

Bodo Identity Politics in Colonial Assam

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Abstract

Early 20th century can be considered as the beginning of Bodo politics. Today, the Bodo politics is inching towards a century old landmark. Chiefly, this paper analyses the Bodo politics of early 20th Century, especially beginning from the political activities of the first-generation Bodo leaders, till independence of India. Emergence of Bodo politics under various quasi-political organizations, especially under the Tribal League remains as the main focus of the study. Overall, the political phenomenon, paradigm shift and the occurrences of politics thereof are critically reviewed. Critical analysis of data from secondary sources is the main basis of this study.

Keywords : *Bodo, Colonialism, Identity, Politics, Tribals etc.*

Introduction

Identity movement is not a new phenomenon in the land of diverse culture in a country like India. It has been rooted in Indian states since monarchical rule. Many ethnic groups have fought for separate political identity. There are incidences of separate political arrangements, created on identity basis (Wary & Daimary, 2015). Bodo identity politics is not a new phenomenon. It was the result of Bodo identity consciousness that was fostered during colonial reign. It may be said that the identity consciousness was kindled by social reformation, spread of western education and the rise of educated Bodo middle class (Brahma, 2016). Among the pioneers of Bodo identity movement, mention may be made of some of the chief architects, namely, Kalicharan (Mech) Brahma, Christian Missionaries, the first-generation Bodo leaders, several social and quasi-political Bodo organizations.

Identity politics is a phenomenon which emerges from an ostensible feeling of deprivation and perceived as a threat for marginalization (Haloi, 2018). Bodo identity politics is perceived as a threat of marginalization rising out of factors, namely, socio-political, language-cultural, economics and land, which originated from Assamese hegemony, migration of outsiders and Colonial policies etc. The subsiding Bodo identity compelled them to organize themselves under various socio-political organizations in order to safeguard the Bodo interest.

Questions come up as follows: What are the “*Bodo Interest?*” and “*Other’s Interest?*”? How did these ‘*divergent interest*’ of “*Bodo and Others*” affected the Bodo politics? Hypothetically, the emergence of the Bodo interest clearly suggests that it is one of the products originating from rising consciousness as ‘distinct and unique’ ethnicity. Bodo ethnic identity is entirely different from others, which they believe is under threat of extinction

due to social, economic and political marginalization. As a result of such apprehension, movements started for recognition, assertion and safeguarding of the identity. Thus politics of difference has become inevitable. The emergence of Bodo identity politics became a regular issue.

Who are the Bodos?

Bodos are the earliest settlers of Assam. Gait believed that they migrated and settled in Brahmaputra valley during prehistoric era (Gait, 1967). They are considered as descendants of Mongoloid race. Eminent scholar and linguist, G.A Grierson recognized them as a sub-section of the Bodo-Naga group, a Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of language (Grierson, 1967). Anthropologists have identified them as Tibeto-Burman in origin. Bodo tribe comprises of Bodo linguistic groups, which include, Lalungs, Koches, Sonowals and Rabhas of Brahmaputra Valley; the Barmans and Dimasas of Cachar Hills; the Tripuris of Tripura; the Hajongs and Garos of Meghalaya and Bangladesh; and the Meches or Boro of lower Assam, North Bengal and South-East of Nepal (Sonowal, 2013). They are also called as the *Kacharis*. The word *Kachari* as described by S. Endle was designated as a racial connotation for the Bodo linguistic group. The Britishers and the Christian Missionaries, who were the first pioneer of Bodo literature, used the term *Kachari* as a racial name (Mochari, 1997). However, it was an eminent linguist, Brain Hodgson, who was the first to confer the name Bodo to the *Kachari* race. Since then, the term Bodo is used both as a generic and national name by the authors of the later period. Many authors used the terms Bodo, *Kachari* or Bodo-*Kachari* as synonymous. The *Bodo* or *Boro* was originally applied only in linguistic context but later it acquired the ethnic connotation (Moshahary, 1983).

