CHAPTER: II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BODOS

Introduction:

The state of Assam is the homeland of different races with their composite culture and distinct identity. All the major races of India viz., Austric, Dravidian, Mongolian and Aryan had lived in Assam with their own culture and heritages (Chaklader, 2004:p.26). They are divided into two categories viz., tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups. The tribals have drawn more attention of the researchers due to their acute problems of deprivation in the fields of education, society, culture, economic and polity. Because, most of the tribal groups of Mongolian race in Assam could not reap of the fruits of benefit from the British administration. As a result, the growing educated middle class among those tribal communities took up the issues of deprivation and felt the need of organising their communities to address the same. Among those tribal communities in Assam such as the Bodos, the Kacharis, the Karbis, the Mishing, the Deuris, the Tiwas, the Rabhas were prominent with their various organizations e.g., All Bodo Chatra Sanmillan (1918), Kachari Sanmillan (1912), Boro Maha Sanmillan (1924) and so on (Phukon, 2014: p.91). With these organisations the tribal groups tried to articulate the ethnic consciousness and mobilize their respective communities. Therefore, after independence the Constitution of India made some special provisions to the tribes for redressing their grievances and categorized them into two groups viz., scheduled tribes (Hills) and Scheduled tribes (Plains) (Sen, 2009). Before that, the term “Plain Tribal” was used by the colonial rulers for the first time in the contemporary political and administrative discourse from 1930’s (Pathak, 2010). This generic term was used to denote a diverse set of people defined in semi-geographical and semi-sociological terms. Through this
word they meant the Valley tribes like the Bodo Kacharis, Mikirs or Karbis, Miris or Mishings, Lalungs or Tiwas and Rabhas together (Pathak, 2010). The term has been continuously used by the tribal leaders themselves which is an indication of the appropriation of this terminology. Later on the tribal leaders used the privilege of the term to unite different communities of the plains of Assam into a single platform for their political interest. Even the tribal communities also tried to locate themselves by using the term “Plain Tribal” in the socio-political circumstances of the colonial society (Pathak, 2010). Among those plain tribes of Assam, the Bodos are the largest and dominant one.

The Bodos - Who are they?

The Bodos or the Kacharis are the largest and the oldest inhabitants amongst the plains tribals of Assam, their population being concentrated mostly on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River, with some of them staying on the South bank as well (Bed, 2006:145). Few of them are staying in Burma, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sikkim and Bhutan. K.L.Baruah in his “Early History of Kamrupa”, states that the Bodo tribes constituted a bulk of the population of Assam and North Eastern part of Bengal during the time of the Mahabharata or even earlier (Sen, 2009:125). The Bodo population is now mostly concentrated in Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Goalpara, Nowgoan, Darrang, Nalbari, Kamrup, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Bongaigaon and Dhemaji district of Assam (Sonowal, 2013:2). The term “Bodo” is derived from the word "Bod" a Tibetan word which is supposed to mean a homeland and the term “Kachari” is derived from “Kachar” which means area near the river (Brahma, 2007). Interestingly, Tibet was initially known as Ti-bod (Kochari, 1997 & Sonowal, 2013) and those members of the Mongoloid family lived in
Ti-bod were known as Bod who came to be known as Bodo later on. Hence, the word “Bodo” first used by a European famous linguistic B.H. Hodgson as an ethnological term to refer the Mechies, the Bodo speaking people of Darjeeling district in 1846 while writing about them. Since then the word “Bodo” has been used as a generic term to denote the different branches of the Bodo language group (Brahma, 2007). The older generation of scholars used the term “Bodo” to denote the earliest Indo-Mongoloid migrants to eastern India who subsequently spread over different regions of Bengal, Assam and Tripura. But recent developments make it imperative to redefine the term Bodo which means the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley known earlier as “the Bodo Kachari” (Choudhury, 2007). However, in this context G.A. Grierson said, “The generic name “bodo” was first applied by Hodgson to this group of languages. The exact sound is better represented by spelling it Bada or Boro. Bodo or Bara is the name by which the Mech or Mes and the Kacharis call themselves” (Grierson, 1967:1).

Regarding this terminology the leaders of the Bodo movement in 1980’s distinguished the term “Boro” from the term “Bodo”. According to them the term “Boro” purely indicates their linguistic affiliation or Boro speaking people while the term “Bodo” refers to all Kacharis and Bodo ethnic groups of people (Chaklader, 2004).

