the status-quo. At times the tribal movements were also against the social evils like liquor addiction, superstitions etc. During the last hundred years, due to rising awareness in the tribals, the agitations against Bonded-labour practices, land alienation, economic exploitation increased. Leaders from tribals and non-tribals were instrumental for such movements (*S.G. Deogaonkar: 1992: 289*).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

No serious research based study on Bodo movements with other tribal movements of India has yet been made by any scholar by utilizing all the available sources. In fact, some scholars have been brought to light on the subject matter in their respective works. However, still await thorough investigation and treatment within a wide canvas.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The methodology of the study is inter-disciplinary one. According the work is primarily based on field investigation i.e interview for collecting first hand data and all published works. The techniques of anthropological data collection i.e participation, observation, interview methods are also adopted. The collected data -both primary and secondary have been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively whenever necessary. Comparative study is also made whenever it is necessary to bring an accurate picture of the subject.

The tribals in India are basically engaged in agricultural and related production. They had a compact economy with tribal forms of 'property ownership' and communal mode of production relations. They were ecologically more or less insulated, geographically concentrated in certain contiguous areas, economically wedded to land and forest, culturally enjoyed a distinct style of life, with distinct language heritage, love for freedom, and respect of 'self identity'. They revolted more often and far more violently than any other community in India when the colonialism bore harshly on them (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 297*).

Anthropologically, a tribe is a social group the members of which lives in a common territory, have a common dialect, uniform social organization and possess cultural homogeneity having a common ancestor, political organization and religious pattern. But perhaps it would be very difficult to find many tribal groups in

India who possess all these characteristics. The classification of tribal population in India is rather complex and difficult. Moreover, recognition of new communities as scheduled tribes also influenced the total tribal population. Roy Burman in 1971 noted 427 tribal communities. The Anthropological Survey noted 314 communities in 1967. In 1950, the number of scheduled tribes was 212. Danda in 1973 noted that out of 642 communities identified, data on 32 tribes are lacking and in 226 cases, they are mostly sub-tribes. According to the 1981 Census, the tribal population of India comprising 427 communities was 51,628,638 constituting 7.76 per cent of India's total population. However, ethnographic data on a number of tribal communities are lacking. Some of the large tribal communities are distributed in a wide region and often profess varied occupations. Again, a few tribal groups are divided into a number of sub-groups which are practically distinct tribal groups. Besides these, the scheduling of tribes has also created a problem as in many cases; a tribe may be scheduled in one state and not so in another state (*Buddhadeb Chaudhuri: 1992: Preface-8*) or even within the state so as the case with Bodos kacharis living in Karbi and North Cachar Hills.

Tribal movements are not a new development in our country and have their origin in the 'Colonial Raj'. Since then tribal movements have taken varied types, forms and dimensions in various pockets of the country. In the past the articulation of movements were different and were mostly in the form of 'out-burst', 'depreations', 'uprisings', or 'raids' and these were described as 'incidents' or 'episodes' as their character could not be ascertained. But they can be characterized as 'movements' as they are an integral part of social system. The basic forces underlying these movements were more economic and ethnic. These 'movements' were regarded as attempts on the part of a group to effect changes in the face of resistance. During the course, the movement became more political in articulation, and the political culture became a strategy of the movement or consequences of the various forces rather than a determining factor. Of course, the tribal movements do have, invariably, political implications in the social system (*K.L. Sharma: 1976: 38-40: 297*)

The genesis and roots of tribal movements in India lies in the colonial rule of the British. The ultimate aim of British colonialism was to exploit the rich and untapped socio-economic resources of the country and drain them off to make the British Empire prosper. The expansion and consolidation of colonial power set free different forces and brought the economy of India into the orbit of the 'world capitalist order'. The introduction of new mode of colonial system into the tribal economy in turn produced new types of property owning systems which in turn gave rise to new social formations, which were unknown to the tribals previously. The British brought them into the historical process of conflict and change. This had broken the compactness of tribal social relations and their 'mode of production'. The new tribal-feudal social formation came in direct conflict with colonial production system with its new market forces, administrative and politico-legal system to safeguard the emerging

system. Money as a medium became capital. Land was transformed into commodity for the first time and was thrown open to market for sale. This made the hereditary communal rights on land defunct. The new system of land ownership resulted in the emergence of a novel class of landlords, a lower rank of cultivating tenants, and large scale of tribal agricultural landless labourers.

