Negotiating Ethnic Boundary: The Construction Of 'Conflict'

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Abstract: Defining the self has been a major task of mankind today all around the world. A sense of common origin, common beliefs and values, a common sense of survival; in other words a common cause has been a defining feature of mankind uniting themselves under various identities. A distinct ethnic identity when fueled with the feeling of alienation and exploitation tends to demand autonomy; most of the time it is in the form of territorial autonomy or 'Homeland' is demanded by such groups. This paper analyses the 'Bodoland' movement as a means of constructing a distict identity for the cause of a seperate homeland. The study finds that contemporary construction of the Bodo identity is based on a sense of alienation from the state due to years of economic neglect and attempts to assimilate into a common culture; which they resist as being a symbol of colonialization over the tribes.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Boundary, Conflict, Bodos, Accord.

I. INTRODUCTIONS

A major form of group separation and self-definition is that of "ethnicity" as found in most of the composite, plural and divided societies. Ethnicity has found a renewed attention among scholars as it has become a major source of considerable conflict and divisions in human society. Also, ethnicity has been utilized as a major instrument to mobilize people with a particular identity. This phenomenon has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention which is generating a vast amount of knowledge regarding ethnicity and related phenomenon.

Ethnicity has been debated by various schools of thought mainly on hyphenated and dichotomous terms. For the 'Primordialist' ethnicity is an essential characteristic of the social world which is acquired as a result of one's birth in a particular social setting. On the other hand, the 'Instrumentalists' sees ethnic identity as choice made by individuals to fulfill certain aspects of their social and individual life. The 'Essentialists' argues that ethnic group developed as a result of distinct culture and identity which was deemed essential to maintain basic social order in human life, while the 'situationalists' maintains that it is the logic of a situation which compels an individual or a group of individuals to identify with a particular group. Another group of scholars, who take a perennial view of ethnic identity, believe that ethnicity has been a defining feature of human civilization since time immemorial. At the other extreme the 'modernists' are of the opinion that ethnicity has its genesis in the birth of the modern nation-states. Some recent writings on ethnicity have considered it as a cognitive process with deep psychological roots and not just a primitive identity or interest based choice.

In the past two decades work on ethnicity has given importance to a synthesis view and attempts have been made to reconcile the contrasting theoretical approaches to ethnicity. But, at the same time it has been increasingly witnessed that the construtivism and approaches close to it like the instrumentalism and modernist view of ethnicity has found prominence over the earlier views like primordialism, essentialism and perennialism. This constructivist and schools closely allied to it lays emphasis on study of categories or discourses of differences rather than ethnic groups. It does not attempt to describe how an ethnic community travels down the historical memory; but tries to understand how it came into being and how it later changes or at times even dissolves into a new identity; instead of observing the everyday workings of

the ethnic culture, the varying claims of cultural difference are studied (Wimmer, 2013).

This work takes a constructivist view of the growth of numerous ethnic identities in the northeast region of India. The ethnic categorization initiated by the British paved the way for further divisions which many a times sowed the seeds of demand for a separate political entity in the form of home land states. Thus, we see the 'Colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly 'natural habitats' has actually triggered exclusive ethnic homeland consciousness among the minds of the tribal people of the region" (Baruah, 2008, p. 61). The post-independent state too carried forward the colonial policy of drawing the boundaries on the basis ethnicity. The granting of provincial states and autonomous regions based on ethnic affiliations further accelerated the growth of distinct ethnic identities.

II. DRAWING THE BOUNDARY

After adopting comprehensive understanding of ethnicity, it becomes important to define the 'boundary' as used in the context of making an ethnic identity. Explaining the notion of 'boundary' Andreas Wimmer (2014) notes that "a boundary displays both a categorical and a social or behavioral dimension. The former refers to act of social classification and collective representation, the latter to everyday networks of relationships that result from individual acts of connecting and distancing" (2014, p. 9). This does not imply that the existence of such boundaries divides the world into water tight. In fact, such boundaries at times can be blurry and soft allowing for easy movement of identities. Also individuals can make a choice among the several identities demarcated by the boundary. Thus the concept of boundary neither represents clarity nor closure; it varies from society to society. It is an important challenge to the comparative study of ethnicity to take into account such varying degrees of boundedness.