The Bodos were earlier known as Kachari, and one of the earliest settlers of plains Assam (Chaudhuri, 2004:16). The historian H. K. Barpujari says, “The Kacharis who belong to the great Bodo race were perhaps one of the earliest aboriginal tribes of the Brahmaputra valley” (Bhuyan, 2007). According to Rev. S. Endle the Boro Kachari race is the original inhabitants of Assam. There is of course no historical evidence of its early immigration and settlements (Chaklader, 2004). History says, the Bodos are the aboriginals of Assam. They once ruled Assam till around 1854 A.D. (Brahma, [et al.], 2001).
The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and their language is derived from the Assam Burmese branch of Tibeto Burman sub-family. The other neighbouring communities who belong to the same linguistic family are Dimasha Kachari, Rabha, Tiwa, Tipera, Sonowal Kachari, Mishing etc. (Chaudhuri, 2004:16). Most of these tribes are included under this bigger group of Boro. The Bodos again itself has some internal divisions into a number of clans. According to Padmashri Mohini Brahma number of clans is eighteen which are not endogamous. They are Basumatari, Brahmari, Doimari, Gaya, Sibigiri, Musahori, Narjari etc. (Chaklader, 2004). These clan names are used often as surnames. This group of plains tribals of Assam belongs to different religions, some are Hindus, some Christians and some are professing tribal religions (Bhuyan, 1989:55). But originally the Bodos are the worshippers of Shiva means Mahadeva. It also means Bathan, their traditional religion. Though, in course of time they adopted Hinduism and of course some of them professed Christianism but still there is no conflict between Shivaism and Hinduism. Because, Shiva was given an important position among the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindus that is why they had no difficulty in adopting Hinduism (Chaklader, 2004). Apart from that it was felt in the early decades of independence that the Bodos in the Brahmaputra Valley were coming closer to the mainstream of the Assamese society and projected the possibility of their assimilation with the Assamese nationality as an inevitable historical entity. The census report 1961 reveals that 93.63 per cent Bodos are Hindus and they become a part of local Hindus. As a result this report shows an unusual decline of the growth rate of the Bodos (Choudhury, 2007). Regarding Christianism they were influenced by the Christian Missionaries who played an important role for socio-religious reforms in their society during colonial period.
According to some historians the Bodos are known under different name in different places and ages throughout the North-Eastern region of the Indian sub-continent. In Goalpara and North-Bengal they are called Mech, in North-Cacher Hills Dimasa, a corruption of Dima fisa or “sons of the great river” (Chaklader, 2004). In this context Sir Edward Gait says, “In Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis call themselves Bodo or Bodo fisa (sons of the Bodo)” (Bhuyan, 2007).

Once, the Bodos were prosperous, cultured and had distinct identity. So far as their language is concerned, it was fairly advanced with a strong grammatical base though; initially they did not have their own script for their language. Therefore, they started to use Devnagari script for their language from April, 1975 (Sen, 2009:127). Now the Bodo language is an associate official language in the state of Assam and have find the space in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This language was known as dowan (spoken language alone) even up to 1960’s. It is evident to the strength of the Bodo language in the ancient age when the Bodo names of the places and rivers were survived even in the present age (Prakash, 2008). For instance, the first syllable “Di” which is the Bodo word for water identified with some of the prominent names in the region e.g., Dihing, Disang, Disoi, Dibru, Dibong (Baruah, 1999:180). Even the great river Brahmaputra which has a pre-sanskritic name i.e., Dilao, that is still popular among the Boros for identifying the great river of Assam (Baruah, 1999:180).

Migration of the Bodos:

Regarding the migration of the Bodos into India there are diverse opinions among the scholars. Rather there is no authentic source of history regarding the migration of the Bodos into India. As the Bodos have been inhabiting in the North-Eastern region of this
country since time immemorial and somewhere stated that their history is about 5000 years old, specially onwards eastern bank of the great river Ganges (Bhuyan, 1989:106). Traditional stories prevalent among certain Boro tribes like Garo and Rabha suggest that their ancestral home was Tibet or eastern sub-Himalayan region from where they migrated to North-East India and were distributed in different parts (Sengupta, 2008: p-6). Some scholars agreed that as they racially belonged to the Mongoloid, they surely and certainly migrated from the Central Asia, the mainland of the Mongoloid people (Sonowal, 2013). Again, another group of eminent scholars stated that the Bodo-Kachris in the ancient times, were living in Mongolia and Siberiya and they migrated from there towards the North Eastern part of India and settled on the north bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra later on (Basumatary, 2012). S.K. Chatterjee in this regard stated that the original home of the Mongoloid people were the places in the North of China in between the head-water of the Huang-Ho and the Yang-tzse Kiyang rivers from where they moved and scattered in different places (Chatterjee, 1974:36). Later on, some people of this Mongoloid community came to Tibet where they settled down. Rev.S.Endle also in this context opines that the two Trans-Himalayan countries viz., Tibet and China were the original home of this race of Tibeto-Burman (Sonowal, 2013). In this regard though Sanyal (1973) was not very clear about the migration of the Bodos from where they came from but provided some information. In this context, he stated,

“Such was the history of a Tibeto-Burmese speaking Indo-Mongoloid tribe, the Bodos, who migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North-Bengal and parts of East-Bengal. They ruled over these tracts of land for many years. It is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south up to Kachar and were called Kacharis. The second part went along the river
Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of modern Assam up to Goalpara and parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar under the name of Bodo and Bara” (Ray, Tamang, et al. 2013 p.4)

Again, S.K. Chaterjee stated that the Bodo group of people had migrated into Assam since 1000 B.C. (Chatterjee, 1974:36, Sonowal, 2013:3), where B. Narzari believes that they started to migrate into Assam since 2000 B.C. (Narzi, 1962:54). However, it becomes clear that this group of people is one of the original inhabitants in this part of North-East India. When the Bodos started to migrate to India because they were in migratory habits, followed the routes of North-Eastern India passes across many mountains and rivers of the Himalayan region. It is the general agreement among the historians and the anthropologists that the flow of the Mongolian people to the North-Eastern part of India was a continuous process which started long before especially from the pre-historic period. Some other smaller groups of the Mongoloid people who migrated into Assam after passing across the various points of mountains along the Indo-Bhutan borders and most of them came through upper Burma considered as Tibeto-Burman in origin as was identified as by the Anthropologists (Sonowal, 2013).

