POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG 
THE BODOS IN POST-COLONIAL ASSAM

An Abstract
Submitted to the Gauhati University for the Degree of Doctor of 
Philosophy (Ph.D.) in 
Political Science in the Faculty of Arts

Submitted by
PHANINDRA KALITA

Department of Political Science
Gauhati University, Guwahati- 781 014, Assam, India
2016
Political assertion of the Bodos has been an important part of the post-colonial political discourses in Assam with significant impacts on the socio-political history of the state. The present work, therefore, is an attempt to comprehend the nature of political assertion of the community in its historicity, besides analysing the factors responsible for shaping the political consciousness of the community as a whole. Political consciousness is conceived as one’s political state of mind, or a person’s awareness of politics which has a link to understand one’s true position in history, as Marx pointed out. The introductory chapter of this work, therefore, makes an attempt to theoretically examine the process of formation of political consciousness essentially linking with ‘Nationalism’—a strong force of political expression and consciousness. The realisation of political consciousness was developed with nationalism in the West in the late 18th and early 19th century with the formation and reformation of new states in Europe. It was borrowed from the West to the colonised world to fight against colonialism. Nevertheless, nationalism in the colonised world has always been a much more difficult process than the Western World. From the Marxian point of view, nationalism or nationalist movement was a struggle against feudal and imperialist powers in the colonised societies. Western educated indigenous elite class led the nationalist forces against colonial rule. In India, nationalism took its shape during the course of Indian National Movement.

Nevertheless, due to the erosion of democratic values and institutions, rise of fundamentalism, politicization of caste, class, language, religion and ethnic groups, political hegemony over others, underdevelopment, regional imbalance and so on gave rise to the emergence of sub-nationalist movements in different corners of the Indian sub-continent. The nationalistic question in North-East India was also emerged with the Indian National Movement. Being a homeland of different nationalities, some communities opposed the nationalistic desire of the wider system who could realize the hegemonic nature of the system. Though the sense of nationality was emerged with the greater Assamese nationality but due to Assamiya hegemony, the sense of sub-nationality was emerged among smaller communities like the Bodos. There are some reasons for the
emergence of the Bodo sub-nationality are, opposition of the Indian state, opposition of the supremacy of Assamese nationality, and clash with other surrounding peripheral as well as dominant nationalities like Adivasi, Koch and Bengali.

Apart from that the processes of modernization ushered in by the Europeans, the India society experienced certain changes. The traditional mind-set of the Bodos also changed with introducing democratic values such as liberty, equality, justice and fraternity. Under this new condition, the Bodos developed the sense of self-respect and socio-economic and political consciousness. Moreover, with the introduction of modern western education by the Britishers, role played by Christian Missionaries and reform movement led by Guru Kalicharan Brahma in the Bodo society resulted in the growth and development of political consciousness among Bodos in post-colonial period.

In the beginning of the Post-Colonial period of Assam, the plain tribes did not get any protective measures in the form of autonomy or an autonomous district council like the hill tribes. Rather, in 1950’s, the imposition of Assamese language and language movements of 1960 and 1972 of the Asamiyas was a hegemonic attempt as a dominant nationality undermining the minority language groups and their identity in the region. That is why the plain tribals of the Brahmaputra valley especially the Bodos from the late 1960’s started to agitate with a new vigor for articulating their own identity and to get autonomy to overcome their miserable socio-economic and cultural condition on the ground of ethnicity. The socio-economic oppression or Asamiya hegemony over their culture, language, increasing socio-economic problems and political mobilization create the sense of sub-nationalism as a strong force of political consciousness among them.

Again, with the emergence of Brahma Movement in the beginning of 20th century led by Kalicharan Brahma and emergence of the middle class among the Bodos made them conscious both politically and socially which created the influx of new participants (popular participation) in to the system. This expansion of popular participation among the Bodos created serious strain on the existing institutions and bring new interests to political system. Consequently, new issues begin to arise and the continuity of the old system is broken. Therefore, the need of re-establishing the entire structure of political relation is felt for mass mobilization. The Bodos also felt that the regional government is not successful to use the powers to influence the distribution of goods, services and values
throughout the Assamese society. Even it was not able to strengthen the opportunities and potentialities of the disadvantaged groups like Bodos in the society. This situation created the distribution crisis among the Bodos and equally made them politically conscious.