Material and Methods

Discussion of this paper focuses chiefly on the Bodo identity consciousness, political phenomenon, paradigm shift and the occurrences of politics thereof during the colonial era. The study is analytical in nature. Observation and critical analysis of secondary data is the main basis and sources of this study. The sources of the data are published books, magazines, journals, thesis etc.

Bodo Identity Politics during Colonial Era

Bodo identity politics has a colonial origin. Academician and scholars very often loosely use the general tribal politics of Assam to indicate the Bodo politics. In this regard, Sonowal observed that in absence of Bodo political party, the Bodo politics started under the Tribal League (Sonowal, 2013). Sujit Choudhury argued that Bodos were the most advanced among all other tribals and their demand represents the demand of all other tribal groups of Assam (Choudhury, 2007). B.K Karjie writes that the Bodo elites initially rose with reformative zeal in early 20th century but very soon they developed a distinct political set of mind. Subsequently, the Bodo politics came at the wake of Bodo identity consciousness simulated from Brahma movement (Karjie B. K., 2020). Sujit Choudhury observed that the emergence

of Bodo politics in early 20th century was kindled by the Bodo reform movement of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. According to Choudhury, the demand for seat reservation in Assembly before the Simon Commission was in response to developments taking place around them. The self-confident Bodos were aware of the neighbouring politics. The Bodo *Mahasanmelans* at the time also facilitated a platform for discussion of political and community issues. They were ready to enter into the politics with a hope to gain something by sharing limited power under the colonial rule (Choudhury, 2007). It is clear that they were aware of the need for power sharing at local bodies and provincial council in order to pursue political ambitions.

The term '*Plain Tribal*' is often used. Plain Tribal in political discourse was first coined by the British in 1930s in order to lump together the cognate tribes of *Bodo-Kachari*, *Miri* and *Mikir* families of Assam. Throughout the century, the term was used by the tribal leaders of Assam (Pathak, 2010). It was consciously used and designed to segregate tribal identity from non-tribal. It was used for the sake of interest of tribals for their political empowerment through union of diverse tribal nationalities. Parallel discourse of tribal politics took place since then. It was seeded in identity question of the tribal originating chiefly from indignity.

It is clear that Bodo politics is a natural occurrence from the resistance and challenge to the hegemony of Assamese caste Hindu. This was proclaimed in 1928, when the Bodo-Kachari Sanmilin volubly and clearly declared the Bodo tribals as distinct and independent group from Hindus in all respects (Karjie, 2020). The reason behind this is that the tribals were discriminated, treated unequal and secluded from the caste Hindu Assamese Society. Beteille (1998) has shown that Hindus shaped the tribal politics and transformation of the tribes (Baruah, 2019). This indicates a momentum of tribal politics that was picking up in Assam to protect the interest of the tribals and their ethnic identity. Formation of tribal identity, especially the Bodo identity, is a clear case that arose from an apprehension of caste Hindu Assamese's hegemony. Organisation of Bodos during the time into various political and non-political platform was none but a response to counter the Assamese hegemony. From thereon, emergence of many social and quasi-political organizations also became inevitable. Foundation of the *Tribal League* in April 1933 is one such tribal political organisation that came at such wake. Tribal leaders such as Rupnath Brahma, Satish Ch. Basumatary, Bhimbora Deuri and Jadav Ch. Khaklary were aware of the needs of tribal unification because of ongoing exploitation (Sonowal, 2013). Emergence of Tribal League for sure was a result of socio-political and economic exploitation of the tribals by the Hindu Assamese. Because divided by religion, unprotected by colonial power, discriminated in Assamese society, the Bodos as a community was breaking-up and the total extinction as a distinct tribe was feared to be imminent.