The various socio-economic forces set free by the colonialism increasingly encroached upon tribal lands and forests, and thereby distorted their socio-economic organization. Land ownership gradually slipped away from the tribals to non-tribal landlords who came with the expansion of commercial economy. New forces of modernization like missionaries, modern education created a new minority social group who increasingly possessing the socio-economic resources at the cost of majority mass of tribal peasants (*Ibid*)

In fact, the basic factors underlying the contemporary tribal movements are the same as in the past. The difference lies in relation to their articulation and dimension of the movement. The tribal peasants reacted sharply when their communal land ownership was disturbed, their religious beliefs were scoffed at, their independence were attacked; when traditional customs, manners and civic rights, standard of etiquette and prestige, code of conduct were brushed aside, and deep-rooted conventions ignored, insulted and violated. Directly or indirectly the policy of colonialism created a lot of contradictions in the tribal self-sufficient economy and social relations. The perpetuation of the same system with some modifications in the post-independence period with its inherent characteristics like inequalities, underdevelopment and deprivation became the catalyst of social movements of various forms, nature and dimensions. All the movements, of course, embodied ideas of freedom from undue socio-economic exploitation and deprivation. The underlying factors of these movements, in varying degrees, were more of economic than religious and political in character. The later was progressively used as an instrument of mobilisation when the movements get articulated on the basis of ideology (*K. Gough: 1972: 1393*)

During the historical past tribal chiefs, warriors and individuals have been active in various parts of the country. The name of the Bhils figures in many such episodes. The names of *Umed Vasava*, a Bhil from the Panchadongri District was associated with the unrest around the Rajpipla state between 1873 to 1882. In 1832, the Santhals started a movement called Bhumij Movement under the leadership of Ganga Narayan Santhal. This was continued by Kandu and Siddha Santhal, who during 1850 stood very firm against the tribal exploitation by landlords and traders. The name of Birsa Bhagwan Munda is well-known for his leadership in the movement against tribal exploitation in 1897. The Oraons, under the leadership of Nana Bhagat started a non-violent movement against the British in 1914, for getting equal justice. Tribals from the Kohan area of Orissa started a movement against the British for exploitation which the British had to yield and assured legal protection to

tribals. The Khonds, Koyas and Saprass from Orissa started movements as early as 1879 and 1890 for getting their rights. There were also movements in Madhya Pradesh by Bastar tribals for the demand of an autonomous state in 1910 which proved to be abortive. In 1879, the Pahadi Reddy tribals of Andhra Pradesh also started a movement for getting the ownership rights of their lands (*S.G. Deogaonkar: 1992: 290*). There were also emergence of inter-tribal political associations and movements for recognition as “tribal” States within the Indian Union in the post-Independence period such as Jharkhand movement among the tribes of Chotanagpur and Orissa, Hills States movements in Assam Hills, Adisthan movement among the Bhils and so on. A violent secessionist movements among the tribals located near the international frontiers also appeared like Nagaland Sovereign movement, MNF movement in Mizoram and so on. Pockets of violent political movements in the tribal belts linked with the general problem of agrarian unrest and Communist movements also emerged like Hajng unrest of 1944, Naxalbari Movement of 1967, Girijan Rebellion at Srikakulam of 1968-69, Birsa Dal movement in Ranchi of 1968-69 etc. Besides all these, there also had been a series of reform movements emulating the cultural pattern of the higher Hindu castes such as Bhagat movement among the Oraon, Vaishnavite reform movement among the Bhumij, social mobility movement among the Bhumij for Rajput recognition, Kherwar movement among the Santhal and so on (*Surajit Sinha: 1992: 310-312*).