From another point of view the manifestation of the consciousness of ethnic identity among the Bodos takes extreme form due to the rise of educated middle class and the growing socio-economic and political problems. It is the result of discriminatory practices and the inadequacy of existing socio-economic and political institutions dealing with this ethnic group. Same thing happens with the Bodos of Assam. They feel that they are depriving from their land and facing the problem of economic neglect and linguistic, cultural and political identity as a distinct tribe. Again they blamed the heavy influx of the outsiders and the Assamiyas attitude of alienating and dominating the tribals for their degraded situation. In this context Hiren Gohain (1989) revealed that the Bodo struggle is one kind of struggle against the Assamese hegemony. By the sixties the cultural pull of the upper caste Hindus became stronger and they were anxious to occupy the superior position of the Aryan ancestry in the Assamese society. After the Indian independence, the Assamese became the most powerful political force led by a number of educated and landed families and gradually came to occupy the important positions into government services. In this regard, they had to struggle with the existing Bengali middle class for political and cultural hegemony and consequently by the fifties they became successful to play significant role in the society, culture and polity in the region. This class actually tried to turn up the Assamese society into a hegemonious society adopting the Assamese way of life and making the Assamese language as the official language. This cultural campaign and the monopoly of power politics in the state administration naturally generated resentment and resistance among the various Bodos and underprivileged groups of the society who were very much conscious with their own culture, language and heritages. They started to raise their voice against the Assamese hegemony in the state and eventually some hill tribes viz., the Khasis and the Garos (Meghalaya), the Nagas (Nagaland), and the Mizos (Mizoram) craved away from Assam with new assignments. On the other hand the plain tribes including the Bodo community united together as Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) launched a popular movement for another new assignment to be known as Udayachal for their distinct identity in the sixties. Being the largest plain tribal community in the state, the Bodos felt the discrimination most bitterly.
because they had no chance for preserving their own cultural heritage in the atmosphere of Assamese hegemony. They were being deprived in education and hence the literacy rate was too low among them. A Handful Bodo youth hardly receive their opportunity for higher education at great sacrifice. But getting good jobs were again more difficult after competing with the politically powerful and educationally advanced caste-Hindu Assamese. Moreover, there are a few roles and positions which are again dominated by high caste Assamese elite class hence their aspirations are not fulfilled. Thus, the newly mobilized and educated Bodo people have lost their trust in the existing institutions and try to regulate the system in their own way which led to the emergence of mass politics in the late 1980’s. This also results in all-round frustration among some Bodo youths which again paves the way to marginalized groups like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT).

However, the plains tribal communities in the north-eastern part of India never had a chance to represent themselves during the colonial period. This has caused deep political resentment among the plains tribes specially, the Bodos of Assam who feel that they have been neglected, exploited, alienated and discriminated against for decades. The main problems among them are establishment of their distinct ethnic identity, participation in the political affairs of the state, appointment in the Government jobs, lack of adequate facilities of modern system of education, land alienation, political neglect which become increasingly acute among themselves. Again the Bodo inhabited districts of Kokrajhar, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Kamrup are among the least developed.

Under the British umbrella, the ethnic population of the country was not comfortable with those policies which kept them to remain far distance from the mainstream. This was happened in the case of the Bodo-Kacharis in the plains of Assam for which they were lagging behind their fellow Indians in terms of many aspects particularly in education. After the Indian independence from the colonial rule, the tribals were given the scheduled tribe (ST) status hence tribal Belts and Blocks were created for their protection from the outsiders. But these protected lands were being encroached by the powerful landlords and immigrants through adopting some illegal means.

Even after independence, due to the low rate of education and ignorance towards the system of education, the problem of getting occupational livelihood as well as
employment remain major problems among the plains tribes of Assam in general and the Bodos in particular though they thought that in the novel condition of the independence from the colonizers will make them out of reach from the miserable conditions which was not materialized. Moreover, even after getting higher education, the Bodo youths hardly compete with other non-tribal educated youths who are both economically and politically powerful so that they are deprived from getting prestigious jobs. Though only ten percent of jobs are reserved for the plain tribes as per the norms of the State Government, the backlogs are even not fulfilled in various categories and most of the appointments are made on the basis of the party affiliation and other considerations. Again, the state governments’ attitude to establish Assamese hegemony in the state administration with making knowledge in Assamese Language as the pre-requisite for services undermining the Bodo language which the Bodos treated as the step of violation of the Article 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution and clause No. 7 of Assam Official Language Act of 1960. Therefore, the Bodos are not comfortable with the motive and activities of the State administration.

Moreover, in the post-colonial period, the plains tribes specially the Bodos compared their position as regards constitutional safeguard with that of the Scheduled Tribes in the hill areas of Assam and the Scheduled Tribes living in other states. They found the plains tribes of Assam enjoy the minimum constitutional safeguard among all the Scheduled Tribes in India. Because those people living outside Assam enjoy the benefits of fifth schedule, the objective of which is to protect the interest of the tribal’s land and to protect the tribal way of life. The Schedule Tribes living in the hill districts of Assam enjoy the provision of the Sixth Schedule which meant to protect the customs, practices and identities of the tribal people and afford them the opportunities of growth and progress according to their own genius and traditions. But the Scheduled Tribes living in the plains of Assam enjoy neither of the two.

