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Identity Assertion by the Bodos of North East India: Exploring the Role of the Educated Middle Class

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Abstract- The paper examines the different phases of identity assertion by the Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam, a state situated in Northeast India. Available evidence indicates that the emerging educated middle class has been playing a catalytic role in articulation of Bodo identity in various phases. It observes that the Assam movement against foreign nationals failed to accommodate the aspirations of smaller nationalities like Bodos and argues that as the Bodo middle class has been apprehensive of Assamese middle class hegemony, it sought to carve out its own political space by transforming and consolidating Bodo ethnic and regional identity into a distinct national identity and by raising the demand for a separate homeland for protection of its class interests. The paper proposes to examine the dynamics of this phenomenon.

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Identity Assertion by the Bodos of North East India: Exploring the Role of the Educated Middle Class

Susmita Sen Gupta

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I. INTRODUCTION

The paper proposes to examine the different stages of identity articulation among the Bodos who constitute the largest plains tribe of Assam, a state of North-East India. An attempt will be made to explore the role of the educated middle class as a catalyst in the process of transformation and consolidation of Bodo national identity. The paper has been divided into five sections. The first section deals with the conceptual framework. The next section seeks to trace the emergence of the Bodo middle class and focuses on its class interests. The third section identifies a few middle class organizations and examines their demands which got reflected in different stages of Bodo identity assertion. The fourth section will enquire into the role of the middle class in the transformation and consolidation of Bodo identity. The fifth and the final section will summarize the main observation of the paper.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The key concepts of the paper are – ‘ethnicity’, ‘nationality’ and ‘middle class’. At the very outset, it needs to be pointed out that although the term ‘ethnic’ is commonly used in the Northeast to refer to groups of people with distinct cultural characteristics, such an usage does not reflect the reality that these groups are in different stages of nationality formation [1]. In the first stage of ethnicity, a cultural group differentiates itself

from other groups, but remains politically insignificant. In the second stage, political consciousness of cultural identity evolves leading to the pursuit and protection of community interests. In the ultimate stage of nationality formation, right to self-determination is sought to be asserted through political action and political mobilization [2]. Baruah [3] argues in this connection that the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Nagas and even the Karbis appear to have become nationalities demanding the political right to control their own affairs. In fact, all nationalities in the contemporary world have been demanding homelands of their own where they can protect their cultural, political and economic interests and this reflects the political dimension of nationality. Nationalities in the Northeast are no exception to this worldwide trend. However, political aspirations of nationalities in this part of India have assumed different forms, ranging from the demand for sovereign independent homeland to the demand for separate statehood within India, in their quest for self-fulfillment and self-determination.

It is interesting to note in the context of the above that the nature of identity assertion in the North East is determined, to a large extent, by the varying stages of nationality formation [4]. For example, the recognised nationalities seem to focus more on the demand for greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Union Government. Integral to such demands is the process of bargaining with the Indian State and central political authorities for a better deal than what the existing scheme of things offer to them [5]. As far as the emerging nationalities are concerned, however, their self-assertion assumes a different dimension altogether. Their struggle is twofold, viz., at a core- periphery level in which a protest movement is launched by the peripheral nationality against the real or perceived exploitation by the dominant nationality of the region [6]. At another level, even an autonomy movement by such aspiring nationalities may exhibit signs of secession in the hands of a militant section of its leadership.

Another key concept to be used in the paper is ‘middle class’. It may be noted that the term ‘middle class/es’ was in common use in some parts of the world by the 1840s when it came to be viewed as basically consisting of various social groups which occupy an intermediary position between the proletariat and the

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bourgeoisie [7]. The term 'petty bourgeoisie' was more familiar than 'middle class' in Marxist literature. Non-Marxist scholars have been using the term in the Weberian sense. Marxists have been arguing that the term 'middle class' as used by bourgeoisie social scientists was unscientific because it was based on an unscientific concept of class in the sense that it was not defined in terms of the position occupied in the system of production. Rather it looks at class as an economic position in a society, based on individual achievement and birth. Though these two different approaches to the use of the term middle class has important distinguishable consequences for social and political analyses, yet the term is commonly used in social science literature to refer to social forces [8].

III. EMERGENCE OF BODO MIDDLE CLASS AND ITS INTERESTS

Keen observers of the Bodo movement for socio-political assertion tend to believe that this phenomenon is not a new development and seek to trace its origin historically from the first quarter of the twentieth century. Sharma for example, observes that this period was marked by the emergence of a nascent middle class among the Bodos of Western Assam. He accounts for this phenomenon in terms of two important factors, viz., the advent of cash economy in the Bodo society and its proliferation during the colonial period which transformed the tribal social and economic structure and the emergence of a religious reform movement among the Bodos led by Kalicharan Brahma which transcended the domain of religion and extended itself into the realms of society, polity and economy. The impact of this 'renaissance' on the sphere of education facilitated the entry of many Bodo youths into the colonial job market, thereby triggering the advent of a middle class among the Bodos. [9]

Sharma (2000) argues that this essentially job-centric Bodo middle class had a vested interest in land as their forefathers belonged to the landed gentry. [10] An interesting point that emerges from this formulation is that on the one hand, the world view of the emerging middle class was different from its predecessors because securing government jobs and availing new socio-political opportunities took precedence over landed interest, but on the other, its role as a liberating force was restricted because of its sustained interest in land. Such contradictions in its class character led to the exclusion of issues like land reform from the agenda of the movements launched by the emerging Bodo middle class [11].