K. S. Singh categorized the tribal movements in middle India into four sections as identified by the ASI and they are- 1. Movements for political autonomy which includes the demand for separate state by the Gonds and Bhils at the beginning of the Second World War consisting the areas of Chattisgarh and contiguous districts of Rewa regions and Vidarbha, tribal autonomy movement in South Gujarat in 1960s, tribal autonomy demand of Chotanagpur which was most advanced and exposed tribal regions of Bihar emerged as Jharkhand movement which touched even Orissa and Bengal politics, 2. Agrarian and Forest based Movements includes a forest Satyagraha led by a dominant tribal peasant community of Kharwar of Palamu and Gond tribals across the borders, agrarian struggle of the tribals of Dhulia, emancipation of the bonded Dublas of South Gujarat, Naxalite movements against the oppression by rich to poor peasants etc. 3. Sanskritisation process includes Bhagat movements in MP, Gujarat and Rajasthan, Sant Samaj movement led by Gahira Guru among the Kavar to promote social reform, propagation of Swaminarayan sect etc. 4. Cultural movements includes Sarna Dharam, Adi Dharma etc. against the conversion to Hinduism (Sanskritisation) and Christianity, assertion of tribal identity through evolving cultural symbols, script and indigenous literature like Adi Samaj movement of Ho tribe, Santhal revivalism movement concerning OI Chiki script etc. (*K.S. Singh: 2006: X-XVI*).

The tribal movements in Maharashtra had religious, social and economic aspects but they were on the whole against tribal exploitations. The movements for tribal awareness like non-drinking and non-eating of meat

started by Ramdas Maharaj also fought for the cause of rehabilitation of tribals displaced by Ukai dam had major impacts on the government's policy towards tribals. The Kisan Sabha under the leadership of Godavari Parulekar organized a strong tribal movement at Thane district for the problem of bonded-labour, Begar (forced labour), less payment of wages etc. In the post independence period many such tribal movements continued in Maharashtra for acquisition of land rights, against bonded-labour and against the displacement of Adivasis etc.

Many tribal movements were also associated with preserving the forest environment like the Chipko movement of Garhwal-Kumaon mountain tracks of the central Himalayan region presently Uttarakhand consisting of Dehradun, Uttar-Kashi, Tehri, Paudi, Chamoli, Almora, Pithoragarh and Nainital districts where the tribals started an agitation to protect the forest from company agents and contractors from cutting the trees by following an symbolic idea of embracing the tree trunks came to be known as 'Chipko' movement. A similar movement was also started by the tribals to safeguard the ecology in the forest of the Gadchiroli District in the triangular nexus of the borders of Maharashtra, AP and MP (*S.G. Deogaonkar: 1992: 290*). There are many more tribal movements having the similar issues of origin almost everywhere in India all of which are not necessary to mention here. But, as a contiguous to the movements of the Bodos, the various tribal movements of the Northeastern region are needed to be highlighted in this writing as all of these also bear the same roots of origin like elsewhere in India.

The uniform administrative mechanism of elsewhere British India was also introduced in the North East part and the tribals inhabiting this region was also not freed from alien exploitation. Many a movements surfaced in varying forms in this part of the region during the colonial rule itself and the British administrative legacy of divide and rule policy still persist here within the tribals elites as well as tribals and non-tribals in some states. The tribes of North-East India were also politically and culturally active even during the colonial rule. The Nagas, the Garos, the Khasis, the Bodo Kacharis, the Mizos, the Kukis, etc. of this region were active in surfacing the movements of various forms and dimensions since the colonial rule to the post-colonial era. They fought injustice and deprivation. Series of insurrections, raids, murders, armed actions against the alien rulers were the orders of the day because the colonial occupation was followed by a period of administrative confusions, of extortions and oppressions, and miseries of people. They organized the movement when they 'suffered incursions, loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy and undermining of their culture by literate and technologically superior invaders both British and India. There were many instances of attacks on British officials, the landlords, the moneylenders, the revenue agents etc. For example, the head hunting of Lushai-Kukis in Sylhet and Cachar against unfair dealings of some business community, the revolt of Synteng of Jaintia Hills in 1860-62, the Manipur rebellions in 1891, the Assam riots of 1894 etc. to mention a few.



It is to be noted that the tribal movements in this part of the region have not ceased to occur even after the departure of colonial power. In fact, after independence, movements with political overtone and much articulation have increasingly surfaced against the glaring inequality and deprivation. The nature of movements has changed now with the accentuation of deprivation and economic exploitation. The tribal peasants are now mobilized by the articulated tribal leaders under various political banners to seek justice of the misdeeds done by the colonial masters. Some adopted non-violent parliamentary methods and tactics for autonomy and others adopted non-parliamentary tactics for sovereignty (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 303-307*).