When it was said that the caste Hindus were unsympathetic towards tribals, *Assam Kachari Jubak Sanmilin* vehemently opposed. The discrimination towards tribal by the Assamese Hindus alienated tribals from non-tribal and compelled to declare themselves as outside the caste-ridden Assamese Hindu society (Pathak, 2010). Andrew Clow, the

Governor of Assam also alleged the Assamese Hindus and Muslims for indifferent attitude towards the tribes. As such, the feeling of deprivation among tribes had fostered the emergence in the province of local organizations, such as, *Kachari*, *Chutiya*, *Koch*, *Rajbangshi*, *Muttock Sanmilan* etc. All of them Initially functioned independently but in 1933 joined hands to form *All Assam Plain Tribal League* (Kalita, 2017). The Sanmalini was keen on reviving the past glory of the Bodos. They propagated that the Bodo-Kacharis were once the ruling class of Assam. They demanded that they should be given opportunities for access and management of political matters even now (Narzary C. , 2011). It is clear that, these kindled the Bodo politics. Emergence of several Bodo quasi-political organizations also gives a clear idea about the appearance of Bodo politics. Existence of loggerhead politics gave rise to the tendency of polarization among the plain tribal Bodos, caste Hindu Assamese and Muslims because of contested interest. The caste politics existed among the Ethnic Tribes and caste Hindu Assamese, in which the latter patronized themselves under Hindu Assamese nationalism and the former mobilized themselves under Ethnic tribal identity, distinct from Hindu Assamese.

Bodo Politics under various Quasi-Political Organizations

With the kind of socio-political paradigm, fostering mainly around ethnic identity, there were resistance to Hinduization of the tribes and hegemony of caste Hindu Assamese. In addition, lack of education, denial of occupation in administration and existing traditional economic system, pushed them further into margins in the Assamese society. On the one hand, the Assamization of the tribes had compelled them to renounce their own ancestral traditions and practices (Brahma, 1992); on the other, the open-door policy in Assam for serving the needs of colonial administration also paved way for outsiders into the province. As a result, all the important positions of administration were either taken by the high caste Hindu Assamese of non-tribal origin or by the outsiders. They became more backward and marginalized. Humiliated in Assamese society because of their occupation and lifestyle, they converted to Hinduism in order to get equal status and social respect. They renounced their own language, traditions, dress, culture, and religion in order to avoid discrimination and to get accepted in Assamese society. But the discrimination continued despite conversion to Hinduism (Sonowal, 2013). This can be well substantiated from the early writings of Sidney Endle. Endle estimated that the ethnic group of Bodo-Kachari within the borders of Assam was not less than a million soul and probably many more; but many of them have converted to Hinduism in late years and lost their mother tongue. From many perspectives, lights are thrown on the queries such as, 'How did ethnic identity shaped tribal politics?' 'What did the tribals articulated and mobilized their interest?' 'What was the outcome?' The table below shows an assimilation and Hinduisation of Bodo-Kacharis during colonial period.

Table : Indicate the Hinduised Population of Bodo-Kachari groups

Emergence of Bodo educated middle class also emphasized the Bodo interest. Since

Name	Number in (Aprox.)	Chief Habitat
<i>I. Northern Group</i>		
1. Bārā (Kachari)	272,500	Western Darrang, Kachari Duars, North Kamrup
2. Rabha (Totala)	31,370	Goalpara
3. Mech (Mes)	93,900	Goalpara
4. Dhimal	(See B. Hudgson)	North East Bengal
5. Koch	10,300	Jalpaiguri to West Darrang
6. Solanimiyas Mahaliyas	15-18 Families	Mangaldoi Subdivision
7. Phulgariyas Saraniyas		Western Darrang (All Slightly Hinduised Kacharis)
<i>II. Southern Group</i>		
1. Dimasa	15,931	North Cachar Hills
2. Hojais	2,750	North Cachar Hills & Nowgong
3. Lalungs	40,160	South-West Nowgong and adjoining Districts
4. Garos	150,000	Garro Hills
5. Hajongs	8,766	Southern Garo Hills
6. Hill Tippera (Tripura)	105,850	Hill Tippera

Source : (Endle, S. , 2017 (Ed. 3rd))

then, articulation of Bodo interest began under the leadership of various quasi-political organizations. The desire for rights, representations and emancipation encouraged them to put forward their interest. Handful of Bodo leaders, namely, Kalicharn Brahma, Rupnath Brahma and few others, were pioneers in this quest (Pathak, 2010). In 1920s, the waves of Swaraj movement had given rise to the sense of nationalism. With the rise of pan-Indian Nationalism, the sub-nationalism based on regionalism, culture and ethnicity had also taken distinct form in many regions. At that time, the British regime appointed Simon Commission for reformation in political setup. Observers were sure about the coming of more autonomy to provincial and central administration, fragmented representation and reservations in Assembly for different communities. Although, the Bodos were new entrant to the politics, but they were vigilant of development taking place around them. Kalicharan Brahma and other Bodo leaders could visualize the outcome and placed their demands