After entering Assam, the Bodos were found migrating from one place to another and took a long time to be settled permanently in a particular place. Therefore, they spread all over Assam as mentioned above. Consequently, in course of time these scattered people got their variation in their language, culture and customs in different circumstances and places and even the isolation of their original kinsman. Apart from that, some other tribes with different names were created out of the parent group due to the close relationship or inter marriage with other local communities that brought the variation on their physical appearance to some extent. Therefore, Lalungs, Rabhas, Koches and Sonowals are found in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Dimasas in the Cachar
Hills, the Tripuris and their allied tribes in Tripura, Garos and Hajongs in Garo Hills of Meghalaya, lower Assam and Bangladesh and Meches in lower Assam, North Bengal and some parts of Nepal and so on (Sonowal, 2013:4). That is why all these groups belong to the whole of Bodo language speaking people.

**Early History of the Bodos:**

As mentioned above, the Bodos are the original settlers of the Brahmaputra valley and they ruled the North-eastern part of India with their powerful kingdoms since time immemorial. There is no doubt that they do have a glorious past with the kingdoms over Brahmaputra valley, down to North Bengal, Cachar Hills, Syllet and Tripura (Prakash, 2008:262). Due to their settlement in different places, their different kingdoms were identified with different names. For example, Kachari Kingdom, Koch Kingdom, Dimasa Kingdom, Chutiya Kingdom, Moran Kingdom, Borahi Kingdom and so on was some of prominent Kingdoms of the Bodos (Sonowal, 2013:8). But the Bodos lacked cohesion among themselves hence they had not a single unified kingdom under the Bodos. As per the works epic Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas and others have also referred that Assam was a land of Mlechchas (uncivilized people) like Kiratas, Asuras (inhuman beings), Danavas (giants) and Rakshashas (demons). The ethnographical studies have also proved that Assam was a land of non-Arya people or mongoloid people (Mosahari, 2011). Most of the scholars are also agreed upon that the Mongoloids once practically occupied the whole of the north-eastern region as was mentioned as the Kiratas in ancient Sanskrit literature. The early rulers from the period of fifth to mid eleventh century were from Indo-Mongoloids of various dynasties in the plains of Assam (Basumatary, 2012). This land of Assam was called Pragjyotispura (it was called
in the age of Mahabharata, latter on it was known as Kamrupa as mentioned in ‘Puranas’ i.e., ‘Kalika Purana’ and ‘Vishnu Purana’) and the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha was mentioned in the epics Mahabharata and the Ramayana and which is generally accepted by the scholars with the view that the Western Assam along with some portion of North Bengal were the core parts of this Kingdom (Choudhury, 2007). Grierson in this regard mentioned that the Mech people ruled Pragjyotishpura for over 4000 years (Prakash, 2008:262).

As mentioned in the great ancient works, the legendary kings like Mahiranga, Narakasura, Bhagadutta, Banasura, Bhaskar Barman etc. are described to have been the Bodos (Mosahari, 2011). Among those, Narakasura was the first king of the ancient Brahmaputra Valley in the real sense though some historians believe Mahiranga Danava as the first king of Pragjyotishpura but he was not a king in real sense (Sonowal, 2013:9). It was Narakasura, who first established a kingdom in real sense after Mahiranga dynasty. This dynasty was forwarded by his son Bhagadatta who was also known as the chief of Kiratas or Mlechas and registered his name in the ancient epics of Bhagabata Purana, Bishnu Purana, Kalika Purana, the Mahabharata and so on (Sonowal, 2013:9). These texts have mentioned that these legendary kings are Kiratas and the Kiratas are the major component of the population of Pragjyotispura. The Mahabharata in its Sabhaparvan, the Kiratas are described as very rich in supplying gold, silver and gems which they obtained from the mountains and also the experts in making cloth of various kinds. Some of them served as the army of the king Bhagadutta. The Ramayana also describes the Kiratas as fearless as a tiger (Choudhury, 2007). Again, the Kalikapurana and the Yoginitantra describe the Kiratas as the original inhabitants of
Kamrupa (Kakoti, 1967). However, King Bhagadatta was a very strong and powerful king of Pragjyotishpura as was praised in the epic of Mahabharata. He died in the great Kurukshetra War.

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in this regard describes Kiratas as:

*It would appear that during the centuries immediately before Christ and in the early Christian centuries, the Kiratas were known to the Hindu world as a group of peoples whose original home was in the Himalaya slopes and in the mountains of the East, in Assam particularly, who were yellow in colour and presented a distinct type of culture. They had spread all over the plains of Bengal up to the sea and appear to have penetrated as far as West Bengal. They were rich with all the natural wealth of minerals and forest produce with which the mountains and hills and jungles where they live abounded, but they were adept in the art of weaving cloth (as their descendent still are), the cotton and woollen fabrics they made being very much in demand among the more civilised Hindus of the plains (Choudhury, 2007).*

Apart from that, another Bodo dynasty, the Barman Dynasty reigned Kamrupa for a long period of three hundred years which was founded by legendary king, Pushya Varman (350-380 A.D.) lineage of Bhagadutta (Sonowal, 2013, Mosahari, 2011). King Bhaskar Varman (594-650 A.D.) was the last king of this dynasty but he was a powerful and the most influential ruler of this region. During the time of his rule, Kamrupa became one of the important learning centres of India. The famous Chinese traveller and Buddhist scholar Hiuen Ts’ang visited Kamrupa on the request made by Bhaskar Varman. Hence, it was the evidence that the Bodos had been maintaining a proud link with the Chinese people, once from where they migrated (Sonowal, 2013:9-10).