The tribal movements in North-East India stand in a category by themselves because of its unique geopolitical situation and historical background. Many tribes live on international boundaries and share ethnic and cultural affinities with other tribes across the frontier. Tribals in the region except in Tripura never felt really threatened of their identity because of their overwhelming majority in tribal region. Their institutions are relatively intact. They remain by and large in possession of their land and forest except in plain areas where encroachments are already being widespread. Christianity in hills has emerged as a strong factor of modernization, has given the tribals a sense of identity. Considering the geopolitical factor the relative isolation from the cultural influences from the rest of the country, the dominant form of tribal movement has been political seeking goals of autonomy and freedom relying on means ranging from constitutional agitation and insurgency. Political processes in the hills became active on the eve of transfer of power. New states were created to accommodate tribal aspirations. The Sixth Scheduled in the process became outdated. A section of Nagas chose the path of insurgency, so also the Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris etc. The tribal regionalism also emerged and the nativistic revival movements such as Seng Khasi, Sanamati Cult, Zeliangrang, Boro and Meitei movements are manifestation of cultural dimensions of tribal regionalism though their strength varies.

In developing a sense of larger tribal identity, education and gradual emergence of small and educated middle class among the tribes in the hills and plains have played important roles. It started with demand for representation of the tribal population in Provincial Legislative Assembly. The Nagas, Khasis, Bodos, Miris and Deuris pressed their demand in 1930s through Naga Club, Seng Khasi and the Tribal League. On the eve of independence, two political trends were clearly visible. The first was in favour of asserting more tribal autonomy within the Indian Union and the other was motivated by the ideas of independence for tribal areas. The first trend was clearly visible in the policies of the Mizo Union and Garo National Council, East India Tribal Union (1952) and the APHLC. The Naga National Council, United Mizo Freedom Organization (1946) and the Mizo National Front (1961) may be included in the second category. The growing sense of ethnic identity among different communities in Northeast and the fear of losing identity contributed to the growth of regional ethno-political

movements in Northeast India. The tribal movement in North-East India is a manifestation of fight for regional identity although based on ethnic considerations. Another prime reason for tribal movement lies in the conflict for controlling of political power and economic resources by the elite tribal societies and neighbouring society. The Tribal insurgency is a militant assertion for share of limited economic resources. The rising tribal aspirations are expressed through regional movement on cultural identity crisis, the basis of which is economic. The aspirations arise and economic development is painfully slow and uneven, militancy is bound to grow. The rising middle class and petty bourgeoisie in tribal society are bound to take up arms against their counterparts in other societies (*B. Datta Ray: 1992: 474-478*).

The Socio-Political Movements of the Bodos are also basically characterized by the manifestation of assertive political demand for changing the existing political order through identity articulation via-vis other community developments agenda in the state of Assam. It was in the late 20th century when the social movement of the Bodos exerted its greatest force with its political character (*Bodoland Movement: ABSU: 2001: 1*). In social movement category, these Movements can also be viewed from the angle of Tribal movement. The uprising of the tribal people against the exploiter groups is not a new phenomenon. There are different forms of tribal movement. Some of them launched with an objective to preserve their political and social identity, some are for the revival of their traditional religious system and some are for the safeguard of their economic interest against the encroachers (*N. Joykumar Singh: 2005: 15*). In the pre-Independence period, the tribal unrest or self assertion evolved around land issues. The policies adopted by the British in their economic policy, money lenders and non-tribal contractors forced the tribes to start movements so that they could maintain their rights over the ancestral land and forest. Although the main issue was economic and regaining land rights, yet the movements were not totally devoid of political hues. The tribes felt that the colonial rulers tried to make inroads into the socio-cultural arena of the tribes. They were apprehensive of losing their distinct identity in future (*L. K. Mahapatra: 1982: Quoted Lohit Hazarika: 2014:7*). The dynamics of plains tribal movements show that it is a product of contradictions introduced by the colonialist and the perpetuation of the same in the post-independence Assam in some form or the other. This has caused acute deprivation, frustration and deep-rooted resentment among the plains tribals. It is this irretrievable discontentment and deprivation of their land and forest that has generated an emotional state of mind wherein the tribals are forced to move for a better alternative of equitable social order for themselves free from exploitation and injustice (*Madan C Paul: 1992: 359*).