(Choudhury, 2007). Dejected by denial from benefits of reform in local bodies and Council, the Bodos demanded for separate electorate because representations were classified on the basis of Mohammedan and non-Mohammedan. Mostly, the benefits were reaped by advanced communities, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Sudras, despite the Bodo-Kachari population was formidable in size. They were also assertive for classification of non-Mohammedan into Hindu and non-Hindus (Sonowal, 2013). The Bodo-Kachari organisation had already identified themselves as distinct from Hindu and demanded for separate census for them. Consequently, the demand for separate electorate and seat reservation echoed louder among plain tribals. In fact, tribal politics in Assam filled up when the Assam Jubak Sanmilini demanded for separate electorate and reservation of two seats in Assam Legislative Council for Kacharis of Surma Valley and Assam Valley (Narzary, 2011). By 1929, tribal politics became stronger when Simon Commission visited Assam. This gave the tribals an opportunity to place their grievances. Various tribal associations including Bodo-Kachari submitted numbers of memorandum. Among them, the representatives from Primitive and Backward Tribes, especially, from the Bodos of Goalpara district were prominent to call for Commission's attention to their deprivation. They demanded for separate representation in local Council and reservation of seat in Central Legislature (Pathak, 2010). The Goalpara Boro Jubak Sanmalini submitted a demand of charter before Commission, which include the creation of Bodo regiment; representation in the Council; reservation in government services; scholarships for Bodo Students; establishment of Civil sub-division at Kokrajhar; enactment of Goalpara Tenancy Bill to ensure the tenants of Khas Mahal trading rights of forest timbers, and retention of Goalpara district in Assam (Narzary C. , 2011). Overall development resulted into great political drive. However it is not known whether it came with the help of higher officials of imperial authority or not. Choudhury's appraisal was quite skeptic in this respect. He wrote that the Bodo leaders might have acted upon a tip of government agent in dejection, as the movement was ignored by other forces around. Clearly, he also gave credit to Brahma elites that it was a result of desire for securing rightful place in the state and polity. Importantly, the British administration had its own reason for sympathy towards tribals because none of the forces around were concerned for their interest. In a matter of fact, although the issues of land alienation and tribal tenants under Goalpara Tencay Act, 1929 drew strong attention and sentiments but concern was only for the Assamese. The nationalist forces were busy outside the Assembly, boycotting the Commission. In social development policies too, the non-tribal elites were indifferent towards tribals. None did consider them as a potential political force (Choudhury, 2007). Hypothetically, Choudhury assumed that the Bodos might have played under the patronage of government agents. Whosoever was behind, the seed of communal and caste-based idea of reservation was already planted by colonial administrators and such idea had taken a course in politics. Apparently, this idea was a result of inherent communal interest of each group, that were contesting for the protection of conflicting interest against the interest

of others. The Hindu-Muslim divide was not only socio-political but eternal too i.e., the caste Hindu Assamese were critical of Muslims, similarly the Muslims towards Hindus. The Bodos too had a strong feeling of being separated by ethnicity from others i.e., both Hindus and Muslims. Unlike, Hindu and Muslims whose identity was principally based on religion, the identity of Bodos resulted from fear of being oppressed by the "Other" identities. This came out of perceived threat to distinct ethnicity. The Bodo politics was motivated by identity centric crisis, originating from socio-economic and political marginalization. Certainly, the communal electorates of Hindu and Muslims have much to do with communal interest of the two. The separate electorate for the Bodos has much to do with safeguarding of indigenous tribes and their political interest. The British did exploit the situation. It became permanent and used for the protection of almost in all matters of socio-economic and political interest. Not only for seats in Assembly but also for job benefits and land settlements. It became a permanent issue since it stood as a stumbling block between the Assamese and Bodos.

