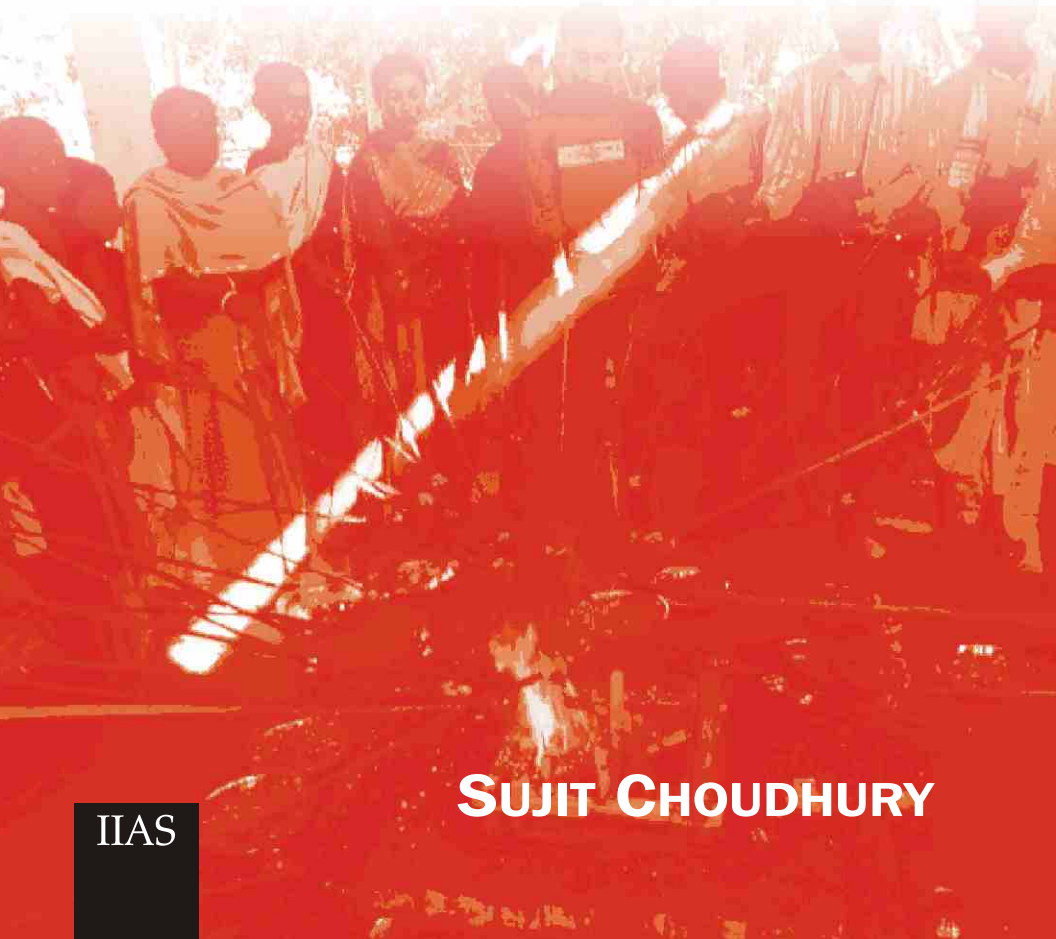


THE BODOS

EMERGENCE AND ASSERTION
OF AN ETHNIC MINORITY



SUJIT CHOUDHURY

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Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority

The Bodos
*Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic
Minority*

SUJIT CHOUDHURY



Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla

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Introduction

The term 'Bodo' is being used in more than one sense in academic discourses as well as in political deliberations and it is imperative to spell out at the very outset the precise meaning in which the term has been used in this study.

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. Grierson identifies the Bodos as a section of the Assam-Burma group of the Tibet-Burman speakers belonging to the Sino-Tibetan speech family.¹ S.K. Chatterjee subscribes to the same view. According to him these people migrated to eastern India in the second millennium B.C. and a large portion of them was absorbed within societies of plains-man at quite an early state.² Isolation caused fragmentation of the original stock and ultimately the branches assumed independent tribal identities like the Tipra, the Bodo-Kachari, the Rabha, the Dimsasa, the Chutiya etc. Rev. Sydney Endle, in his monograph, *The Kacharis*, used 'the Kachari' in the same wider sense incorporating all these branches.

In present day socio-political terminology 'the Bodo' means the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley known earlier as 'the Bodo-Kachari'. The media at the regional and national level; officials at the Centre and the state political parties of all hues and the people in general have accepted what may be termed as the contraction of the original denotation. In the light of this situation, in this study also the term 'Bodo' has been used in the new sense, meaning the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Rev. Endle identifies trans-Himalayan region between Tibet and China as the original home of the Bodos.⁶ S.K. Chatterjee is more specific when he suggests that 'the north-western China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-Tsze Kiang rivers was the early home of the Proto-Bodos who migrated to eastern India in waves

between the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium A.D. There are also other theories which we need not go into since the determination of the original home of the Bodos does not have any direct bearing on our study.⁸ However, for our purpose, it is necessary to remember that scholars like Edward Gait,⁹ J.D. Anderson¹⁰ and K.L. Barua¹¹ hold the Bodos as the autochthons of the Brahmaputra Valley. At present, they are concentrated mainly in the districts of Kamrupa, Goalpara, Darrang and Nagaon of the Brahmaputra Valley. According to the Census of 1971 the Bodo population of Assam was 6,10,450 in 1971.¹² Amalendu Guha, on the basis of the Census of 1881 thinks that in the late nineteenth century the Bodos formed one third of the indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley.¹³ The Bodos of today speak a language of Tibeto-Burman origin, have an indigenous religion called 'Bathau' religion and lead a distinct way of life.

II

During the early decades following independence a general feeling was current in the Brahmaputra Valley that the Bodos were gradually coming closer to the mainstream of the Assamese society and the possibility of their assimilation with the Assamese nationality was projected as an inevitable historical destiny.¹⁴ The Census of 1961 depicts 93.63 per cent Bodos as Hindus and this gave the illusion that the Bodos had already become a part of the local Hindu milieu. Also, the Census of 1951 and 1961 show an unusual decline in the growth rate of the Bodos. This was ascribed to willingness of the Bodos to register themselves as Assamese speakers. It was also argued that the adaptation of language was nothing but the natural corollary to the process of social absorption that had preceded the linguistic assimilation.¹⁵

The developments of the last three decades have proved beyond all doubt that these speculations were wishful thinking. As early as 1967 the Plain Tribals' Council of Assam in its memorandum submitted to the President of India made it clear that the Bodos were neither eager to involve themselves in the process of Hinduisation nor in the process of Assamisation. The memorandum inter alia, says:

Language spoken by the Bodo group of plain tribals belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group and widely differs from the Assamese language which is one of the modern Indo-Aryan languages. Though few of them speak partly Assamese, most of them speak their mother tongue and the village folk, particularly the women folk, do not at all understand the Assamese language.¹⁶

The Bodo group of the plain tribals of Assam practices different religions: some of them are Hindus, some Christians while some others profess tribal religion. The caste system and untouchability are foreign to them.

This memorandum marks the beginning of the demand for autonomy of the Bodos, though the quantum of autonomy to be enjoyed was kept undefined in 1967. In 1985, United Tribal Nationals' Liberation Front made a specific demand for creation of a union territory for the Bodos. In 1987, All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) entered the scene with the same demand but its assertion has been more vigorous and at times violent. ABSU, in its memorandum submitted to the Centre on November 10, 1987, expresses its bitter feelings in the following words:

The Assamese people are following the policy of expansionism and imperialism to capture and dominate all corners of Assam including the tribal areas. In fact, they have a plot to conquer all tribal areas and dominate them everywhere under their feet. That is why they are deeprooting Assamese colonialism in tribal areas. The Assamese people do not want to agree or recognize the existence and pre-dominance of tribal people in their majority areas too. The process of engulfment and silent aggression over the tribals by the Assamese people is still continuing.

The Assamese people have no political toleration. They cannot tolerate the existence of tribal communities and other democratic organizations who oppose the policies Assamisation and Assimilation.

The Assamese people, the Assam government and the administration consider the Bodos as the number one enemy for demanding a separate state.

From these lengthy extracts the reader may have a glimpse of the Bodo mind as it has been moulded since the sixties of the last century. Whether these allegations are based on genuine grounds or not is a different question but the fact remains that these are the manifestations of the Bodo's perception of the present day situation. It is clear that the process which the Assamese intellectuals once visualized as the formation of a composite and greater Assamese nationality has been halted with no sign of redemption.