Anthony p. Cohen (1994) sees boundary not just as a social barrier but also as a mental distance. For him boundary-crossing perpetuates the consciousness of a person as an individual, as someone who can step back and reflect on his or her position with respect to society. Cohen suggests to recognize boundaries as matters of consciousness rather than of institutional dictation, so as to we see them as much more vague, much more ambiguous than what we usually do. For Cohen it is this very ambiguity which inclines societies to invest their various boundaries so heavily with symbols. Such understanding of boundary is important as most of the work on ethnicity has taken the boundary to be a cultural phenomenon. The fact that boundary can exist in terms of consciousness paving way for a mental distance can exist cannot be overlooked.

This study takes into account physical, social as well as emotional boundaries when it comes to boundary making in the construction of an ethnic identity. Taking a constructivist/instrumentalist position of the formation of ethnic identity, the work is informed by the social, cultural and geo-political compulsions of the groups in defining and asserting their self-identity.

III. THE BODOLAND MOVEMENT

The Bodoland movement has been of great importance and interest in recent times given the violent history it has been attached to it. This movement has been exceptionally contested both in mainstream academic discourses as well as in political discussions. Ironically, most of the observers view Bodo movement as a separatist and violent movement and a challenge against the integrity of the state. Some scholars see it as an attempt to revive the ancient glory of the Bodo-Kachari kingdom which was uncontaminated by the Assamese culture (Baruah, 2012; Nath, 2013). While others see it as a resistance movement by a group to escape from a socio-political and cultural entrapment of communities perceived to be 'outsiders' (Vandekerckhove and Suykens, 2008).

What is evident in such scholarly debates is the failure to recognize the subtleties of the movement which also involves the state as well as the resistance put forward by other groups in the region to this movement. It does not either illustrate India's absolute inability to accommodate democratic political aspiration of the Bodos who remained outside the ambit of Constitutional protection till the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in February 2003 (Mochahari, 2014). The movement has been in news for a very long time as being one of most violent statehood demands which led to a large scale death and displacement induced by both militants and state machinery.

IV. CONSTRUCTING THE 'BODO' IDENTITY: REDISCOVERING THE GLORIOUS HISTORY

The role of history, in both uniting and dividing a community is undeniable. History has been the powerful tool in reclaiming the self in the post-colonial period. Various subaltern groups which had been silenced by the powerful have been voicing their resistance through the means of history.

The 'Bodos' too have been engaged in a process of rediscovering and reclaiming their self by making attempts to construct a great Bodo- Kachari race. Mythological as well as historically documented evidences have been put forward to arrive at a common origin of the race in the region. The Bodos are a part of a greater and larger ethnic community called the 'Bodo- Kachari'. Bodos, Koches, Rabhas, Lalungs, Hajongs, Meches, Dhimals and Sonowals of the Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal, the Dimasas of North Cachar, Hills, the Tripuras and Garos are considered to be a part of the greater Bodo- Kachari race. Racially, Bodos are a part of the Indo-Mongoloid race found all across Northeast India.

The Bodos claim themselves to be the descendants of the Kiratas, a term used in the ancient Hindu epics to refer to the people of the Mongoloid stock. According to the Bodo legends, Mahiranga Danaba, a ruler of the ancient Kamrupa, was a kirata ruler whose original name was Mairong-dao. 'Mairang' is a bodo word which means paddy or rice and 'dao' stands for hero (Mosahari, 2011). Another legendary king of ancient Kamrupa, Narakasura, also has been claimed to have bodo roots. In Bodo, 'Narkho' means stout and strong and 'sor' stands for iron in Bodo (ibid.).

From the above discussion it is clear that the Bodo identity composed of a diverse range of communities, which in due course of time, being geographically isolated from the other developed their own distinct culture and language. Subsequently, the British ethnographers classified them as distinct tribes, based on their habitat they were divided into-Hill tribes and Plain Tribe. The Bodos emerged as the largest plain tribe inhabiting a large part of western Assam in the northern bank of river Brahmaputra.

V. BODOS AND ASSAMESE: DRAWING THE LINES

The present assertion of the Bodos cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon. Their position vis-à-vis the Assamese language and culture is important in understanding their discontent. Usually, it is understood to refer to people speaking a particular language and living within a geographical area. In this regard, this Bodos seem to take a contrary position. It is seen as a language and culture which developed as a result of the 'sanskritization' of the region. Most of the Mongoloid groups lacked a written script; therefore it was readily accepted in the region and especially in the Brahmaputra valley. At the same time, the Bodo rulers were influenced by the Aryan civilization and adopted Hinduism. With the advent of the Ahoms and their subsequent adaptation of the Assamese language most ethnic communities of the region began to learn and gradually adopted this language.