The tribal unrest and identity formation movements of the post independence period in the Northeastern region are in a way continuation of the pre-Independence period but, of course, with more demands coming in, while some are newborn movements with the similar kind of demand. The new movements were largely



conceived from the psychology viewpoint of the concerned communities who feared the domination of an alien culture or superior culture would lead to loss their distinct identity. Referring to these identity crisis states and identity formation movements Apurba Baruah remarks that “The movement of various communities to assert and protect their, what is commonly called, ‘ethnic’ identity, are the most important aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India’s North East” (*Apurba Baruah: 2005: 17*). Renowned social scientist and historian J.B. Bhattacharjee also writes “In the post colonial period, the quest for identity in the Northeast essentially originated in the crisis of under-development. Whereas the political leadership in the states and intellectuals in general talked of the indifference or apathy (or even neglect) of the Government of India towards economic and infrastructure development of the region, the ethnic and linguistic minorities in various states gradually became vocal in alleging exploitation and deprivation of the minorities by the majority community in respective states. The cultural and linguistic domination of the majority community was another factor that cause alienations and made the minority more conscious of its identity, whereas leadership of the majority community highlighted the threat of cultural invasions from outside and the danger of becoming minority or being swamped by the outsiders. The polarization and alienation eventually resulted in the demand for - and creation of - new states or autonomous areas within the states” (*J. B. Bhattacharjee: 2011: 6*).

Ethnic assertion or revival of ethnicity becomes a characteristic feature of some of the Indian tribes particularly in the post-independence period. Due to large scale interaction and expansion of educational facilities to the tribal people today, they possess quite a number of educated persons and they no longer tolerate the injustice, mal-administration and oppression. Identity formation has offered new dimensions to the exclusiveness of the ethnic groups. To attain the goal the strategy adopted varies from group to group. Some tribal took language or culture as the easy tools for demanding separate identity, while others resort to backwardness in relation to fellow communities. The avowed non-political character of such movements ends in political aspirations (*Lohit Hazarika: 2014: 6*). In Assam the situation is very complex. Assam is a land of diversity and is home of diverse ethnic groups. These groups, each with their own culture, language and customs, have contributed considerably over the centuries to the growth and development of a composite Assamese society through a process of socio-cultural fusion. Independence made Assamese the dominant group in socio-economic and political sphere of Assam. Therefore, the Assamese tried to safeguard this social space by imposition of Assamese language on its diverse people and in that process gave rise to political conflicts around identities in Assam. In the years following independence, Assam has witnessed a number of identity movements and the Bodo identity assertion is one among those (*Hira Moni Deka: 2014: 6*). The Bodo leadership emerged at this point of time was no exception to this idea of feelings and eventually developed a strong sense of alienation in the light of

their socio-economic and political backwardness and deprivation for which they held the high class Assamese Brahmin ruling group responsible. Vastly apprehensive of losing their identity by the aggressive assimilating policy of Assamese ruling class, the educated middle class Bodos began mobilizing themselves in the form of different organizations to safeguard their community which solely played determining role in the Bodo identity formation (*Why Separate State of Bodoland: 1998: 22-26*). The Bodo movement did not emerge out of a vacuum. It was the product of a long historical process of identity formation among the Bodos that started in the colonial period and became gradually assertive in the post-independence period. The twentieth century brought about some momentous changes in the collective life of the Bodos. The spread of education led to the emergence of a small number of Bodo elite class which felt the need to reform the Bodo society to save it from complete extinction and from caste-Hindu domination (*Hira Moni Deka: 2014: 6*).

### CONCLUSION:

Thus, the historical background of the Bodos in the free independence British period was characterized by the socio-economic, religious and political backwardness which resemble the other tribal groups of India in a resounding manner. But, there were gradual endeavors for uplifting overall dismal conditions of the Bodos through bringing about certain proactive changes in the society influenced by certain Western educated enlightened individuals, group of individuals and associations that eventually resulted into a series movements in the post independence period ranging from script, language, literature, socio-economy, religion, cultural identity and political self determination Movements. On the whole, the entire parameter of social changes and the consequent emergence of these Movements for survival of identity, equality, political and civil rights, economic and social justice, right to land; language and culture, refinement of custom and traditions, awakening of national consciousness of the Bodos bear the same testimony and affinities of other tribal movements of mainland India in general and North-East India in particular.

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