III

The state of Assam is known for different varieties of ethnic tension and most of the hill tribes whose territories were incorporated within the political boundary of Assam in 1947 have opted out of state to form their own autonomous units. Thus, apparently, the aspiration of the Bodos may give the idea that it is nothing but a belated endeavour of another tribe to join the rank of their more fortunate counterparts. But the situation is not that simple, because, as pointed out by Homen Bargohain, the Bodo phenomenon is essentially linked with the process of formation of the Assamese nationality and their position cannot be treated at par with the hill tribes of the erstwhile composite Assam.¹⁷

It is to be noted that in one significant aspect, the Bodos differ not only from the hill tribes of Assam, but also from most of the tribals of the country. Tribal habitations of the country are generally confined to the hills or to the forest zones and this remoteness normally accounts for the isolation of the tribes from the mainstream population of different regions. The case is not the same with the Bodos. The major chunk of the Bodo population lives in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley and that is why they are designated as 'plains tribe'. In other words, the Bodos share the heartland of Assam with the Assamese. As the Bodos are the autochthons of the region, it can be assumed and the assumption is backed by evidences that they have been living side by side with the mainstream population since the germination of the Assamese nationality. Evidently, in spite of this age-old and continuous association with the Assamese, who form the majority as well as the most advanced section of the population, the Bodos are not assimilated within its fold. The significance of this phenomenon can be understood better if we keep in mind that the Assamese is perhaps the lone major linguistic community of the country whose heartland itself is dotted with innumerable tribal pockets. In these diasporas the Bodos and other minor plains tribes live with their distinct culture, way of life and language depriving thereby the Assamese majority of a unilingual and unicultural geographical territory. Amalendu Guha says that

the Assamese nationality is still halfway in the process of its formation.¹⁸ No doubt the exclusion of the Bodos is one of the symptoms of this incomplete formation.

We cannot find a simple answer to the question as to why the Bodos were not incorporated within the Assamese society through the normal course of history. As we shall see later, historians are unanimous in their assertion that there was a prolonged phase in the early history of the country when mobility from tribe to caste based mainstream society was in operation in a slow but steady and decisive manner. Apparently, the Bodos, because of their uninterrupted proximity to the mainstream society, were potentially suitable for such absorption. But this did not happen, and thus, in a sense, history failed them.

IV

Whether history as a general rule repeats itself or not is a debatable proposition, but in the case of Assam this early failure is not a singular phenomenon; in fact the processes of assimilation and absorption have suffered successive setbacks throughout the course of history. The Bodo phenomenon is essentially linked with this failure and hence, though the assertion of the Bodos is a recent development, their existence as a distinct ethnic group has a history of more than two thousand years. It is almost impossible to trace and reconstruct the history of a people who do not have a written tradition and whose participation in the mainstream history is only marginal. On the other hand, it is well nigh impossible to comprehend the Bodo phenomenon if the tribes' peculiar isolation is not assessed and analyzed in the context and perspective of history.

Reconciliation between this objective deterrent and subjective need is hard to achieve. This study thus opts for the safest course open, i.e., to deal with only that aspect of the Bodo history which can be traced on the basis of evidences, direct or indirect, and at the same time which is capable of throwing some light on the complex process of formation of the Assamese nationality *vis-à-vis* the evolution of the Bodo society. There are constraints and hindrances in attaining this limited objective as well, but we depend on the

assertion of E.H. Carr that 'the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present' and hope to draw from the present circumstances, relevant facts and data which are capable of enlightening us on the darker phase of the past.

The vigorous assertion of the Bodos is a recent development and as such there is no paucity of data for dealing with the present day Bodo problem. Here we are confronted with a different kind of problem which may be termed as a problem of methodology. The problem of the Bodos is a complex and hazardous one and a scientific investigation into it becomes difficult because:

1. The overall milieu, of which the Bodo society is a constituent, itself represents a confusing picture. The different ethnic groups, big and small, with which the Bodo transacts are all living under a perpetual shade of uncertainty and instability. This is true even of the Assamese society supposed to be the ruling dominant majority of the state. So there are innumerable variables emerging now and then and dying out in the same fashion.
2. External factors apart, the Bodo society even within itself has become a complex one. There are different layers of material and psychological factors operating simultaneously within the community. Tribal traits exist at the grassroot level but the core group that speaks on behalf of the community is quite articulate and individualistic. Perception of community interest thus differs. Inter-generational as well as intra-generational gaps are there giving rise to value conflicts.
3. On the other hand, the Assamese society, whose dominance the Bodo resents, is also not a homogenous one. It is divided into segments and each segment approaches the Bodo problem from its own sectarian interest which may not be in conformity with the interest of the core Assamese society and at times such sectarian stance may even endanger the interest of the majority segments of the Assamese society. Such role-conflicts and role-adjustments of very temporary nature make identification and classification of friends and foes-difficult.
4. On the whole, the socio-political situation of Assam does not manifest a 'unity' and discordant or incompatible role-

expectations always add tension to a scenario that is already fragmented.

It is apparent that available frameworks with their rigid formulations are not capable of getting at the bottom of this complex reality. Not that the situation is unique. Social scientists are always confronted with this problem while dealing with Indian society. Bernard S. Cohn is forthright when he says:

The comments I have made on the problem of conceptualization of Indian society, which derive from the categories of foreign observers and administrators, point not just to the need for new source materials but for new ways of handling the source materials ... Social science is not a unitary methodology nor it is easily packagable. Social science can sensitize the historian to new problem, free him somewhat from a narrative framework in the writing of history. It can also equip him with tools of analysis. But in order to rise above a simplistic obsession with one technique or another, or one school or another of analysis, he must to some extent experience through direct participation in research the limits as well as advantages of his chosen aspect of social science ... The social scientists have thus far been hampered by their assumption that the course of change in the world would follow western experience and have not dealt with change as a phenomenon which takes place through time.¹⁹

F.G. Bailey, while dealing with social situation of rural Orissa, finds the situation more confusing and ultimately decides to break the barrier of broad disciplines of social sciences. His monograph concludes with the following:

The chief parts of this book appear to be integrated with one another in a far from satisfactory way. The first resembles social anthropology, the second looks like political sciences, and the third part might have been written by a somewhat hasty historian with sociological leanings.²⁰

Notwithstanding this humble admission, the success Bailey achieved in the treatment of his subject is spectacular. However, what is important for us is that Bailey justifies his failure to stick to a rigid framework because "Orissa is not a unity". What is true to rural Orissa is more true to Assamese as we have already seen. So, a particular framework with stereotype hypothesis and formulation may not be helpful in dealing with the subject we are concerned with here. We think it preferable under the circumstances to keep an open mind so that rigidity of the framework does not stand in the way of appreciation of the reality.

NOTES

1. C.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, Part II, pp. 1-17, Reprint, New Delhi, 1967.
2. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana Kriti*, Calcutta, 1950, p. 28, "But at the present moment, except where some islands of Bodo speech still remain, the Kirata Bodos have merged into the Bengali and Assamese speaking masses, Hindu as well as Musalman, in the area".
3. Rev. Sydney Endle, *The Kacharis*, Reprint, New Delhi, 1975, p. 5.
4. Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, p. 27
5. R.N. Mosehary, an ideologue of the Bodo-Kacharis, suggests in 1983 the use of the term 'Bodo' to mean the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley and thereby retention of the generic term 'Bodo' with its old earlier denotation. See 'The Boros: Their Origin, Migration and Settlement in Assam' by R.N. Mosahary in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Fourth Session, 1983, published from Shillong, 1984. However, it is apparent that his suggestion, backed by some sound arguments, was not accepted by the Bodo Kachari leadership.
6. Rev. Endle, *op.cit.*, p. 3.
7. Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-27
8. See C.C. Sanyal, *The Meches and the Totos of North Bengal*, North Bengal University, Siliguri, 1973, p. 2, Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XIX, 1908, p. 224.
9. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 229.
10. Introduction of S. Endle's monograph *The Kacharis* by J.D. Anderson.
11. K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamrupa*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 14.
12. The accuracy of this figure is being contested by different Bodo organizations.
13. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 21.
14. Most of the newspapers of the Brahmaputra Valley foresaw such destiny of the plain tribals of Assam in the fifties, also see *Assam Assembly Proceedings*, 1948, pp. 518-82.
15. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in its memorandum submitted to the State's Reorganization Commission in 1955 put forward this argument.
16. The memorandum submitted to the President of Indian by the Plain Tribals' Council of Assam, dated Kokarajhar, May 20, 1967.
17. Homen Borgohain, Bahiragata Samsya, *Weekly Nagarik* (Assamese), July 5, 1973.
18. *Proceedings of North East Indian History Association*, 1989, p. 7.
19. Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 197-98.
20. F. G. Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, Delhi, 1968, p. 221.