Another Bodo dynasty, the kingdom of Banasura was popular during the time of the reign of Narakasura. The capital of his kingdom was at Sonitpur and he was a worshiper
of Shiva (Choudhury, 2007). As a symbolic relic of his worship of Shiva, Mahavoirab Shiva Temple still exists in Tezpur which was once constructed by him (Sonowal, 2013:10). These descriptions proved that before the advent of the Aryans, the Bodos maintained their powerful independent Kingdom with their traditional culture, religion, language and economy. They were never influenced by other language, culture and religion and were free from caste divided society as was introduced by the Aryans since the fifth century and also started to influence the Bodo kingdoms and their societies (Sonowal, 2013:10). Moreover, the history of Assam plains shows that the local dynasties of Mongoloid origin had contacts with the Hindu societies of India and by the twelfth century they became Hindus, even in the later period the patronization of the Hindu religious institutions by the Ahoms also influenced them in this regard. But their counterparts i.e., the Mongoloids in the hills and mountains remained untouched by the Hindu influence and its caste based structure (Basumatary, 2012).

Hence, it can safely be assumed that in ancient India, the people known as the Kiratas are the common ancestors of the Bodos and other allied tribes of both the eastern and north-eastern India. Since 335 A.D., many other Bodo Kings ruled the land till around the last part of the 15th century. It is mentioned; the Kamrupa included the then Assam, East Bengal and Bhutan (Mosahari, 2011).

Before the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, by which the British acquired to control over the whole of Brahmaputra valley of Assam was ruled by the Ahoms (Gait, 1984:248). The Ahom Kingdom was formed by Sukapha in the 13th century i.e., in 1228 A.D., who ruled over Assam for merely 600 years till the advent of the British in 1826 and started to consolidate their rule. This period was significant where the Ahom rulers became successful for establishing a well-integrated administrative system in Assam.
As a result, the first three hundred years of Ahom rule witnessed the gradual disappearance of the Bodos from the field of political activities. One after another, the Bodo principalities submitted to the Ahom rule. This process continued till 1536 AD; when Ahoms occupied the entire Kachari Kingdom and this year also equally important because the mightiest Bodo state of Assam, the Dimasa Kingdom of Dimapur was destroyed by the Ahom troops (Sen, 1986). When this kingdom was in Dimapur as its capital, it was so wealthy and powerful that became a glorious past for them. It forced them to settle towards the North Cachar Hills from Dimapur and later the Capital was shifted to Maibong (Narzary, 1998). But again the Ahom King Rudra Singh occupied Maibong and the Bodos were forced to settle in Khaspur of Cachar District where they founded another Bodo Kingdom. But due to the frequent attacks made by the Manipuri Prince in 1818 and later the Burmese troops forced the Bodo Kingdom to enter into a treaty with the Britishers and remained tributary ruler. After the death of King Govindachandra, the Kingdom was included in the British Empire in 1832. However, another group of Bodos led by Tularam Senapati maintained himself as an independent chief in the hills of North Cachar but he was also compelled to enter into a pact with the British giving up Central Cachar in 1834. After the death of Tularam Senapati the Bodos lost their entire kingdoms completely in 1854 to the British (Sonowal, 2013) and it was merged with Nowgaon district by the British (Narzary, 1998). Likewise, in course of time, the Boro Kachari lost their Kingdom, palace, land and everything though the ruins and relics of the last kingdom of the Boro Kachari are still lying in Dimapur city (Brahma [et. al.], 2001).

After coming under the British annexation the Bodos lost their political existence and sovereignty. Gradually, they were becoming more and more backward with their
traditional mode of economy. They could not compete with other communities and with
the Assamese caste Hindu elite due to the lack of education and other privileges in
socio-political and economic spheres. Therefore, they were placed in the lower position
in the society and deprived from getting equal position and status in the caste Hindu
dominated society. To get rid of this situation, some of the Bodos converted themselves
to the Hinduism but even that they failed to get equal social position and respect
(Sonowal, 2013:13-15). So, it was the time that the Bodos started to feel marginalized
and also were submerged under other hegemonies in the region. Though they do have
glorious past history, the present Bodo movement for distinct identity is therefore an
attempt to revitalize their past glory.

**Pre-Independent Period:**
The annexation of the Brahmaputra valley by the British as a result of the treaty of
Yandaboo, 1826, no separate arrangement was made for administration of the plains
tribals of Assam with the exception of the hill tribes. They were brought under the same
type of administration as was adopted for Brahmaputra valley. It means
administratively, the hill areas differed from the plains. The land revenue system with
its all complexities was existed in the plains but never introduced in the hills (Goswami,
1996). Hence, the British government created a hostile kind of situation between the
plains and hill tribes for their smooth running of administration. This kind of attitude
was guided by their policy of “divide and rule”. It was therefore, the tribals lacked
cohesion among them politically. Again there are immense diversities among the tribes
(Rao, 1998).
As a result in the colonial period the hill tribes of North East India were barred from active politics excluding plain tribes. Taking this advantage, the plain tribes started to play an active role in the Brahmaputra valley in the political arena. They wanted to empower themselves socially and politically through organized movements and fight against the hegemony of the caste Hindus (Pathak, 2010). In this context, the Italian Marxist intellectual, Antonio Gramsci is perhaps correct when he argues that hegemony over the civil society is a pre-condition for establishing supremacy over political instrumentalities. In this way they started to control and direct the cultural life of the society. As a result of this kind of hegemony they became conscious of their group interest (Chaklader, 2004: p.44).