Expressing the views of the Bodos towards assimilation, Jadav Pegu (2004) notes that:

It is difficult to imagine a Marathi living in Orissa, pick up the Oriya language and start identifying himself as an Oriya. Or for that matter, an Assamese staying in Tamil Nadu, learning Tamil and calling himself a Tamil. In today's multicultural world, language is a vital benchmark in cultural identity and politics. Assimilation and homogenization is hardly the accepted trend: rather the recognition of differences existing between people within a nation- state in terms of ethnicity, language, institutions, religion, texts and artifacts is advocated for the better understanding of the demand of indigeneous people for accommodation of their cultural and political identities. The Bodo identity has to be seen in this light and as opposed to the homogenizing Assamese (Pegu, 2004: 7).

British scholar E.A.Gait who had conducted extensive research on the Bodos writing in the year I905 had observed that the process of assimilation of Bodos into Assamese had made inroads into the Bodo society. By analyzing the language data of 1891 census, he revealed that the languages/dialects of the Bodo group were dying out and would gradually be extinguished. He commented on the decline of number of speakers of Bodo language group from 1881 to 1891 census. The Bodo-Kachari (present day Bodos) speakers declined by 24% from 2, 63,186 to 2, 00,129 people, whereas Hinduised Bodos of lower Assam (Meche) increased by 19.6 percent. According to him, most of the converted Bodo Hindus could move into some higher status Hindu caste. As a result, those joined the Assamese formation no longer identified themselves as Bodos (such as Koch Rajbongsis of

Assam). Many of them such as Sonowal-Kacharis, Chutias, Rabhas etc. changed into different ethnic identity (Assamese under S.T. category), lost their original Bodo language.

Even after a long period of assimilation into the Assamese caste society there were groups who could maintain their unique identity, language and culture. Those groups who did not share any close geographical and political ties with the caste Assamesse or the Ahom rulers were out of the ambit of the process of assimilation. Attempts to assimilate them into the Assamese society began only during the 19th century with the policy of official language and desire for homogeneity by the caste Assamese.

The language policy of the state government after independence has been a major factor in alienating the tribal population of Assam. The Assamese middle class who held the leadership of the state and dominated the politics subsequently held sway over the cultural manifestation of minority groups. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, the apex body for the development and promotion of Assamese language and literature was making untiring efforts to make Assamese the only official language of the state. It tried to make Assamese the sole medium of educational instructions as well as administrative purposes. Such a unilateral move was vehemently opposed by most of the non-Assamese speaking linguistic groups.

Prior to independence, the tribal leaders of Assam had formed a multi-ethnic tribal organization in the year 1993 known as the 'Assam Tribal League'. The organization included leaders from all over the state- Rupnath Brahma and Kalicharan Brahma (Goalpara), Jadav Ch. Khakhlary (Lakhimpur), Gopal Ch. Choudhuri and Rabichandra Kochari (Kamrup), Dhanbar Patar (Nagoan), Mohi Chandra Miri (Sibsagar), Bhimbar Deuri and KhorsingTerang (Mikir Hills), and so on. This conglomeration of tribal leaders shows the desire to come together and forge a united alliance against the injustice and discrimination meted out to them. The ATL, under the able leadership of Bhimbar Deuri, made an appeal to all the tribal people of Assam to identify them as "Tribal", irrespective of their conversion to any religion in the forthcoming census of 1941. Consequently, the tribal population increased to 28, 24, 133 in the census of 1941 from a merge count of 12, 39, 280 in the year 1911 (Mosahari, 2011).

A major actor of the Bodo assertion and agitation has been the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) which came into being on the 15th of February 1967 with the objective of raising consciousness among Bodo youth and students about the needs of their community and to actively raise demand for a separate homeland for the plain tribes of Assam. A new era began in the political life of the Bodos with the entry of Upendra Nath Brahma, the eighth President of ABSU. The quest for political identity with its separate entity for the Bodos found a new lease of life under the abled and dynamic leadership of U.N.Brahma. He was able to effectively articulate the glorious past of the Bodos among the common people. He was able to bring the much required unity among the Bodos and mobilise them under the banner of ABSU. He attempted to carry out a non-violent struggle against the chauvinistic policies of the state government and safeguard the interest of the tribal population. At the same time he believed

that the only a separate state could fulfill the aspirations of the Bodos.