CHAPTER 1

What Happened in the Early History of Assam

In the epics (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) we find the mention of the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha and it is generally accepted by scholars that the Western Assam alongwith some portion of North Bengal was the core zone of this kingdom. In classical Sanskrit literature both Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa occur as alternative names of the region.¹ The Kiratas are mentioned as the major component of the population of Pragjyotisha in these texts. In the Sabhaparvan of the Mahabharata, there is a description of the Kirata army that formed the retinue of Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha. In the same parvan the Kiratas are mentioned as very rich having abundant gold and silver and gems which they obtained from the mountains. They are also described as experts in making cloth of various kinds. In the Kiskindhya-kanda of the Ramayana the Kiratas are described as pleasant to look upon, shining like gold and also as fearless as a tiger. The *Kalikapurana* and the *Yoginitantra* are two later texts supposed to be composed in Assam. It is believed that these two texts retain some genuine tradition of the dim distant past. In both the texts, the Kiratas are described as the original inhabitants of Kamrupa.²

Who were these Kiratas? Suniti Kumar Chatterjee identifies them:

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 descendents still are), the cotton and woolen fabrics they

made being very much in demand among the more civilized Hindus of the plains.

The ancient tradition naming particularly the Mongoloid inhabitants of the Eastern frontiers as Kiratas is found down to late medieval times. Thus in the Rajamala chronicle of the Tripura Kings (a verse chronicle in Bengali going back to the 16th Century), the Kirata affinities of the local dynasty, otherwise believed to be of Indo-Aryan (Kshatriya) origin, are set forth elaborately ... We may be permitted to reconstruct the picture of the Kirata or Early Mongoloid movements on the soil of Indian right down to the beginning of the Christian era. They entered the country probably through Assam, and their advent in the east might have been as old as that of the Aryan migration in the west, at some period before 1000 B.C. ³

Thus we can safely assume that the people known as the Kiratas in ancient India are the common ancestors of the Bodos and other allied tribes of eastern and north-eastern India.

The historicity of Bhagadatta is still a matter of conjecture. But it is certain that the period during which the text of the epics was finalized, the Kiratas or the Indo-Mongoloids of eastern India had already formed an important constituent of the population of the region. In classical writings they are described more or less objectively and it is apparent that they were not despised or disdained as such. Actually the *Mahabharata* makes a difference between the civilized and not so civilized Kiratas. As a combatant soldier, the Kirata is praised in all ancient sources. In the domain of economy, also they played a significant role as producer of marketable cloth and collector of precious gems. These traits obviously felicitated their participation in the proto-politics of the region, but unfortunately, mythological allusions apart, we do not have any recorded evidence to assess their role in the early process of state-formation in this region.

On the ruins of the ancient Pragjyotisha, the Kingdom of Kamrupa emerged. It is an enigma that no segment of the autochthon Kiratas are found to be involved in the emergence and organization of the kingdom. At least there is no direct historical evidence to show it. The transformation of the mythical Pragjyotisha to historical Kamrupa appears to have effected a vanishing trick by which the Kiratas, a powerful component of the earlier polity (or protopolity), were

reduced to oblivion. For appreciating the full significance of the marginalization of the Kiratas, it is necessary to have a glimpse of the process of tribal absorption that had been in operation in ancient India and to compare the situation of Assam during the same period with what may be termed as the pan-Indian scenario of the time.

The rationale and mechanism during the early period of Indian history for bringing the tribals within the Hindu fold is elaborately discussed by D.D. Kosambi.⁴ He shows that the pastoral economy of the Aryans and primitive agricultural economy of the pre-Aryans were subjected to a qualitative change when iron plough was introduced to being about an agricultural revolution. This transformation of immense magnitude had originated in north India and gradually spread over to the south and the east. More or less a uniform policy was pursued by different royal houses of the country for the diffusion of the technique and economy of plough-based agriculture. It appears that the Brahmin as a class was eager to act as pioneers to travel to far-off regions to reap the benefit of *Bhumichhidra Naya* or other similar modes of land grant. The term *Bhumichhidra* ordinarily meant waste land left out as uncultivable. In the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the theory of *Bhumichhidra* is explained as a system of allowing a tract of waste land to an individual or a group who would reclaim and cultivate the land and enjoy the produce without paying any revenue to the state.⁵ Thus this system or similar other modes of land grants were envisaged not only for conferring patronage on the Brahmins but there was also an important economic motive behind these religious gestures. The donee as recipient of waste land was required to act as an agent to bring these tracts under regular cultivation.

The royal houses were interested in pursuing the policy because it had the potential of increasing the gross production thereby helping significantly to the growth of wealth and prosperity of their kingdoms. Particularly, since the days of the Guptas, the leasing out of vast fallow areas to the Brahmins became a customary royal practice, and it dominated Indian scene for more than one thousand year, with some regional variations and marginal modifications. The economy of land grants automatically produced its social corollary. The Brahmins, in

general, were not cultivators themselves, and often it was also beyond their individual capacity to plough the vast expanse of land which they received. In most cases, they utilized the services of the indigenous people living in the vicinity of the donated land and generally these people happened to be tribes whose basic occupation was either hunting or primitive agriculture. The Brahmin pioneers, while bringing the tribal recruits within the fold of plough-based economy, also acted as zealous missionaries of Brahmanical Hinduism. The tribes once employed as peasant labour, were gradually initiated to Hindu religious practices and ultimately they were absorbed in the Hindu society as lower castes. Thus the introduction of plough cultivation and conversion to Brahmanical Hinduism went side by side providing for the pioneer Brahmins not only field labourers but also a lower stratum in social ladder which was essential for smooth functioning of Brahminical social system. This process is termed by Kosambi as 'feudalism from below' which is somewhat different from the classical feudalism of the West. The difference is, of course, one of form, not of content. Because, at the initial state these agricultural units served as the primary support base of the monarchy and in course of time, these wealthy estates were incorporated in regular revenue system and intermediaries inevitably cropped up between the monarch and primary units. In other words, these land grants played a major role initiating a process of feudalization of remote areas detribalizing the population in the process.

Kosambi's formulation of 'feudalism from below' was contested by some scholars.⁶ But there is a broad agreement as to his basic findings. For example, R.S. Sharma, while differing on some minor points concedes:

The Brahmana immigrants to the east, west and southwest of their original home in mid-India, which was considered to have set the norms for the whole of the country, had to deal with people who were at different levels of culture. Some of them were semi-Brahmanised, others were completely tribals... The penetration of the Brahmanas into the tribal-belts added enormously to the number of Sudras. Since the tribal people were given a low social rank, some spiritual compensation was necessary... But the agrarian expansion in the early middle age under the aegis of the Brahmana was accomplished through the efforts of the local people who were recruited as Sudras.⁷

Another observation of Sharma is also relevant:

The land charters do insist in many cases that only such land should be granted to Brahmins and others as are uncultivated. They consider suitable for grant such areas as has not been brought under cultivation and so on, although frequently cultivated areas were also granted. Thus great agricultural expansion is indicated by epigraphic evidence in Gupta and post-Gupta times from fifth century onwards.⁸

It may be mentioned that when Nirmal Kumar Bose speaks of 'Hindu mode of social assimilation'⁹ or Nihar Ranjan Ray formulated the theory of 'tribe-Jati continuum'¹⁰, they do not differ much with the basic contention of Kosambi.

Thus, it can be assumed that royal houses of mainland India pursued a deliberate policy of leasing out wasteland to Brahmins which in the long run contributed significantly to the process of detribalization of the country. The mechanism had been in operation even during the Mauryas, but it assumed the status of a general policy since the Guptas and continued to be effective for a prolonged period of more than a thousand years. Needless to mention that the linguistics homogeneity, cultural uniformity and social cohesion that form the basis for the emergence of different regional identities of the country of the present day owe much to this early process of detribalization.