**Bodos in the 20th Century and Brahma Movement (Socio-Religious and Cultural Awakening):**

As early as 1905 Guru Kalicharan Brahma (1860) a spiritual Bodo leader and a disciple of Sivnarayan Paramhangsha Swami of West Bengal, introduced and preached “Brahma” religion among the Bodos. This sect of religion was founded by Sivnarayan Paramhangsha Swami (Brahma, 2011). Barhma religion is originated with a supreme being known as *Param Brahma*, the ultimate reality. “*Brahma is by nature eternally and absolute blissful. He is eternally self-realized, self-perfect and self-enjoying. He also passes the unique power of creating from within himself or manifesting himself as the phenomenal world of divinity without the least prejudice to the perfect unity of His self-existence*” (Benarjee, 1989, p.132 & Brahma, 2011). This sect of religion has its root in Vedic philosophy and it sanskritized the rituals and culture of the Bodos in the plains of Assam (Brahma, 2011). The process was the initiation of upward social mobility with refined culture and practices in the Bodo society. Besides that, it was
initiated the socio-cultural revolution and brought about the changes in the field of education and politics. Therefore, this movement inspired the first generation of Bodo leadership in the 20th century enabled them to raise their voice for their Bodo cause. Brahma used this religion to reform and modernizes the Bodo society like Raja Rammohan Roy of Bengal (Chaklader, 2004:p.44-45). The introduction of Brahma religion by him marked a new era among the Bodos in the beginning of 20th century which was identified as the reformative movement towards the development of Bodo language, literature and political ideas in their society. Hence, the spread of Brahma religion was a prime factor in the development of education and cultural consciousness among a section of the Bodo people resulted in the rise of a middle class, who later provided the leadership for the Bodo uprising (Mittal, 1998). They also tried to redefine the tribals tradition adjusting with the colonial modernity were regarded the first attempt towards the formation of the tribal identity (Pathak, 1998). As a result the “Brahmas” among the Bodos became educationally and culturally more advanced and took over the leadership of the socio-political life of the Bodos (Mittal & Sharma, 1998). They came in contact with the European education in the beginning of twentieth century. Following that, a reformist movement took place among them in the second decade of twentieth century (Choudhury, 2004: p.17) which was basically socio-religious in character aiming at uniting the Bodos for their social progress, the rise of collective consciousness and aspiration among them. Thus, like all other ethnic movements the Bodo movement for self-rule was also preceded by a cultural movement (Chaklader, 2004: p-44).

This influence upon a section of the Bodo people was perhaps one of the major factors to arouse a level of cultural consciousness among them. They also propagated the need for education and social reforms like changes in marriage customs, stoppage of dowry
system, pig rearing and such others for the benefit of their people. Accordingly, the Brahmas initiated steps for bringing about socio-political changes among themselves (Das & Basu, 2005:p.159).

In the late 1920’s the college going Bodos, particularly the Brahmas formed the Bodo Chhatra Sammelan with the explicit aim of uniting the Bodo speaking tribes through conferences and to take initiative for social reforms (Mittal & Sharma, 1998: p.303). Their first priorities were to demand for facilities in education, health and economic development (Das & Basu, 2005: p.159). At first, the activities of this association were started in Kokrajhar sub-division and were later extended to other parts of Assam (Mittal & Sharma, 1998: p.303). It demanded reservation of jobs in the government for tribals. Again it also strengthened the foundation of Bodo identity and socio-political consciousness (Singh, 2002: p.94). Immediately after the arrival of the British Statutory Commission on Constitutional Reforms (popularly known as the Simon Commission) in 1929, in Assam, they put forwarded their grievances and aspirations for the first time. These demands submitted to the Commission were basically political in nature showed the strong presence of political consciousness on the notion of the tribal identity (Pathak, 2010). As a result; it produced some enlightened socio-political Bodo leaderships like Rupnath Brahma, Padmashri Madaram Brahma, Yadav Chandra Khakhlary and many others who led the Bodo society later on. The prime concern of this sanskritization movement was to bring some refinement to the people of different castes and towards the ascending social position of the Boros to a great extent. Behind this ascending social position of the Boros are the development in their higher education and literature. In this regard, the effort of the Boro Chatra Sammillan (1919) and Boro Sahitya Sabha (1952) pioneered by the Brahma movement are significant which brought
about striking changes. Gradually, these changes in the Bodo society started to create self-awareness among them and pushed them to search about their identity and constitutional rights. Hence, the Bodos had to launch the movement for implementation of Boro language as the medium of instruction in the 1960’s; for self-rule unit “Udayachal Autonomous Region” by the PTCA in 1970’s and the Bodoland movement by All Bodo Students Union in 1980’s one after another. Hence, the socio-religious movement of the Bodos under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma became successful to spread the self-awareness among Bodos and to arouse consciousness about their social identity and political rights.