Issues, Politics and Interest Articulation of the Bodos under the All Assam Plain Tribal League or Tribal League (AAPTL): A Critical Overview

There were local quasi-political organizations too, who were actively articulating the interest of respective tribes. The emergence of 'Tribal League' was clearly a landmark in the history of tribal politics because this can be considered as a steppingstone towards political unification of plain tribes in Assam. With the birth of Tribal League, the multi fold problems of plain tribal also began to gather political articulation. Then onwards the tribal politics took off and gathered momentum towards proper direction.

It is observed that migrations, foreigners, land, and Assamese nationality occupies central position in the contest for present politics in Assam. Such politics is not new. It was generated at a time dating back to the colonial rule. In simple parlance, the colonization of Assam resulted in continuous wave of both internal and external migration. Throwing lights into this matter, Sandhya Goswami has pointed out the social and economic restructuring of Assam during Colonial rule. These were mostly related to the introduction of new administration, land and taxation policies by the British that were designed to suit the colonial interest. Particularly, the booming Tea industry and settlement policy of vast wasteland under cultivation for revenue encouraged more immigrants. By 1901, the tea industry alone brought more than 5.97 lakh (Census report) migrant laborers (Goswami S., 2001). As stated, the districts of Brahmaputra Valley had a vast and virgin cultivable wasteland. Bengal saw a rapid rise of population during the period. As a result, a steady influx took place in Assam. By 1911, the western part of Goalpara district was crowded by migrants. More than 85 percent of the migrants were Muslims, and the rest were Hindus. They were rapidly entering into the districts of Nowgong, Kamrup etc. and occupied the lands originally belonging to Tribal people (Borthakur & Thaosen, 2012). By 1921, the number

of immigrants almost tripled in Goalpara district. In Brahmaputra Valley, the estimated number of immigrant settlers crossed 3 lakh (Guha, 1977). This happened because of the open door policy by colonial rulers. As a result, the local communities were squeezed by rapidly rising Muslims migrant populations. Especially, the tribals were culturally submerged and demographically outnumbered (Goswami, 2001). In fear of demographic marginalization, the natives agitated and demanded for safeguard. In this backdrop, the Line System was introduced in Nowgong and Kamrup districts in 1920 with a view to safeguard the interest of natives and to avoid conflict rising from tensions between natives and immigrants. Line System demarcated the areas settled by migrants from those of the original settlers by a line (Borthakur & Thaosen, 2012). By 1930s, it came into effect in most districts of Upper Assam. For Tribals, it was a move towards protection of their land. But in reality, it failed to work effectively in absence of strong local authority because the government never took it seriously and was not pursued with strict policy (Pathak, 2010). Most part of Goalpara district where Bodo-Kachari were concentrated was left without any such provision. As a result, land alienation continued despite the operation of line system. Back in 1920s, the phobia of illegal migrations gave birth to a new political wave of Assamese sub-nationalism in Assam. Nonetheless, this wave was the result of phobia from "immigration and land alienation". The politics of "true or indigenous Assamese community" then started with the loud echo of narratives like Bidekhi (foreigners), Asamiya Jatir (Assamese Race), Assamese Hindu Jatiya (Assamese Hindu National), Assam Desh (Assamese nation or birthplace) and Jatir Sampati (National Resources) throughout Assam (Pegu, 2004). However, the question is "whether the birth of Assamese sub-nationalism was an inclusive identity embracing both tribals and non-tribals"? A critical observation however is contradictory because the Bodo identity consciousness happened concurrently by opposing the chauvinist attitudes of caste Hindu Assamese, at a time when the Assamese nationalism was in its prime. Clearly, the politics in Assam became complicated with questions of legitimate control of land and resources rights, ethnic identity of tribals, Assamese identity, religion, illegal migrations, and foreigners. Each group were contesting against the other. The Congress representing indigenous Assamese interest, Muslim League, and Tribal League articulating interest for their own communities. For that matter, the Tribal League representing tribal interest was also assertive for the institutional safeguard of tribals.