In the light of this pan-Indian scenario, we can now venture to examine the situation of Kamrupa during the same period. The first specific mention of Kamrupa as a kingdom occurs in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta. From other epigraphic evidences we learn that the first historical dynasty of Kamrupa was known as the Bhauma-Naraka dynasty and its founder monarch was Pushyavarman.¹¹ Bhaskarvarman, the renowned ally of Harshavardhana, is the last king of this dynasty. The Bhauma-Naraka dynasty, it is believed, started as feudatory of the Guptas and with the decline of the Guptas they perhaps attained independent status. This dynasty was succeeded by the Salasthambha dynasty. Harshadeva, later king of the line, is claimed to have conquered Gauda, Udra, Kalinga and Kosala. Kamrupa was then passed on to the Palas of Assam (not to be confused with the Palas of Bengal). The last king of the Pala line

was overthrown by Vaidyadeva, a general of Kumarpala of Bengal. Vaidyadeva's rule came to an end in the middle of the twelfth century. Then a spell of chaos and confusion followed that continued till the early thirteenth century when the Ahoms established themselves in eastern Assam to lay the foundation of the Ahom Kingdom.

Thus, altogether three dynasties, the Bhuma-Naraka, the Salasthambha and the Pala, ruled the Brahmaputra Valley in succession for about eight hundred years from the fourth century A.D. to twelfth century A.D. Forty-two inscriptions of this period have been discovered so far and most of these are land grants. From the texts of these inscriptions an outline of the socio-political condition of the Kamrupa kingdom can be drawn. It appears that all these dynasties were devoted Hindus or thoroughly Hinduised. Inscriptions, composed in classical Sanskrit, frequently refer to mythical allusions and Pauranic analogies. The kings and officials are described as great patrons of the Brahmins and lavish grants of land to Brahmins are recorded. So, apparently, the situation of Kamrupa was no different from that of other kingdoms of the same period and outwardly the Kamrupa kings were following the same land policy that was being followed by their counterparts of other regions. On the face of it the stage appears to be all set for incorporation of the Bodos and other allied tribes within the mainstream society in conformity with what R.S. Sharma suggests as 'the norm set for the whole of the country.'¹² But a scrutiny of the epigraphs reveals that in spite of superficial marks of similarities the royal land charters of Kamrupa differ significantly from that of the other kingdoms of the country. In form, language and style they follow scrupulously the model used elsewhere but in content and spirit they represent an attitude totally different from the established norm prevalent in the country.

An examination of forty-two inscriptions issued by the Kamrupa rulers shows that only two of the grants were in accordance with the *Bhumichhidra Nyaya*. These are the Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskaravarmana and Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva. It needs to be stressed that though issued by Kamrupa Kings these two land grants do not represent the general trend and characteristics of Kamrupa land grants. The Nidhanpur grant, though issued by a Kamrupa monarch, was issued from Karnasuvarna of Gauda and the donated

land was situated in Sylhet, which did not belong to Kamrupa proper.¹³ And the donor of the second grant, Vaidyadeva, was not an indigenous Kamrupa king, but was only a general of the Palas of Bengal.

In the rest of the cases, the evidence of the land grants present quite a contrary picture. Nayanjyot Lahiri makes a close scrutiny of the Kamrupa epigraphs and says:

The basic point is that the donated land was in settled village areas where agriculture had long been practiced and where the present cultivators were obviously supposed to give the donee what they were supposed to give the king. In inscriptions of this period in the Brahmaputra Valley grants were not in waste lands which were colonized by the Brahmins but in the Valley proper where all the general land was already settled and contributing revenue to the state.¹⁴

It is evident that though the rulers of Kamrupa imitated rulers of the other regions of the country in patronizing the Brahmins, similarity was superficial. They were insensible to the economic and other motives that worked behind such patronage. It seems that expansion of agriculture did not form a part of the state policy of Kamrupa kingdom. Whatever agricultural expansion took place, in all probability, it was accomplished by private enterprises and to a limited extent, and remained confined to the best arable land. Any special efforts and endeavors to involve the tribals of the locality in plough cultivation, thus were not a compulsion for such limited and selective pursuits and that was not done.

And if the tribes were excluded from agriculture, their exclusion from other affairs of the state becomes a corollary. It is thus no wonder that besides one doubtful reference, not a single tribal group or individual finds any place in the epigraphs of the Kamrupa kingdom. There is a popular notion that one or more Kamrupa dynasties might be of tribal origin. This notion is very strong with regard to the Salasthambha dynasty for the reason that in Hayanthal inscription of Harjjaravarmana, this dynasty is mentioned as a Mleccha dynasty.¹⁵ But whatever might be their origin, there is nothing to show that any of these dynasties had ever shown any concern for the tribals, not to speak of pursuing a policy for their incorporation in the society or polity. Banikanta Kakati identifies a number of place names of the

inscriptions having tribal association.¹⁶ So tribal hamlets were there but the state policy preferred to ignore them. For demarcating the boundaries of donated land, names of the individual landholders of the neighbouring plots are frequently mentioned, but none of them is a tribal individual. Names of Hindu castes are there, but no tribal community is mentioned, not even indirectly. It is also to be noted that forest regions or Atavi-anchalas are referred to quite frequently in a number of epigraphs of the same period but in Kamrupa epigraphs the term is missing.¹⁷ When forests and other wasteland were left outside the scheme of colonization, it is only natural that agricultural activities would be confined within a terrain that was most easily accessible. Actually that is the finding of Lahiri:

Most of inhabited and cultivated areas in Kamrupa between the fifth and the thirteenth centuries lay within the valley of the Brahmaputra river or near the various other rivers which are such an integral part of the Assam valley... The most tangible expression of the spatial limits of the villages and settlements in the riverine plains of the valley is to be found in the description of land.¹⁸

When all riverside land was being allotted to the beneficiaries of the royal grants, then where did the tribal people live? Amalendu Guha says:

The Bodo-Kacharis of today are mostly found on submontane tracts and low hills of north-east India. During the medieval times also this distribution pattern of population was not much different. The Bodo-Kacharis preferred to remain at a safe distance from the periodically inundated areas near the Brahmaputra and kept close to hillstream.¹⁹

Though it is a fact that since the medieval period, the Bodo-Kacharis have been living at a distance from the rivers of the plains and developed a life-style in conformity with their habitation, it isn't wholly true to say that they preferred to live in submontane regions. Rather whenever they got a chance they migrated to riverine plains.²⁰ They are called 'the plain-tribals' for this reason. Guha's contention in this respect can be contested on three grounds. First, if the land on the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries was so unsafe then the favoured class of donees would not have been given settlement there by their patrons. Secondly, as Guha²¹ and Endle²² observe, the Bodos were one of the earliest people of the region to

use the technique of artificial irrigation. Thus it is evident that the Bodos had always been aware of the importance of water source even for their own variety of shifting cultivation. Thirdly, as already discussed, Kakati identifies a number of place-names of the epigraphs as of tribal origin. It is thus more probable that the Bodos were actually in possession of the riverine tracts of the plains from which they had to withdraw subsequently only because their land was encroached upon by the new settlers on the strength of the royal charters. They might have learnt the art of irrigation under the pressure of the changed circumstances following their ouster from the riverine tracts. In fact Guha himself is also not altogether unaware of this possibility:

The Guwahati Grant, particularly, contains many non-Sanskritic place-names, obviously of tribal origin. One cannot but conclude therefore that relevant land grant was carved out of some common tribal lands. It is in this manner that proprietary estates were created in favour of Brahmin recipients.²³

The donees of the royal grants were mostly Brahmins and they themselves were not cultivators of the soil. On the other hand, the indigenous tribes were excluded from the new technique of cultivation that these Brahmins were introducing. Inevitably there would be a shortage of labour and this problem was bound to assume the form of a perpetual handicap for agricultural expansion. It is perhaps one of the major reasons for confining donations in settled villages where the question of deployment of labour force for reclamation was not involved. Again, as Guha observes, some grants mention donation of land along with some individuals who were perhaps already attached to the plot with a semi-serf status though institutional serfdom never operated in Kamrupa.²⁴ Such exceptional practices manifest the eagerness of the donors for providing the donees with farmlands in a region where labour was really scarce.