Again, the question of giving inadequate protection to their land and to maintain their economic stability is another important issue. Because from the beginning of this century, a large number of East Bengal immigrants infiltrated into their area swallowing up many of their old villages and the most fertile areas. The age-long activities of the non-tribal traders and money lenders and the adverse socio economic efforts of recent urbanization and industrialization without careful arrangements for their economic
protection and rehabilitation endangered a feeling of deprivation, discrimination and injustice among the Bodos

Again, in the 1980s the objectives of the anti-foreigners movement which was led by All Assam Students Union were to drive out the foreigners from the land of the state for preserving the distinct identities of various ethnic groups. Taking this advantage of this movement some leaders of AASU formed the Assam Gana Parishad Government in the state and completely undermined the language and culture of the other indigenous groups which led to the violation of the Clause 6 of the Assam Accord except their effort to promote only the Assamese language and culture. Most of the ethnic groups especially the Bodos and their various organizations mainly the ABSU naturally took it as complete negation of the diverse cultural and linguistic heritage of Assam. This kind of discrimination and the unresolved questions regarding the illegal settlements of the outsiders in their land and protection to their language and culture led to violent conflicts especially among the Bodos which rocked the state almost for two decades.

These deprivations and discriminations developed a sense of political consciousness among the Bodos to secure their distinct identity, history, dignity and socio-economic and political justice in the dominated Assamese society and persuaded them to follow a non-violent democratic mass movement in the 1980’s for their political autonomy.

Therefore, it is the Researcher’s effort to study the level of political consciousness among the Bodos and what are the actual motivating factors behind it are the main concerns for investigation.

With this backdrop, the present study has been an attempted primarily to examine the growth and development of political consciousness among the Bodos; to study the level of political participation and political consciousness of the community and to comprehend the background, nature, aims and objectives, demands and activities of the Bodo organizations for raising political consciousness.

The study is based on field survey on the basis of simple random sampling. With the purpose of studying the political consciousness of the Bodo community, the field survey is conducted with the help of interview schedule. The interview schedule is semi-structured as well as open-ended and a special emphasis was given on focused group discussion.
The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) or Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) has been chosen as the focus area of the study which consists of four districts, namely, Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar and Udalguri having 25 Development Blocks, 13 Revenue Circles and 3082 villages. There, 1 (One) block having highest ST population was selected from each four districts i.e., (1block x4districts) =4 blocks. Again, 3 (three) villages from each four blocks i.e., (3villages x4blocks) =12 villages are selected at random from the list of villages having highest number of ST population. From each villages 25 (twenty five) household i.e., (12villages x25households) =300 households were selected through house listing. Thereafter, a total of 300 adult household members (both male & female) were surveyed.

The first chapter deals with the introduction of the study and theoretical construct of political consciousness. It also covers the objectives, methodology and significance of the study. The second chapter deals with the historical background of the Bodos. It also points out the generic details of the Bodos through a brief historical analysis. Being a part of the North-East India, Assam is the homeland of different races with their composite culture and distinct identity. The Bodos are the largest and dominant plain tribe of Assam and belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and their population being concentrated mostly on the North bank of the Brahmaputra river with some of them staying on the south bank as well. Few of them are staying in Burma, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sikkim and Bhutan. Linguistically, their origin is derived from the Assam Burmese branch of Tibeto Burman sub-family. Regarding the migration of the Bodos into India, there is no authentic source of history as because they have been inhabiting in the North-Eastern region of this country since time immemorial. This chapter also deals with their early history of glorious past with the kingdom over Brahmaputra valley, down to North Bengal, Cachar Hills, Syllet and Tripura. Apart from that, the role of Christian Missionaries to construct the Bodo ethnic assertion and Brahma Movement as way of socio-religious and cultural awakening of the Bodos are some significant outcomes of this chapter.

The third chapter of this study has focussed on the origin and background as well as aims and objectives of the political and non-political organisations of the Bodos and their efforts to interest articulation. These socio-political organisations have come into existence
with their own ideologies and have been working since inception, as it appears, for articulating the interest of the Bodos. It has also come out from the chapter that political consciousness is developed by different political and non-political Bodo organizations in the process of political mobilization of the people in an organized and planned manner. Finally, it can be stated that these Bodo organizations were quite successful for articulating socio-economic and political aspirations of the Bodos. The forth chapter reveals that the newly emerged tribal organisations among the Bodos out of rising political consciousness made various attempts to develop and uplift their conditions and tried to locate reasons for their backwardness and consequently, they tried to introduce reforms in social practices and so on. In this regard, the struggling Bodo ethnic group of the Brahmaputra Valley has been appealing to the ruling elite for the solution of their problems through political demands and submitting memorandums. All these political demands and memorandums related to Bodo issues submitted by different Bodo organizations shows the presence of strong political consciousness and also it makes their political consciousness stronger.