Tribal League's landmark achievement came when the government under the Act, 1935 considered demand for separate electorate and four seats were reserved in the Assembly. First election for Assam Assembly was held in 1937. Officially, the Tribal League did not contest election, but the four elected Tribal leaders created a block in Assembly with the name Tribal League block or Tribal Party (Choudhury S. , 2007). Elected tribal representatives were Rupnath Brahma, Rabi Ch. Kachari, Dhirshing Deori and Karka Ch. Doley. Bhimbar Deori got nominated in Assam Legislative Council (Narzary, 2011).

Table : Composition of Assam Legislative Assembly (*Under the Act of 1935*)

However, none of the party emerged with clear majority. In a state of hung Assembly,

	No. of Seats	Number of Electors	Poll Participation Rate in Contested Seats
<i>Territorial Constituencies</i>			
1 Non-Muhammedan General including 7 reserved seats for Schedule Caste	47	445626	76
2 Muhammedan	34	277677	65.5
3 Women	1	2199	55.5
4 European	1	2357	
5 Indian Christian	1	5743	
<i>Special Constituencies</i>			
1. (a) Backward Plain Tribes	4	27588	46.3
(b) Backward Hill Tribes	5	18338	64.6
2. (a) European Planters	7	975	
(b) Indian Planters	7	344	
3. (a) Commerce and Industry (European)	1	18	
(b) Commerce and Industry (Indian)	1	197	
4. Tea Garden Labour	4	34279	
Total	108	815241	71.3

Source : (Guha, 1977)

the Congress did not show any interest in power sharing due to rigid party policy. As such, the Tribal League on certain conditions supported the Saddulla government. But soon, the Congress realized the needs of fluidity in politics and amended rigid party policy when saw the eagerness of other parties in power sharing (Choudhury S. , 2007). It was not surprising that the tribals were unhappy with Saddulla's land policy. As a result, uncertainty emerged over continuation of support to Muslim League. Clearly by late 1930s, the tribal land alienation had become a chronic problem. The tribal leaders seeking for land protection were keen to support any party to power on terms of land policy. Amid this, the Bordoloi led Congress started wooing other parties. Obviously, the Tribal members were their target for number game. Guha says,

“In an attempt to gain allies among tribal and labour members, Bordoloi raised the bogey of

tribal people in plains losing their lands to immigrants. He demanded a protective system of tribal belts for them.... The Congress and the Tribal League entered an agreement to bring in a new coalition government." (Guha, 1977).

Sujit Choudhury in his critical observation underscores the fact that Bordoloi's concern for tribal was sudden and not the outcome of policy under consideration. In simple word, his concern was clearly a political and designed to win the tribal's support. Because of the fact that during these decades, the Assamese social leaders and intellectuals have never featured tribal's problem in their agenda nor they ever tried to involve the tribals in political processes. When the land alienation remained burning issue for social and political debates throughout the decade, almost all the organizations, Assamese leaders and newspapers had their opinion expressed and circulated. The concern and agony expressed were always for indigenous Assamese peasants, not for the tribals. Therefore when Bordoloi took up the long neglected tribal's cause, it was no secret that the gesture had its origin in political exigency dictated by the situation. The Tribal League by that time had come to understand the game of politics and they did not shy away to form a pact with Congress on agreements (Choudhury, 2007). In 1938, Tribal League withdrew from Muslim League and joined with Congress on terms that included *continuance of separate electorate, maintenance of independent party identity, determination of Tribal representation in Local Boards, inclusion of tribals in Schedule irrespective of religion, preferential treatment of Tribal as a separate class for government services, grants of fund for the education and tribal welfare, settlement of lands to the landless tribals and one ministry from Tribal League* (Karjie, 2020). Surprisingly, the question of land alienation remained understated in the pact and was just limited to mere land settlement for landless tribals. Trivial concern for political and economic security were prioritized. The question remains, did Bordoloi's plea of tribal land alienation had any direct bearing on Tribal League? or, they just preferred to ignore the issue for the time being; or is it that tribal land alienation was just anticipatory; or else, the tribal leaders were sure that Bordoloi had his own reasons to let any immigrants to settle in the wasteland. Astonishing though, and not to forget, that many times the issues of immigration and land alienation had been raised by tribal leaders prior to this pact.