Epigraphic evidences suggest that another means was adopted to overcome the problems of farm labour. In the epigraphs we find mention of the Kaivartas both as boat-cum-fisherman as well as peasants.²⁵ In all probability their immigration from neighbouring North Bengal was officially encouraged to fill in the vacuum in the functional sector. The Kaivartas by that time had already become a dominant community in Bengal and they posed a real threat to the later Palas

of Bengal. Amongst the non-Brahmin caste-names the Kaivartas were the most numerous in the Kamrupa epigraphs. That they also had enough political clout in Kamrupa is evident from the fact that according to one epigraph when a dispute broke out between the Kaivartas and some officials over the right of a river passage, the verdict ultimately went in favour of the Kaivartas.²⁶ Even today, the Kaivartas (Halik) are numerically formidable amongst the Assamese peasantry.²⁷

In Assam, the Kalitas are traditionally believed to be the earliest peasantry of Assam, but epigraphs are silent about them. Scholars are inclined to attach some credence to the tradition. According to Dalton the Kalitas were the earliest Aryan colonizers of Assam.²⁸ Guha also says, 'they appear to have always been associated with plough cultivation, so far as knowledge goes'.²⁹ Besides the Kaivartas, some other peasants are also mentioned in the inscriptions but they are not identified with regard to their castes. Since the tradition firmly associates the Kalitas with the introduction of plough cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley, it may be assumed that these non-specific immigrant peasants of the grants constituted the original nucleus from which the Kalita caste subsequently emerged. It is to be noted that the western Assam districts of Kamrupa and Goalpara, which had formed the core region of the ancient Kamrupa kingdom, is the region where the Kalitas are still concentrated.

Besides peasants, functional and occupational groups like Kumbhakarars, Rathikas, Hadia, Sekyakaras etc. are there in the epigraphs but evidence are too meagre to draw a comprehensive picture of the Kamrupa society of the period. It is evident that Brahmins occupied the top position in the social ladder and the peasants were at the bottom. Amongst the peasants also there might have been some subdivisions. Artisans and occupational classes were likely to have enjoyed a marginally higher status though there is no evidence to prove this. The status of the Hadi of these epigraphs is difficult to ascertain because it might mean outcastes like the Hadi of Bengal or can also mean a potter. The village gentry, amongst whom the Karana-Kayastha was the most prominent, possibly formed the basic stratum of the ruling class along with the Brahmins of different

varieties. There is no mention of either the Kshatriyas or Vaisyas in these epigraphs and even the term Sudra is mentioned only once, that too in a general context. For our purpose the most significant fact is that the glimpse of the society that we get from the charters nowhere manifests any tribal layer in the caste structure and also there is nothing in these documents from which even their existence as a component of the society can be postulated. Individual names even of the lowest strata do reveal their alien origin, not to speak of the higher ones. This ethnic reality, in fact, influenced even the style and orientation of the composition of the inscriptions in a strange manner. Precisely there is a deliberate attempt to avoid local fervour. So, mountains are mentioned, but they are all Kailasa and Malaya, none of Assam. Amongst animals, even camel finds a place but not rhino, the most famous of Assam animals.

No doubt it was an enclave society that the epigraphs present. And such a society can hardly generate through its own efforts enough material wealth to make the state self-sustaining. The valley of eastern Assam, rendered fertile by the upstream of the Brahmaputra, could have formed the normal expansion range of the Kamrupa monarchs as the region was ideally suitable for productive colonization. But the task was not undertaken because it was a tribal inhabited region.³⁰ Instead, the Kamrupa monarchs always went for expansion in the west or the south-west North Bengal (Pundravardhana-Gauda) or South West Bengal (Vanga-Samtata) had always been their targets and inscriptions bear testimony to the innumerable clashes that took place between the Kamrupa rulers and their neighbours. These encounters seldom proved to be of any permanent gain to Kamrupa Kingdom its core region being always confined within Western Assam. Still, the Kamrupa rulers had the economic compulsion for seeking expansion in the west as they had abandoned the easier course of eastward expansion. The reason for opting for this difficult alternative can be explained in the light of the fact that the western neighbourhood of Kamrupa had long been under the influence of plough-based agriculture.

The political priority thus created had its reflections on the social and cultural attitude of the dynasties as well. Brahmins were brought

from Sravasti and Varendra³¹ and donation was made to Nalanda and pilgrimage was made to Benaras.³² Inscriptions were composed in classical Sanskrit, analogies and metaphors were borrowed from epics, puranas and classical texts and rituals were performed strictly in conformity with scriptural regulations. A superficial look into the inscriptions is thus bound to give the impression that it was a fully developed Hinduized society, but we have seen and later history has proved that society was created artificially by the state power which imposed it on a population that could not interact with it. The society, with no viable infrastructure to depend on, had always been hanging on a precarious balance maintained by a pull from the above.

As already said, in ancient India federalization of the polity and economy went hand in hand with detribalization of the indigenous population. Not that such symbiotic process worked everywhere with equal degree of success, but most of the monarchical states showed an awareness of these objectives. We have seen that in ancient Kamrupa detribalization was beyond the purview of the state-policy and as a result the process of feudalization had an unsure start. This initial setback had some adverse effects on the future course of the history of Assam. First, the caste-based Hindu society and the indigenous tribes remained secluded from one another and as a result the society became somewhat insular. Secondly, a large number of tribal pockets survived even within the heartland of the kingdom and the tribal speech of Tibeto-Burman origin retained its vigorous existence there. This hindered the process of formation of a unilingual society in the Brahmaputra Valley. Thirdly, the exclusion of the tribes from plough-based agriculture put a check on the emergence of an indigenous peasantry. That created a perpetual shortage of farm-labour making expansion of agriculture and reclamation of wasteland almost an impossible task. As a result the economy of the region suffered and this stunted growth of economy failed to create an infrastructure for a composite social system.

The policy of the Kamrupa monarchies *vis-a-vis* the indigenous tribes of the kingdom is an enigma. At the present state of our knowledge, it is not possible to identify the precise reason or reasons for which the Kamrupa kings were not only indifferent towards the

major section of their down subjects but also pursued a policy that was overtly harmful to the general interest of the state. Some explanations essentially tentative, can be attempted here just to facilitate further investigation into the problems.

First, the Brahmaputra Valley, in the early historic period was not known by any ethnonym.³³ Neither Kamrupa nor Pragiyotisha has any ethnic association. In contrast, even in neighbouring Bengal, we find different regions were known as Gauda, Vanga, Sushma etc. all these are ethnonyms. When a tribe and a region become synonymous, it pre-supposes the existence of some kind of a political or proto-political organization of the people who inhabit the region. And if a strong political authority establishes itself on such a society either from within or from outside, inclusion. Incorporation of already – organized indigenous population within the state structure becomes a necessity. In the case of scattered tribes inhabiting isolated hamlets without any form of organized social institution, such incorporation is neither easy nor very necessary for the state power. Since the Brahmaputra Valley was not known by an ethnonym, it is possible that the tribes there were still at a primitive state of development and the newly organized state power found it beyond its capacity to bring them within fold of the new socio-political set up.

Secondly, though we find the ancient society of Kamrupa as Hinduized to a considerable extent, from orthodox Hindu social point of view, the formation was still incomplete. As already mentioned, we do not find any Kshatriya or Vaisya layer in this society. It is possible that in the absence of these two essential strata, the socio-economic motivation of contemporary Hinduism perhaps was not operative in ancient Kamrupa.

Here a question crops up. In the neighbouring Bengal also the Hindu society of the ancient period was devoid of any Kshatriya or Vaisya element but social situation during the same period and after was more homogenous and cohesive. It needs to be pointed out that Bengal could get over from the impediments involved mainly because of the Pala rule of more than four hundred years. The Palas of Bengal were Buddhist and they followed a policy of catholicity that did not antagonize the Brahmins, but kept them subordinated to the basic thrust of the state policy which drew inspiration primarily from the

Buddhist liberalism. It is thus in fitness of things that the Bengali nationality assumed a tangible form at the end of the Pala period.