**Christian Missionaries and Construction of Bodo Ethnic Assertion**

The Christian Missionaries came among the Bodos in the early part of 19th century to preach the Christianism with a view to attract them towards the Christian religion. The Missionaries played an important role in the backward tribal societies with bringing about changes in their socio-cultural and economic lives. Considering the case of sensitivity of the Indians in the matter of religion, the Britishers earlier adopted the policy of neutrality and prohibited the Missionaries activities in the Indian subcontinent. But the adventure of the Missionaries in India became certain when the Charter Act of India, 1813 permitted the missionaries to reside in the company’s territories under some conditions. The Bodo Kacharis in the Northern tract of Brahmaputra Valley attracted the Missionaries with their simplicity of behaviours and easy lifestyle and encouraged them to work among themselves for preaching Christianity (Brahma, 2011).

Rev.E.W.Clark in this context writes,

“I note first a large body of Cacharis or Kocharis who constitute an important
element of the population of the north side of the Brahmaputra River in Assam and said to extend nearly Darjeeling. The Kocharis are allied to Garos in language and belong to the aboriginal races of India, which have been found much easier to Christianise than the Hindu, Mohommedian or Buddhist. Where Cachari community lived many years alongside of Assamese Hindu and mingled with them, they frequently take on something Hindu faith and caste also acquire a limited use of the Assamese language. Though ruder and less cleanly in customs and dress than Assamese they are said to be more truthful and honest. I understand that in the later years a few of this people have been baptized into the membership of the Gauhati Baptist Church. Possibly these conversion are an intimation from the lord that we should enter the field and cultivate it.” (Brahma, 2011:p.45)

So far as the Missionaries are concerned, the American Baptist Missionaries were the first who came in contact with the Bodo Kachari community. The American Baptist Missionaries in 1840’s with the association of the Australian Baptist Missionaries established some educational institutions in the region where a few Bodo pupils were admitted with the Garos. The missionaries gradual spread of education infused a sense of self-esteem among the tribes in general and tribes in the Brahmaputra valley (Bodos) in particular. This factor was crucial to understand the rise of ‘ethno-nationalism’ (Das, 2009) among these tribes against linguistic and cultural domination of the Assamese people. Consequently, these discontent tribes people under the relative peaceful period of 1930’s, which may be called ‘the silent phase of identity consciousness’ demanded ‘participative representative’ in the principal decision making political institutions (Das,2009).

Rev. Sidney Endle who belongs to Anglican Church came to Tejpur for propagating gospel in 1864 where he was successful in establishing a full-fledged church at Bengnabari near Harisinga (Endle, 1991). With the propagating the gospel, the
Missionaries planned to teach the people from different professions and introduced with the western education. They not only converted them into Christianity but also wanted to train them as schoolteachers, translators, printers, carpenters, tailors, proof readers, cooks and for all those necessary works which were important for every walk of their lives. The missionaries believed that the Christianity is a self-developing force which would help the people who were converted to Christianity. With this view they tried to attract different groups of people including the Bodos towards their ideology and for that cause they opened up some educational institutions to impart education. This aspect of the Missionaries put great impact on the Bodo language which is one of important languages of the Tibeto-Burmese language group in the region. Apart from that some Missionaries tried to study the Bodo language scientifically for the purpose of spreading the gospel among the Bodo-Kacharis which made the very foundation of Bodo language and literature. Therefore, it was necessary for the Missionaries to learn and develop the local dialect scientifically to consolidate their base of gospel among the Bodos. Along with that it was also necessary for the translation work of the holy Bible in the local language of the community. The Bodo language got the written form for the first time during these Missionaries specially when Rev. Sidney Endle pioneered the creation of written Bodo language by his work “An Outline Grammar of Kochari Language: As Spoken in the District of Darrang” in 1984 which gave the present shape to the present Boro language and literature. Besides that, some significant works such as “A Short Grammer of the Mech or Boro Language” (1889) by Rev. L.O. Skresrud, “Linguistic Survey of India” by Grierson, “Specimens of Languages of India” by Sir G. Cambell and others contributed to the history of Bodo language and literature to a great extent (Brahma, 2011). These contributing efforts of the Missionaries towards the growth and
development of Bodo language and culture planted the seeds of demand for the introduction of Boro language as medium of instruction in primary and secondary level in 1960’s and Roman Script Movement in 1970’s (Brahma, 2011).

Apart from that, with the spread of Christianity, the Christianised Bodo society came out from traditional superstitions with some new rituals and customs without giving up their basic values and norms.

Christianity has brought some remarkable changes in the history of Bodo society and its custom, habit, belief, values and their pattern of living. Along with the Christianity and its western teachings brought some new values and ideas to the Bodo society and culture that awakened them to a great extent and make them enable to re-evaluate their position in the modern age. Besides that, the process helped them to be freed from some superstitious beliefs and blind practices. Missionary activities are still going on in the Bodo dominated areas with some missionary institutions and churches.