Moreover, it was evident, that there was growing distrust between Hindu and Muslims; Assamese and Bengali; and the fear of tribals against the immigrants. The Line System Committee favored the effective line for tightening the tribal lands protection system (Guha, 1977). The Muslims outrageously opposed the Line System both inside and outside Assembly. Against the Line System, the Muslim League in 1937 moved a resolution for abolition of it. This move was strongly criticized by Rabi Ch. Kachari and Rupnath Brahma, both members of Tribal League, which eventually led to withdrawal of the move (Pathak, 2010). Rabi Ch. Kachari justified its continuation as a necessary protection measure to safeguard the tribal land (Kachari, Rabi Ch. (Speech), 1937). Rupnath Brahma too demanded for enforcement of such system in the Goalpara district to protect tribals from immigrants (Brahma, R (Speech), 1937). Some non-tribal leaders too, especially Naba Kr. Dutta and Mahi Ch. Bora criticized such move by Muslim League. Evidently, the 'Line or no Line' contest echoed through the

entire Assam. Partisan politics in caste line upheld by the Assamese indigenous or Hindu Assamese. Tribal and Muslim voices were distinctly loud in the Valley. This created a delicate situation for Saddulla for taking a decision on the matter. Tilting towards Muslims, Saddulla pursued Muslim appeasement politics by assuring to do away with the Line System. This created hysterics among the Hindu Assamese and Tribals (Guha, 1977). However, back in 1928, the colonization scheme relaxed the protected lines implemented in Nowgong, Barpeta and Mangaldai sub-division with the approval of NC Bordoloi and Saadulla. It allowed the immigrants to settle in virgin land of Brahmaputra Valley. Bordoloi's advocacy for leaving enough land for expansion of indigenous people was an appeasing move for Assamese indigenous. The scheme drew severe criticism from Mulan and Jnananath Bora. Bora was especially, overt to the outcry, that unless Sylhet was separated, influxes were stopped and Assamese language was declared as medium of instruction; the Assamese nationality would perish (Guha, 1977). Muslim leaders, especially Maulvi Sayidur Rahman, backed the scheme and retaliated that indigenous have no bar for occupying land. Nonetheless, this scheme met a strong resistance from the tribals. F. W. Hockenhuil rejected Rahman's claim. Karka Dolay opposed such scheme because of the growing land scarcity (Pathak, 2010). M. Mullan, a superintendent of 1931 Census, called the immigration as an "invasion". J. H. Hutton, a Census Commissioner of India, also said that the immigrants were 'prolific breeders, industrious cultivators, unruly and uncomfortable neighbors. They have threatened to take over the indigenous people and change the demography of entire Brahmaputra Valley in few decades (Hutton, 1931).

Clearly, the migrants' intrusion made the tribal leaders afraid and apprehensive for displacement from their own land. In the wake of urgent need to protect tribals from immigrants, the demand for line system echoed louder in Brahmaputra Valley. In 1939, the Bordoloi ministry, after much deliberation, agreed to evict all immigrant squatters from the submontane regions, which were declared as "protected tribal blocks." Following the Committee's report, the government adopted a land settlement policy, which declared to constitute protected areas, comprising of areas "*mouzas*" or compact parts of the "*mouzas*", predominantly inhabited by the tribals and other backward classes. But in 1940, due to the resignation of Bordoloi Ministry, such provision were largely left unimplemented (Pathak, 2010). Tribal League was left in confusion. With the development of political exigency after the resignation of Congress, the Tribal League again realigned with Muslim League in 1940 in similar terms agreed previously, although they were in of doubts in Saddulla ministry's sincerity (Narzary, 2011). The Tribal leaders were cautiously watching Saddulla's policies. Saddulla's "*Grow more food*" policy met a stiff opposition especially, from the tribal leaders. Under the pretext of policy, they sensed conspiracy of settling surplus Muslims population of East Bengal, in tribal areas and turn Assam into Muslim majority province (Bhattacharya, 2001). In 1940, Baliram Das, a representative of backward caste strongly criticized Saddulla ministry for its immigrant policy. He called the migrations an "invasion" into the "line and reserved areas" (Das, Baliram (Speech), 1938). Saddulla's underlying policy was to protect interest of immigrant Muslims by the land settlement policy at the