NOTES

1. For details of territorial identity of Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa Kingdom, see Bani Kanta Kakoti, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Gauhati, 1967, pp. 1-9.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
3. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, Calcutta, 1951, pp. 21-22.
4. D.D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, Chapters V, VII, IX and X.
5. U.N. Ghosal, *Hindu Revenue System*, Calcutta, 1929, p. 224.
6. Irfan Habib, 'Landed Property in Pre-British India', *Indian Historical Probings*, ed. R.S. Sharma, New Delhi, 1974, p. 278.
7. R.S. Sharma, 'Matrilineal Millieu of Tantricism', *Indian Historical Probings*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 179.
8. R.S. Sharma, 'Keynote address', *Historical Archaeology in India*, Proceedings of Calcutta University Seminar, ed. Amita Roy, Calcutta, 1988, p. 7.
9. N.K. Bose, 'The Method of Tribal Absorption', *Science and Culture*, Vol. 7, pp. 188-94.
10. Nihar Ranjan Ray, 'Introductory Address', *The Tribal Situation in India*, ed. K. Suresh Singh, Shimla, 1990, p. 23.
11. Nidhanpur Copper Plate of Bhaskarvarman, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XII.
12. Sharma, *op.cit.*
13. There had been a lot of controversy as to the location of the donated land mentioned in the Nidhanpur Plates. However, in 1961 the Paschimbhag Copper Plate of King Srichandra of Eastern Bengal was discovered and in this inscription Chandrapura Vaishya' where the donated land of Nidhanpur grant was situated, was mentioned as a subordinate unit of Srihattamandala (modern Sylhet of Bangladesh) and this specific mention brings and end to the controversy (see K. Gupta, *Copper Plates of Sylhet*, Vol. I, Sylhet, 1967, pp. 118-152).
14. Nayanjyot Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam*, Delhi, 1991, p. 101.
15. K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamrupa*, Gauhati, 1933, p. 107.
16. Bani Kanta Kakati, 'Place and Personal names in early land grants of Assam' in *A Cultural History of Assam*, B.K. Barua, Nowgong, pp. 202-3.
17. Samanta Lokanatha of East Bengal donated land in Atavi anchala (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, pp. 301-315). Marondantha, his successor, donated forest land in Sylhet (Gupta, *op.cit.*, pp. 177-78).
18. Lahiri, *op.cit.*, p. 89.
19. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 67.

20. See P.C. Choudhury, *History and Civilization of the people of Assam*, Gauhati, 1959, Map No. I showing the Bodo-inhabited areas of Assam.
21. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
22. Endle, *op. cit.* pp. 112-13.
23. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
25. Lahiri, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
26. M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Gauhati, 1977, Plate No. 7.
27. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
28. Quoted in Guha, *Ibid.*, p. 17
29. Guha, *Ibid.*, 18.
30. In the thirteenth century A.D., the Ahoms entered Assam through the eastern frontier and they introduced plough cultivation in the region converting it into a granary (Guha, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-77).
31. Lahiri, *op.cit.*, p. 115.
32. Kamauli Copper Plate of Vaidyadeva was discovered in Benaras and two clay seals of Bhaskaravarman was discovered at Nalanda.
33. Amalendu Guha, 'Ethnic Processes in India with a special reference to Assam', *Proceedings of India History Association*, Tenth session, 1989, p. 7.

CHAPTER 2

Caught Between the State and the Church

With the disintegration of the ancient Kamrupa kingdom, a new political situation developed in the Brahmaputra Valley. There was no longer any supreme authority to rule the entire region. Taking advantage of this vacuum, a number of small kingdoms came into existence, some of which were too short-lived to deserve and mention. However, since the fourteenth century a more clear picture emerged. The tribal Chutiyas established a kingdom in the easternmost tract of Assam comprising more or less the present Lakhimpur district where they retained their position till the early sixteenth century. In the south-east Assam the Dimasa Kacharis, the nearest kinsmen of the Bodos, carved out a kingdom within which some parts of the Naga hills, Nagaon district and North Cachar-Karbi-Anglong were incorporated. On the west of these two tribal kingdoms, in the fertile tracts of both sides of the Brahmaputra river, a number of petty chiefs known as the Bara Bhuyans became powerful enough to divide the region between themselves. The western part of the erstwhile Kamrupa kingdom was ruled by a few dynasties we do not know much about; only it is known that the centre of the political authority was then shifted from Kamrupa to further west in Kamta of Kochbehar (now in West Bengal) and the last ruler of the Kamta kingdom was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498. However, on the ruins of the Kamta kingdom, by the end of the fifteenth century, Viswa Singh founded the Koch kingdom and his son Naranarayana raised it to the status of an imperial power in the early sixteenth century. However, the most significant historical development of this period was the advent of the Ahoms, a branch of the Shan tribe of Thailand who first conquered Sibsagar district and a part of the Lakhimpur district during the fourteenth century and gradually absorbed the Chutiya

kingdom and the principalities under the Bara Bhuyans and pushed the Dimasas further south. Finally they succeeded in consolidating under their rule the entire Brahmaputra Valley, barring occasional setbacks in the western part and retained that hold for more than six hundred years.

Socially and economically the emerging kingdoms differed from one another. The two tribal kingdoms, kingdoms of the Dimasa and the Chutiya, were rich in forest products and the financial needs of the royal houses were met normally from this single source. Since their administrative system was simple depending mostly on tribal allegiance, the demand of the royal exchequer was modestly meagre. The tribal subjects of these kingdoms carried on with food gathering and primitive type of shifting cultivation (*jhum*) and there was no initiative on the part of the state to bring them under the plough based economy. Both the houses were Hinduized at a later date but the impact of this conversion on the state policy was marginal. On the other hand, the situation of the Kochbehar kingdom was different. In a sense, it was also a tribal state since its founder King Viswa Singh was of the Bodo origin. He set out an agenda of feudalization of the kingdom which was accomplished to a great extent by his son Naranarayana. Two factors were responsible for this pragmatism in the state policy of this tribal monarchy. First, the Kochbehar kingdom incorporated within it the most developed portion of the erstwhile Kamrupa kingdom where a large number of Brahmins and other Hindu castes had already been settled. An administrative set up based on tribal notions would not have been effective there. Secondly, the neighbouring Sultanate of Bengal, subsequently replaced by the Mughal Subedars, was a constant threat to the kingdom and to combat it, a need for increased revenue was always felt for retention of an army on a semi-permanent basis. Only an economy based on plough-based agriculture could provide the monarchy with a steady flow of revenue that would serve such purpose.

The Bara Bhuyans came from altogether a different background. The early Bhuyans were perhaps the land holders or revenue officials under the earlier monarchies of Kamrupa. Most of them were the migrants from Gour (north west Bengal) or further west who came at an early date though subsequently some of the later emigrants from

the west also attained the Bhuyan status. They were high caste Hindus, mostly Kayasthas, though a few Brahmin Bhuyans were also there. They took fullest advantage of the vacuum created by the absence of any central authority and carved out for themselves small principalities in the eastern and central regions of the erstwhile kingdom. They always tried to expand their sphere of influence at the cost of their counterparts but in the hour of crisis, they often displayed an unusual ability to make a common front. Again, when attacked by any formidable enemy, they normally preferred to lie low and avoid direct confrontation, though at the same time, they looked for the very first opportunity for reasserting themselves. It is these petty chiefs who actually initiated the process of feudalization of the eastern and central Assam along with introduction of plough cultivation in this hitherto ignored region. Their situation was not as resourceful as to transform the socio-economic condition of the Brahmaputra Valley but their pioneering role in this respect is to be recognized. The famous Vaishnava reformer, Shankaradeva, who was of Bhuyan origin, had a landed estate which was maintained by thirty pairs of bullocks and one hundred and twenty cows. Thus Guha says, 'Their (Bhuyan) appearance, at least as early as the thirteenth fourteenth centuries, also suggest that some degree of feudalisation of land had taken place in certain areas during the period of weak central governments preceding the full-fledged formation of the Ahom-state'.¹

In this process it was likely that some of the Bodos and other tribes were involved and subsequently incorporated within the Hindu society. It may be presumed that during this period the nucleus of the Koch caste – a caste name that denotes the fully Hinduized Bodos and their kingsmen – was formed. But it would be far-fetched to assume that the Bara Bhuyans in any way had envisaged any deliberate policy for absorbing those tribes. Rather we have a strange and tragic example to the contrary in Kathagurucharita, a biography of Shankaradeva. According to this account:

The few Kachari families, who lived in the outskirts of the Bhuyan lands, often let their cattle roam into the latter's crop and lay it in waste. The Bhuyans invited the Kacharis to a feast as a subterfuge and killed a number of their people.²

Such an attitude can hardly be regarded as conducive to bringing

about a meaningful social transformation. However, their pioneering role in introducing a comparatively advanced socio-economic set up in the eastern Assam should be recognized.

The advent of the Ahoms in the early thirteenth century, signaled a process of change which practically determined the fate of the Brahmaputra Valley for the subsequent six centuries. The Ahoms were different from all other segments of the population of the Valley. Though of the same Mongloid stock, they differed from the earlier Indo Mongoloids as they did never come in contact with the Hinduism of any variety. They had their own religion with an ancient origin myth, a pantheon of deities with distinct functions and elaborate ritual practices. They were a branch of the Shan tribe and before migrating to Assam they were settled in Thailand and Upper Burma. On entering Assam, they at first settled in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts for first three centuries where they colonized the region and consolidated their position. Then, as Guha observes:

Numbering a few thousands or may be, a few hundreds at the beginning, they rapidly swelled in number through their assimilation of the local population as well as fast natural growth. They also received fresh groups of Shan migrants from Upper Burma from time to time. Within three centuries, they built a strong state and by 1682 held almost the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley up to the left bank of the Manas under their rule till the early nineteenth century.³

Assimilation of the local people hinted by Guha refers to the incorporation of the entire Barahi tribe within the Ahom fold along with some segments of the Chutiya and the Moran people who had the opportunity of coming in closer contacts with the Shans.⁴ This process of assimilation was virtually abandoned in the sixteenth century when the Ahom royal house adopted Hinduism.