**Simon Commission and Political Assertion of the Bodos:**

The second decade of the twentieth century is regarded as the initial phase of the Bodo Movement which gained political momentum in the post “Government of India Act, 1919” reforms. Though it developed a political mind-set of the Bodos during the 1920’s but failed to bring tangible change into their society till the arrival of the Simon Commission in Shillong, 1928. So far as the Simon Commission is concerned, it was constituted on 26th November, 1927 at St. James, London to inquire, “in to the working of the system of government, the growth of education and the development of representative institution in British India and matter connected therewith” (Brahma, 2011). Therefore, it was the opportunity for the Bodos to file petition regarding their
various grievances to the Commission. It was observed in the petition that they are depriving from all the benefits and these were enjoyed by the upper castes. Hence, they demanded separate representation in the state council and one reserved seat for the Bodos in the Central Legislature (Pathak, 1998). This was later i.e., under the Government of India Act, 1935, four seats were reserved for the tribal in the Assam Provincial Assembly (Singh, 2002:p.95). For instance, Shri Roop Kumar Brahma, a Bodo and a member of the All Assam Tribal League, became a minister in the Bordoloi Ministry in September, 1938. In 1946, another Bodo, Shri Dharanidhar Basumatary was selected by the Indian National Congress for the Constituent Assembly (Singh, 2002: p.95). So that, for the first time, the plains tribes specially the Bodos entered electoral politics.

The Bodo leadership also opposed the census report in which they were placed as lower caste in the Hindu fold. It was suggested in the memorandum submitted by the “Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan” that the tribals are misleading by the Hindus and don’t receive the tribals into their society as well as mostly unsympathetic with their ideas and aspirations. They asserted that the Kacharis were never a part of the Caste divided Hindu society and were independent (Pathak, 1998). That is why in the later part of 1920’s onwards because of their distinctiveness cultural character, the issue of “tribal identity” became an important part of the Assamese society. Moreover, the Bodos blamed the existing stratification in the Hindu society is responsible for their degraded situation in the society as was mentioned in the Memorandum of 1929. The Governor of Assam, Andrew Clow (1942-46) while making the same point, states,

“the Assamese both caste Hindus and Muslims, professed solicitude for the tribes, but neither had studied the question nor any real sympathy with them.
The feeling of deprivation among these communities thus fostered the growth of local organisations, i.e., the Kachari Sanmillan, Koch Rajbongshi Sanmillan, Chutia Sanmillan, Muttock Association, etc. throughout the province. Initially, they all functioned independently..., but in 1933 joined hands to form All Assam Plains Tribes League” (Prakash, 2008).

The Goalpara District Bodo Association also placed some demands regarding facilities in education and appointments, a separate Bodo regiment, separate seats in the Dhuburi Local Board and separate electorate status for the tribals in the Legislative Council and so on before the Simon Commission. Besides the Goalpara District Bodo Association, the Assam Kochari Youth Association, Bodo Jubok Sanmillan, Garos, Rabhas of Goalpara subdivision also submitted their various demands to the Simon Commission regarding their various grievances (Sonowal, 2013:71). This political move of the tribals in the Brahmaputra Valley especially the Bodos sharpens and hence a common political platform for all plains tribals was created in the 1930’s under the bannership of All Assam Plains Tribes League (AAPTTL) shortly Tribal League (TL) to fulfil their political aspirations with common efforts.

Emergence of Tribal League and Bodo Political Assertion:

In 1933, the first political organization for the plains tribals of Assam, the Tribal League came into existence as a common platform of all the plain tribes. Main agenda of the Tribal League was the preservation of the line system without which they felt that the entire tribal economy and culture would be jeopardized by the heavy influx of the immigrants from the outside (Sharma, 2009: p.99). It became clear from the fact that when Bodo delegation met with the Simon Commission and other British Constitutional groups. A very few educated tribal elite like Bhimbar Deuri and others attempted to identify the tribal identity as a “community of the plains tribes”. The Tribal League tried
to unite all the tribes living in the plains of Assam in a same field (Pathak, 1998). Though it was named as “Tribal League”, the Bodos from the very beginning dominated the Tribal League (Chaudhury, 2004: p.57).

In this period two issues were mostly debated regarding the identity formation of the plains tribes of Assam in its legislative Assembly are land alienation and issue of immigration. It was the colonial government which encouraged the immigrants for proper using of the cultivable waste land in the hope of raising more revenue which also created the issue of land alienation for the tribes in the plains. Though, government introduced the line system in 1920 keeping in view protecting the tribal interest but in reality the system didn’t work.

Therefore, on the basis of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1880, this organization demanded a separate territory for the plains tribes of Assam. They also supported the line system in 1938 which was introduced by the Britishers in 1920 to protect the interest of the tribal people in general and Bodos in particular to stop the influx of land hungry people, money lenders and traders to their territory (Chaudhury, 2004: p.57).

In the meantime of the election of provincial legislature in Assam held in 1937, the League bagged all the four seats reserved for the tribals and extended its support to both the Congress and Muslim League ministries respectively later on (Chaudhury, 2004: p.57). However, the main trust of agreement with any party used to be maintenance of independent identity, assurance of tribal representation, maintenance of line system and protection of tribal areas (Sharma, 2009). Eventually, the Muslim League moved a resolution for the abolition of the Line System in the Legislative
Assembly in 1937. The leaders of the Tribal League fought against the constant attack on the tribal lands and accused Shadullah for sheltering the immigrants and led his ministry fall in 1938 (Narzary, 2000). In this regard, a leader of the Tribal League, Rabi Chandra Kachari expressed a protective measure with following words:

“There should be a line system to protect the weak and backward people, without a line of demarcation it is not possible to look into the interests of the poor people who require special protection” (Pathak, 1998: p. 7).

In this regard the tribal representatives defended for the continuation of the line system in the Legislative Assembly and expressed a fear that if it is abolished then cores of immigrants will come in to the region and the original ruling people of Assam will have to move to jungles and hills (Pathak, 1998: p. 7).