expense of Tribal interest. This was severely opposed. Further, the abolition of Line System left the tribals helpless and unprotected (Mwshahary, 2015). Not only that, the Tribal League also opposed vehemently the merger of Assam and transfer of Goalpara with Bengal (Narzary, 2011). By 1946, the Congress returned to power with majority. The Tribal League could retain only two seats. Bordoloi accommodated Bhimbar Deori, from Tribal League, in his Ministry. The Tribal League also pressurized the Bordoloi Ministry for tribal representative in Constituent Assembly. As a result, Dharanidhar Basumatary was elected as a member for Constituent Assembly (Mwshahary, 2015). The wave of Independence across the nation gave a new zeal to the leaders. Tribal leaders too, in 1946 submitted a number of demands to British Cabinet Mission, which included: reservation of 4 seats in the Assembly, 16 seats in the Council, one representative in the Viceroy's Executive Council, 3 seats in the Central Legislative Assembly, one seat in the Central Legislative Council (Karjie, 2020), separate seats with separate electorate, not to merge Assam with Pakistan, safeguard of Tribal interest in the post-colonial India, and one or more Tribal member in Constituent Assembly. Other demands of the Tribal League submitted in 1947 included the creation of Scheduled Areas for plain tribals under 5th Schedule of the Constitution (Karjie, 2019). In the wake of tribal land alienation and tribal resentment, the government formally amended the land settlement of 1945, adopted to protect tribals and other backward class. By an Act in 1947, the "*Tribal Belts and Blocks*" were created by adding Chapter-X in Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886. Under the provisions, 33 Tribal Belts and Blocks covering 5,704 square miles were created. The Act prohibits transfer and possession of tribal lands by outsiders and non-tribals within the protected Belts and Blocks. In post-independent time, despite existence of such provision, immigration did not stop. Land menace continued for the Bodos (Barpujari, 1998). No doubt, the provision came as a significant measure for safeguarding the political and land rights of the Tribals. But the sincere implementation of it has been questioned from time to time. Relating to this matter, B. Karjie points out that the Bodo Movement for autonomy originated out of such provision (Karjie, 2019). However, post-independence period saw disintegration of Tribal League due to diverse interest and problems of different tribes. Many leaders of the League merged with Congress because of their individual vested interests. And few of them got elected with the Congress ticket (Sonowal, 2013). The Tribal League after independence renamed as Tribal Sangha, had assumed non-political role from political role. This weakened the position of the tribals in the State politics. Many considered it a blunder, because League was a beacon for plain tribals' socio-economic and political interest in Assam. Remarkably, the absence of tribal local party in the State, left them at the mercy and goodwill of the Congress government for about two decades. Instead of giving special attention, the tribal grievances were merged with those of the mainstream Assamese (Karjie, 2019). To summarize the politics during colonial era in Brahmaputra Valley, the dominant issues were immigration, foreigners, land alienation and the politics arising out of those for the socio-economic and political security. Each group contested for respective interest and tried to mobilize their loyal supporters in the line of caste, religion and ethnicity. It became clear that the Congress

cared mostly for the interest of Hindu Assamese Caste or Assamese indigenous, Tribal League stood for tribals' interest and Muslim League, and other Muslim Party patronized immigrants and Muslim interest.

Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, the Bodo identity politics has its colonial origin. Today, it has become a persistent issue in the politics of Assam. It chiefly originated from a perceived threat of marginalization of socio-cultural, political-economic, language, land alienation due Assamese hegemony, migration from outsiders and colonial policies. Clearly, from the above overview, the process of Bodo identity formation and politics thereof were fostered with the spread of western education, rise of educated Bodo middle class, social reform in Bodo society and their desire for preservation of distinct Bodo identity. For that matter, they articulated their interest through several Bodo quasi-political organisation, tribal organisation and leadership of the time.

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