The Ahoms brought with them a superior knowledge of plough-based wet rice cultivation in the midst of a mixed tribal population who were practising an inferior kind of shifting cultivation with hoe and broadcast sowing. In fact the Ahoms traditionally believed that their heavenly forefathers were sent by the gods to descend on earth to cultivate fields that had been lying vacant.⁵ It appears that in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley the Ahoms took up this assignment in right earnest. They reclaimed the vast tracts of fallow but arable land, and constructed huge dams and embankments to

guard them against flood. The huge manpower required for the purpose was provided by the peculiar system of administrative set-up that they Ahoms built up. We will discuss the system later.

II

What was the condition of the Bodos when all these developments were taking place around them? And what kind of interaction was there between these kingdoms and the Bodos? We will leave aside the two tribal states of the Chutiyas and the Dimasa Kacharis as the former was annexed by the Ahoms in the sixteenth century and the latter, though it retained its precarious existence—at times as vassal of the Ahoms but always until 1832 under the threat of their growing power—remained throughout these centuries strictly committed to tribal kind of political organization, social set-up and economic outlook. It is a fact that the royal house and some of its nearest kinds came under the Hindu influence as early as the sixteenth century, but the conversion was only notional; and its impact only marginal.⁶ Moreover, under the perpetual pressure of the Ahoms the frontier of the Dimasa state ultimately came to be confined to the extreme limits of the southern Assam and thereby its direct contact with the Bodo inhabited region was severed. So, mainly it is the Koch and the Ahom kingdoms we are concerned with.

As already stated, Viswa Singh, the founder of the Koch kingdom, was himself of the Bodo origin in the sense that he belonged to the Koch caste—a caste composed of the Hinduized Bodos and other tribes. This caste perhaps came into existence at the fag end of the Kamrupa Kingdom for we do not find any mention of it in the inscriptions up to the twelfth century. The installation of the Khen monarchy, itself believed to be of Hinduized tribal origin, in the fifteenth century in the northern Bengal and emergence of the Bhuyans in the eastern region of erstwhile Kamrupa Kingdom perhaps added numerical strength to this caste as a sequel to the partial feudalization of the region. However, this process of Hinduization of the tribes received real boost later starting from the ascendancy of Naranarayana on the Koch throne (1540 A.D.). Viswa Singh sent his sons Naranarayana and Sukladhwoja (commonly called Chilarai)

to Benaras for study—an unusual gesture on the part of a semi-tribal petty chief. It appears that both the sons did justice to their father's aspiration. In Benaras, they acquired genuine taste for art, literature, culture and at the same time, these refinements did not blur their eyes as to the political agenda ahead of them. When Naranarayana ascended the throne, he made Chilarai his general who in no time defeated all of their eastern neighbours including the Ahoms whose capital the Kochs ransacked in 1562. It is a different story that this empire could not be consolidated and Chilarai suffered from setbacks while dealing with the Sultan of Bengal.

For our purpose Naranarayan's policy at home is more important. The King backed by his knowledge of north Indian process of feudalization cum Hinduization initiated a persuasive policy of de-tribalization of his kingdom. This apparent socio-religious project was not unlinked with the temporal needs of the kingdom. The policy of expansion pursued by Naranarayana had its financial implications and only an economy based on plough-based agriculture could replenish the royal coffer for meeting this enhanced expenditure. So, the King wanted maximum utilization of the manpower available for reclaiming fallow land and bringing them under plough-cultivation. Hinduization or in other words, conversion of the Bodos to Koch status was the mechanism the King adopted for attaining this objective because, as Guha points out:

To become a Koch meant more than mere religious conversion. It meant the adoption of the plough in place of the hoe, of the mudplinth dwelling in place of the pile house dwelling, and of cremation of the dead instead of burial. It also meant gradual abandonment of pig rearing, abstinence from liquor and the adoption of a Sanskrit-based neighbouring language in preference to their own tribal tongue.⁷

Since Naranarayana was guided more by the socio-economic needs of his kingdom than by any religious zeal so common to neophytes, he did not pursue a policy of forcible conversion. He proceeded cautiously taking into consideration the susceptibility of his kinsmen. There are at least two recorded evidences to show that he allowed the tribal converts to retain their own mode of worship even while paying homage to a god of the Hindu pantheon. Banikanta Kakati writes:

About tribal mode of worship there are certain references in the dynastic history of the Koch Kings of Kochbihar. It is narrated that on the eve of his expedition against the Ahoms, king Naranarayana of Kochbihar offered worship to Shiva according to accepted sastric rites. Thereupon there was an insistence by his Kachari soldiers that Shiva should also be worshipped according to their tribal customs. This was allowed and the worship was carried out by the sacrifice of swine, buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks, by the offering of rice and liquor and the dancing of women (deo-dhai).⁸

Later the king thought it necessary to demarcate territories regulating the form of worship to be followed in the temples of his kingdom. So he issued an edict to the effect that in the temple lying on the northern side of the Gohain Kamal Road (running along the north bank of the Brahmaputra from the Koch capital to Narayanpur in the east) Koch, Mech and Kachari people alone could carry on with their tribal mode of worship while those on the south of the road were left to the Brahmin priests.⁹ It is this liberalism backed by a shrewd practical sense that prompted Naranarayana to patronize Shankaradeva, the Vaisnava reformer, though the king himself always remained a devoted Shakta.

The situation of the Ahom kingdom was altogether different. The agricultural revolution that the Ahom rulers undertook to bring about was devoid of any social agenda. For their immediate need a programme of this kind was not necessary also. The Ahoms had their own way of doing things. They, from the very beginning of their rule, started reclaiming land, erecting dykes, leveling hilly tracts etc., for introduction and expansion of wet rice cultivation. But they did so with forced labour recruited from the tribes they had subordinated and ultimately built up a huge work force in the pattern of a national militia. The purpose was to exact maximum labour for outing a surplus and in doing so they did not think it necessary to add any social dimension to the system.

III

The emergence of Shankaradeva, the Vaisnava saint and reformer (1449-1568?), at this juncture added a new dimension to the situation

that deserves to be considered in some details. This reformer, one of the most outstanding religious leaders of the medieval India, had a vision of social reconstruction and this vision incorporated within it the task of absorbing the Bodos and other tribes within the fold of Hinduism and thereby laying the foundation of a cohesive society in the Brahmaputra Valley. According to Guha, in the early sixteenth century the Brahmaputra Valley was passing through a phase of transition that 'needed a supporting ideology that would cut across tribal and early feudal formations then in existence' and neo-Vaisnavism propagated by Shankaradeva was best suited for the purpose of 'detrribalising society in transitions'.¹⁰

However, Shankaradeva and his followers, contemporary as well as of later days, were not given a free hand to propagate their religion; rather the Ahom monarchy pursued a deliberate policy of persecution against the Shankarities almost throughout the entire period of the Ahom rule. On the other hand, Naranarayana, the neighbouring Koch king, in spite of some initial misgivings, patronized the saint till his death. This triangular relationship between Shankaradeva, the Ahom monarchy and the Koch king gives us vital insight into the social outlook and political compulsion that moulded the attitudes of the rival courts of the Ahom and the Koch. It was no accident that the former rejected and the latter welcomed the great preacher.

The Ahoms brought along with them a semi-tribal kind of socio-political structure that worked well during the early period of their domination over the Brahmaputra valley. Eastern Assam, where they first consolidated their position, had been inhabited by tribes who were yet to reach state of state formation and the former faced no difficulty in subduing them and bringing them under their authority. This success made them contented as to the efficacy of their semi-tribal social organization and were not inclined to effect any change in it. Hence an initiative for gradual feudalization of the society, the polity or the economy was beyond their agenda. Moreover, the only politically organized force that the Ahoms encountered during their early days were the Bhuyans. The latter could not forestall the ultimate Ahom expansion but tried to resist them whenever they could. Even after more than two hundred fifty years of the installation of Ahoms in Charaideo as the reigning power, there is a narrative in the Ahom

chronicle that two Bhuyans had the audacity to scoff at 'the Ahom power by saying that they were puffed up with pride and the country actually belonged not to them but to the Bhuyans.'¹¹ There are also reports of subsequent revolts by some Bhuyan chiefs. Some Bhuyans actually extended co-operation to Koch invaders in 1562 A.D. against the Ahoms.¹² So, though most of the Bhuyans were subjugated and made powerless by the Ahoms, they were regarded as a perpetual threat to the Ahom authority. At the same time, by crushing the Bhuyans, the Ahoms halted the process of incipient feudalization that the Bhuyans had initiated.