In September 1939, the Tribal League entered into agreement with the congress and took part in the coalition ministry headed by Gopinath Bordoloi as the Prime Minister of Assam (Narzary, 2000). The Bordoloi Ministry adopted a resolution based on the report of line system Committee. Paragraph 4 of this resolution states:

“The restrictions constituting the so called line system which have been existing in the province for over ten years past were primarily intended against the unending flow of Bengal immigrant cultivators and took the form of constituting the certain areas in which settlement of land with such immigrants was prohibited. The government agrees with the Committee that in future the unit for such restriction of prohibition should, where possible, be larger. They consider that in the subcontinent areas it should be possible to constitute whole Mouza or compact by backward and tribal classes into “prohibited areas” (Brahma, 2008).

But the Bordoloi Ministry could not materialize the resolution because the ministry had to resign due to the Quite India Movement launched by the National party. The League
had to keep quite again when another coalition ministry headed by Sir Mahammad Shadullah came into power in 1939. Hence the land policy of Bordoloi was reversed. Shadullah, instead of introducing developmental schemes, adopted the policy to divide all the waste lands into blocks and allotted to different communities including immigrants on payment of premium of Rs.5/- per bigha. As a result many immigrants were settled down in different areas even in the tribal dominated areas (Brahma, 2008).

In 1942 when Sir Shadullah again came in power with assurance of full co-operation to the British Government in the eve of the war against Japan took the policy known as policy of “grow more food” which resulted flow of thousands of immigrants into the soil of Assam (Brahma, 2008). Consequently, the Tribal League came out with strong criticism of Shadullah’s policy and there was almost a cessation of political relation with him and his Muslim League by the time of their 5th session at Mongoldoi, on 20th April, 1945. Rabichandra Kachari, a leader of the League openly criticized Shadullah’s land settlement policy and held the view to fight for independence (Barpujari & Bhuyan, 1977).

After the general election of 1946 to the Assam Legislative Assembly Gopinath Bordoloi formed the ministry and also the Tribal League was shown good result in that election. Later, the leaders of the Tribal League merged with Congress party in July 1946 expecting with their tribal interest and aspirations. Consequently, the ministry appointed a special officer to inquire into the land problem of the tribals. Later, on the basis of his report the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886 was amended by adding Chapter- X to it in 1947 which created 33 tribal belts and blocks in Assam (Brahma, 2008).

So far as the contribution of the plain tribals in Indian freedom struggle is concerned it is necessary to mention here that a section of tribal leaders like Kulachandra
Basumatary, Aniram Basumatary, Chatrasingh Teron, participated in the freedom struggle under the leadership of Revolutionary Communist Party because there was neither discrimination nor middle class snobbery in the party (Goswami, 1996). Though they contributed to the Indian freedom struggle with the Assamese, they were always apprehensive about the domination of Assamese. They had fear that Assam with the rest of India would lead to the strengthening of the caste Hindu element in the Assamese society and give them a leverage which would be denied to the tribals. The All Assam Plain Tribal League expressed its fear of both caste Hindus and Muslims domination and demanded that Assam and its hills should not be made part or province of any federation - Hindustan or Pakistan without the consent of its people. The Kachari Sammelan also expressed similar views (Sharma, 2009).

In the eve of Indian independence, when the transfer of power from the British Government to the Indian Government was being discussed, the tribal leaders also wanted to push their wishes for consideration of their future in independent India. As a result, the League submitted a memorandum on 20th March, 1947 to the advisory committee for the inclusion of statutory provision for safeguarding the tribals in the new constitution of India (Brahma, 2008).

**Conclusion:**

Since political consciousness has a link with one’s true position in history, therefore, it is necessary to understand the true position of a particular community. Hence, the above discussion focuses on the historical background of the Bodos with their generic details. They are the largest and dominant plain tribes of Assam and belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and linguistically, their origin is derived from the Assam Burmese branch of Tibeto Burman sub-family. Moreover, it is also tried to find out the root
causes of composite culture and distinct identity of the Bodo community. The early history of the Bodos and their glorious past with the kingdom over Brahmaputra valley, down to North-Bengal, Cachar Hills, Sylet and Tripura set the foundation of golden age of the community. Though, there are diverse opinions among the scholars regarding their migration, they are the original settlers of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and they once ruled the North-Eastern part of India with their powerful Kingdoms since time immemorial. Due to their settlement in different places, the different Kingdoms were identified with different names. For instance, Kachari Kingdom, Koch Kingdom, Dimasa Kingdom, Chutiya Kingdom, Moran Kingdom, Borahi Kingdom were some important Kingdoms of the Bodos in different corners of the region. But the Bodos lacked cohesion among themselves, hence; in course of time, they lost their kingdom, palace, land and everything though the ruins and relics of some of their Kingdoms are still lying in some of the places of the region. They are now mostly confined in the Bodoland Territorial Administrative Districts which were formed with the BTC Accord, 2003 in accordance with the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Apart from that, the roles played by the Christian missionaries and Brahma Movement led by Kalicharan Brahma had constructed the Bodo ethnic assertion and awakened them in socio-cultural fields. On the other hand, the Tribal Laegue, as the first political organization for the plains tribals of Assam played significant role in the Bodo political assertion. These are remarkable inspirational ways which made them aware to regain their lost position in the post-colonial period.
References:


Rao, V. Venkata: “A Century of Tribal Politics in North-East India(1874-1974)”, S.Chand & Company, New Delhi, 1998,p.120.