IV. MIDDLE CLASS ORGANISATIONS AND DIFFERENT STAGES OF BODO IDENTITY ASSERTION

It appears that the Tribal League, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) etc. were some of the prominent middle class organizations which were instrumental in the assertion of Bodo identity in different phases [12]. The Tribal League, a pioneer socio-political organization of the Bodos, was formed in 1932. However, this organization sought to fulfill the interests of the middle class alone, as reflected in its demands like reservation of jobs, reservation of seats in the Assam Legislative Council and so on. Not being a mass organization, the Tribal League played no role in mobilizing the masses on issues of poverty and socio-economic backwardness. It was also apathetic to the plight of the Bodo peasantry who were displaced from their lands on a massive scale due immigration from East Bengal. These developments further alienated the Tribal League from the masses and after India's independence in 1947 all its leaders joined the Congress en masse.

During 1952-1967, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the most important literary organization of the Bodos, played a significant role in the assertion of Bodo identity and the issues of language and script were integral to such assertion. This period was marked by the articulation of demands like introduction of Bodo language in the Bodo-dominated areas and the replacement of the Assamese script by the Roman script. This phase of identity assertion was marked by the active involvement of the masses unlike in the previous phase. However, a major limitation of the politics of identity assertion during this phase was that the middle class leadership hardly made any radical demands for the improvement of the lot of the common man.

On January 13, 1967, Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi made an important declaration regarding the reorganization of Assam on a federal basis. This enhanced the prospects for the fulfillment of the political aspirations of the Bodo middle class which was reflected in the demand for a union territory to be called "Udayachal" for the plains tribes of Assam. A new political organization, viz., Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed to spearhead this territorial demand. The PTCA was, in essence, a Bodo political party although its name suggested a common political platform for all plains tribes of Assam. In this context, it has been argued by some scholars that the initiative to construct a pan-tribal identity of the plains-tribes of Assam always came from the Bodo middle class leadership which was not only more organized, but was also likely to play a key role in any future power

alignments. It appears that the Bodo political assertion during this period was accompanied by the emergence of a mass movement around the issue of territorial autonomy.

Territoriality continued to dominate the political agenda of the Bodo middle class in the next phase of identity assertion as well. The prevailing trends signalled towards the emergence and consolidation of the Bodo regional identity which manifested itself in the demand for a separate Bodoland State. The leadership during this phase was assumed by a student organization, viz., All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). Unlike the earlier phases, this phase saw a resort to violence by the armed wing of the ABSU, especially on those who were perceived to be pro-PTCA. However, the ABSU-led movement lost popularity due to the lack of meaningful socio-economic programmes in its agenda which would have improved the lot of the Bodo peasantry, an active component of the movement. The most significant parallel political development during this period was the articulation of the demand for sovereignty by an underground militant outfit, viz., Bodo Security Force (BdSF). In its anxiety to prevent the movement from being hijacked by militants, the ABSU became a signatory to the Bodo Accord on February 20, 1993, which led to the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC). Meanwhile the ABSU floated Bodo People's Party (BPP) to capture power in the BAC. But an intense struggle for power and internal squabbling among the Bodo leadership for primacy within the BAC reduced the Bodo Accord to a political farce.

The present, contemporary phase of identity assertion by the Bodos is marked by almost total marginalization of the Bodo regional identity by the secessionist agenda of a number of militant outfits which has radically transformed the character and substance of the Bodo movement from autonomy to secession. However, the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF), a militant outfit which has been alleged to be a beneficiary of state patronage eventually gave up its demand for a separate Bodoland state and reconciled itself to autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. This led to the creation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) on February 10, 2003 as an autonomous self-governing body within the State of Assam in order to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspirations as well as to safeguard the socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos. On the other hand, the BdSF was rechristened as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and it has been persistently advocating a sovereign independent state of Bodoland.

V. TRANSFORMATION OF BODO IDENTITY AND THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

A critical look into the different stages of identity assertion of the Bodos reveals some interesting trends.

The middle class which has been instrumental in articulating demands of the Bodos in these various phases seem to have played an important role in transforming the Bodo identity. Since the issues of language and script were integral to identity assertion of the Bodos in the initial phase, the middle class was apparently articulating the Bodo ethno-linguistic identity as distinct from the larger Assamese linguistic identity. The subsequent phases which focused more on territorial autonomy signaled towards the emergence of a distinct Bodo regional identity. The demand for a territorial unit of all plains tribes of Assam was supposed to be an inclusive political arrangement, but the Bodos, being numerically larger and its middle class leadership being more organized than its counterparts among other tribal groups, were likely to assume a predominant role within such an arrangement. This was followed by a more aggressive assertion of Bodo exclusivity which centered on the demand for a separate Bodoland, thereby indicating the transformation of Bodo ethnic, linguistic and regional identity into a distinct national identity. The advocacy by militant outfits of a sovereign independent Bodoland as a homeland for safeguarding the political, cultural and economic interests of the Bodos is nothing but an endorsement and reassertion of the Bodo national identity. In reality, however, the middle class is likely to pursue its own class interests in the proposed homeland of its own.

VI. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

For a deeper understanding of the Bodo identity assertion, it is necessary to relate this assertion with the nationality question in India. The Indian State has always viewed this issue as a problem of all-India national integration and has considered nationality aspirations as anti-national. This has further alienated smaller nationalities like the Bodos of Assam. Ironically, the Assam movement against foreign nationals had initially drawn the Bodos and other plains tribes under its banner, but it failed to accommodate the aspirations of these nationalities. Moreover, the Assamese middle class hegemony generated a sense of insecurity among the Bodo middle class and pushed it towards a path of self-determination for consolidation of the Bodo national identity.

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