The fifth chapter, dealing with the question of political consciousness empirically, is based primarily on analysis and interpretation of field survey data from BTAD region. The factors responsible for shaping political consciousness of the Bodos are analysed on the basis of the empirical insights gathered through an intensive field study. Attempt has been made to comprehend the achievements of the community in terms of educational attainment, livelihood and employment scenario highlighting the pertinent questions associated with the agrarian community, the level of economic prosperity indicated by the existing material conditions of life, participation of people in the organised socio-political activities, and the impacts of social protection measures initiated by the state. The quantitative insights gathered through the field study have been supplemented by some amount of qualitative insights gathered through FGDs and personal interviews with the political leadership of the community as well as leading citizens. The last provides summary and conclusion of the study as a whole.

Essentially, it has been argued that the common grievances of the community, which provides the basis for political mobilization historically and primarily responsible for shaping political consciousness of the community, are still valid. For instance, historically, the Bodos have been deprived of minimum level education. In the recent
years, owing primarily on the interventions made by the state in the sphere of primary education, the literacy rate among the Bodos has significantly increased. Nevertheless, the average level of educational attainment has considerably been poor due to massive drop out at the level of middle school. Consequently, the sense of educational deprivation has still its political implications.

Historically, the Bodos are predominantly an agrarian community, and it is therefore expected that the Bodos living in the BTAD would still substantially depend on agriculture as their main source of livelihood, as the region does not witness proliferation of other economic opportunities backed by industrialization. It has been, however, been found that the agriculture sector has no more been attractive, especially for the young workforce. In addition to the traditional practices associated with agriculture, the other crucial factor is considerably small size of ownership holding. Though the small size of ownership holding is not something unique to the Bodo community, the question of small size of holding of the Bodos has always been an important political issue, as it has been perceived as a consequence of land alienation from the tribal community to the non-tribal farmers, especially the immigrants. The Bodo peasants with small size of holding sought to supplement the land to be tilled by leasing in agricultural land. The resultant operational holding has still remained smaller than what can be considered as subsistence holding to make the peasants economically better off.

The sector of agriculture being conspicuously poor, a sizeable section of the workforce is bound to migrate out in search of livelihood opportunities. It is also pointed out the aspect of migration and its probable political implications in the study.

The housing and associated basic amenities, which indicate material condition of life of the people, also witness a deep sense of deprivation of the Bodos. The material conditions of life of the common Bodo people are found to be considerably poor. Even a significant section of the people does not have adequate size of homestead backed by Myadi Patta. Backed by poor economic contribution of the agricultural sector and lack of adequate employment opportunities naturally resulted in considerably poor annual income of the common people of the community. The study, therefore, provides an analysis of the overall economic condition of the common Bodo people for a better comprehension of the political processes to take off.
The study has also indicated association of the common Bodo people with various socio-political activities. The analysis reveals a considerably high level of political participation of the common Bodo people, which has been instrumental in precipitation of their political consciousness with a deep sense of deprivation. Constructing a distinct socio-cultural or sub-national identity of the Bodos, the political leadership found a solid political ground to mobilize the anger of the community against the dominant Assamese nationality on one hand and the state on the other. Attempt has also been made to understand the impacts of the state dispensations in the form of various several welfare as well as social protection schemes. The state dispensations, being largely ineffective, contributed to further consolidation of the grievances to be articulated politically.

The empirical findings have been corroborated with some amount of qualitative insights, as has already been mentioned. It has been observed that the factors including language and literature, which significantly contributed to the process of formation of the Bodo identity subsequently, started asserting itself against exploitation and discrimination of the Bodos by other communities. The political leadership of the community contributed a lot to consolidate the Bodo identity as a distinct sub-national identity. Moreover, they want to establish their own community as one of stronger communities in the region through culturally, politically and economically, resulting in establishing some organizations like BSS, ABSU and other political parties. They also feel that some measures like separate directorate for Bodo language and education, separate political identity in the form of separate state can only consolidate the Bodo distinct identity. Some of them also feel that without unity and integrity among the Bodos and better co-ordination among the political parties and Bodo national organisations, it is simply not possible to establish a strong foundation for their distinct identity.

The limited autonomy structured in the form of BTC, which is the outcome of the prolonged political movement of the Bodos, further consolidated political identity of the Bodos, though its socio-economic dispensations are far from the level of expectation of the community as a whole. Therefore, the political struggle of the community must lead to separate state to ensure fulfilment of the common aspiration of the Bodos, a nationality in making.