Finally, after a series of talks between the Central Government, State Government and the BLT backed by ABSU-BPAC, a Memorandum of Settlement was signed on Febrauary 10, 2003. This led to the creation of a self-governing autonomous body to be known as 'Bodoland Territorial Council' under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. The demand for a separate state was withdrawn by ABSU as a support to the MoS. It has been witnessed at the later period that the political journey of the Bodos in Assam has been a turbulent one and continues to dominate public life in Bodo heartland in the absence of a pragmatic political solution to the problem (Mochahari, 2014).

VI. CONCLUSION

The above discussion clearly illustrates how an assertive ethnic identity, when fuelled by a sense of deprivation and marginalization tries to unite the community by drawing boundaries at various levels. The demarcation of the boundary, most of the time is informed by the politicaland socio- cultural requirement of the groups. The role played by the ethnic elites in drawing as well as manipulating the boundaries is undeniable and requires further research. What is evident from this comparative analysis is that construction of ethnic identity, which attempts to draw a boundary between 'us' and 'them' is also a care construction of history which is required for the legitimacy of the identity. At the same time, the role played by the state and its policies cannot be overlooked when it comes to construction of identity in the contemporary times. Drawing the boundary line of identity requires the group to negotiate with the state and its agencies on a daily basis. Such an interaction can be both conflicting as well as cooperative depending on the nature of demand and the response of the state towards it.

Contemporary construction of the Bodo identity is based on a sense of alienation from the state due to years of economic neglect and attempts to assimilate into a common culture; which they resist as being a symbol of colonialization over the tribes. One of the important planks on which the Bodo movement was based, according to the Bodo leaders was the "Assamese chauvinism" as being responsible for discords in a multi-ethnic state like Assam. Today, they desire to manage their own affairs without any dictation or interference from the state government which is perceived to be indifferent and unsympathetic towards the interest of the tribals in general and Bodos in particular.

The Bodoland Accord of 2003 is a clear manifestation of the Indian State's top-down approach in resolving conflicts which involves issues of justice and empowerment. It envisages that the creation of exclusive ethnic homelands, as demanded by the group would solve the problem. Thus, it adopts an exit strategy from the conflict by the way of signing an agreement. What is absent in such approach is to build people to people contact and to build a confidence on the newly empowered structure. Lack of comprehensive and all inclusive approach to conflict resolution is of little substance as there is hardly any understanding amongst both the victims and perpetrators of violence.

Presence of numerous ethnic conglomerations in Bodoland gives peace a fragile presence. Any tilt of power towards a particular group is seen to be loss of power by the others. In such a situation, the Bodoland Accord was seen by the non-Bodos as being an unfair to them and their socio-political rights. For the majority of the communities the accord was nothing but an attempt to appease the Bodo leadership. The formation of a specific ethnic homeland without guaranteeing the constitutional rights of the other communities living in the area was the foundation of the conflict lines leading to repeated clashes between the Bodos and other communities, especially the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims. As mentioned earlier it did not take long for the Bodos, who had secured a measure of political autonomy, to realise that the demographic equation and, especially, the land factor were not in their favor. Also, what is important to note is that the land question was not really addressed in the Bodo Accord and encroachment of forest areas continued. Bodo anxiety was fuelled by the fact that the concept of a homogeneous ethnic homeland in a highly heterogeneous setting would be a practically impossible. This fact became even clearer as Bodo militancy started receding and the non Bodo groups began consolidating themselves under various banners. All these advances were enough to add to the sense of existing insecurity among the Bodos regarding their ambition of a separate Bodoland.

There is a widespread perception that Northeast region has been subject to neglect and relegation and whose presence in the Indian nation has been seriously challenged by many groups. This has given rise to identity politics which has shaped the politics of resistance and retribution. The struggle for political and economic power in such a context becomes bloodier. Numerous struggles which attempt to establish their own identity and political right have carried historical reprisal to an extreme extent through militancy and unprecedented violence. Democratic politics in India is built upon on the logic of vote banks and the politics of numbers munched together with caste and tribe. Also, religious configuration has made identities very crucial in the postcolonial period. Thus, territoriality and political power coupled with a desire to gain control over resources for the ruling classes of such communities have given rise to politics of exclusion and politics of fear.

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