Shankaradeva was not only a reformer but also a social philosopher. He propagated a religion that had a mechanism for the incorporation of the tribes within the Hindu society. And as a practical reformer he himself actually chalked out a programme for such absorption through some states. But this message of social reconstruction had no appeal to the Ahoms who were quite contented with their semi-tribal type of polity and society. On the other hand, Shankaradeva came from a Bhuyan family and this background made the Ahoms apprehensive of the real intention of the preacher. Growth of a powerful Shankarite group had obvious adverse implications for the Ahoms. Hence the Ahom court took measures to contain Shankaradeva. His son-in-law was executed and Shankaradeva himself was compelled to leave the Ahom territory and opted for a life in exile in Kochbehar. Madhavadeva, the most prominent of the preacher's disciples, was imprisoned along with some of his colleagues. Thus the Ahom monarchy hindered the process that could have been instrumental in bringing about a large-scale de-tribalization of Assam.

Naranarayana, the Koch king, on the other hand, received Shankaradeva with due honour and patronized him. That this cordial relation between the king and the saint was one of expediency, not of conviction, is evident from the fact that Naranarayana himself did not embrace Shankarite Vaisnavism—he retained his Shakta allegiance. His objective was both political and social. The King's relation with the neighbouring Ahom state had always been antagonistic and he was aware of the potential advantage he would have in any future combat with the Ahoms if Shankaradeva, the most prominent of the Bhuyan progenies of his time was patronized

by him. Secondly, as already stated, Naranarayana had been a student in Benaras and thereby was conversant with the basic tenets of the operation of the Hindu or Brahmanical variety of feudalism. At the same time, he had a vision of making his state economically prosperous and socially cohesive. The bulk of tribals that form his subjects were fierce fighters but during the peacetime they could not contribute to the state exchequer through their rudimentary type of agriculture. On the social front, the king encouraged Brahmins and other higher or occupational classes who were called to settle down in his kingdom; but the king was perceptive of a social dichotomy ingrained in such a situation if the bulk of the tribals were not Hinduized. So, initiation of the tribes in plough cultivation along with their Hinduization was an important agenda visualized by the king. Even before the arrival of Shankaradeva in his dominion, the king himself had set off a mechanism of Hinduization by introducing worship of Hindu divinities amongst tribes who were allowed to perform the worship with tribal customs.¹³ There is little wonder that the king found in Shankaradeva a religious leader capable of rendering invaluable services to the cause of social revolution he had been dreaming of. It needs to be mentioned that the king's farsightedness proved correct—the Hinduization process of the Kochbehar district of present West Bengal which remained the core region of his kingdom is almost complete leaving outside its pale only a handful of Bodos known as the Meches.

The scenario of the Ahom state continued to be different. Prosecution, started during the saint's lifetime, continued almost unabated till the end of the Ahom rule. Assamese historians normally feel shy to acknowledge this fact in spite of a huge bulk of unassailable contrary evidences.¹⁴ Always there is an attempt to show that the Ahom monarchy subsequently made amends for its past folly and patronized the neo-Vaisnavite satras and preachers. This subjective approach had its origin in their reluctance to dig up sensitive issues in an already fragmented social milieu. Whereas this apathy is quite understandable, it needs to be asserted that history cannot be wished away and the best way of combating an unpleasant historical phenomenon is to bring it in the open and make an unbiased and objective analysis. The fact is that successive monarchs let loose

horrible persecution on the Vaisnavite monks of Shankarite faith as a matter of policy and sporadic respites that came in between always had a diplomatic overtone behind them. Time to time there were attempts to create internal dissensions and only those satras were patronized that toed the royal line and these satras came to be known as rajgharia satras (followers of the monarchy). Needless to mention that such satras could enjoy royal blessings only at the cost of the basic principles of Shankarite social philosophy. For example Shankaradeva was opposed to idol worship, supremacy of the Brahmins and discrimination amongst the followers. The Ahom state at regular intervals issued directives to the Vaisnavite preachers with the sole objective of taking away all dynamism from the Shankarite creed. So, initiation of Brahmin by non-brahmin was banned, people of lower castes and tribes were forbidden to practise Vaisnavism and in some satras installation of idols were ordered. Only those satras who compromised on the basic principles of the religion were patronised. Others were ruthlessly persecuted in spite of their status and position.¹⁵ As Maheswar Neog observes, "Most of the Mahantas of the land, thus, had to make departures from the original tenets and practices of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva without a murmur for fear of persecution from the king."¹⁶ Thus the variety of Vaisnavism, that received favour from the Ahom court was not the dynamic creed preached by Shankaradeva.

This conflict and contradiction between the state and the Church had some deeper implications than what appeared at the surface level. It goes to the credit of the satras that in spite of sustained hostility from the state, they played a positive role in developing a new socio-economic ethos in some areas and pockets where they exerted influence. In fact the feudal mode of production and economy along with expansion of plough cultivation took place only in the areas around the satras and these areas were more cohesive socially than the areas that came under plough cultivation through the Ahom policy of enforced labour the areas where primitive tribal mode of production was in vogue. Some satras that still adhered to the humanist and liberal message of Shankaradeva also continued with the task of absorbing the tribals within the Vaisnavite fold. In this

respect Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626) played a pivotal role in bringing about some eastern Assam tribes within the fold of Vaisnavism and these neo-Vaisnavites known as Mayamarias ultimately became a powerful community to challenge the political authority of the Ahom state. Some other satras, also in a limited scale, initiated a process of detribalization within their sphere of influence. But this process could not be completed because of the perpetual opposition of the state power.

Vaisnavite satras set forth a process that inevitably created a cleavage in the society as well as in the structure of economy within the Ahom domain. In areas where satras were operating, society came under the hegemony of feudal notions which were comparatively progressive at that period in the context of the Brahmaputra Valley. And that clashed directly with the social notions of the Ahom rulers who were still guided by their semi-tribal outlook. In the field of economy, the satras incorporated the tribals in plough cultivation and introduced a feudal mode of production. That was an advanced method compared to the Ahom mechanism of deploying forced labour not to speak of hoe cultivation of the tribes. So, the satras encashed on their pioneering job and amassed enough wealth to make the Ahom ruling class envious. It is said that king Gadadhar Singh, while on exile, saw the affluence of some satras and on ascending the throne, decided to crush the parallel economy that the satras developed.

It is no wonder under the circumstances that the feudalization of the region initiated by the Shankarites appeared to be a menace to the Ahom ruling class and they undertook regular attacks on the satra institutions. In doing so they hindered and ultimately brought a halt to the detribalization process as well. That left most of the Bodos outside the pale of the Vaisnavite fold and the Ahom rulers were satisfied keeping them at a tribal stage where they had been for ages. At a later phase, the inner compulsion of a monarchical state compelled some Ahom rulers to seek advancement in a feudal direction. But by this time the antagonism with Shankarites had become an integral component of the state policy. So, they were even not in a position to give a fair trial to the potentials of the indigenous dynamic religious creed to serve as a vehicle for effecting such vital

social transition. Instead, they imported Shaktism of Bengal variety, which had already become irrelevant in Bengal itself at that period, for bringing about a feudal transformation of the society and polity. The imported creed had nothing to meet the special needs of the Brahmaputra Valley and this ill-suited imposition became counter-productive. The belated attempt of feudalization on the part of the Ahom state rather created ground for a constant friction between the feudalism from below and the feudalism from above. Open hostilities between the Shakta monarchy and Vaisnavite satras, since then, became a perpetual feature of the state politics and this ultimately paved the way for the ruin of the Ahom state. It is the revolt of the Mayamaria Vaisnavas that became instrumental in bringing about the end of the Ahom monarchy.

The failure of the Ahom monarchy to sponsor a movement for socio-economic integration and cohesion and to steer a state policy directed towards an overall progressive transition had implications of far-reaching consequences. First, feudalism had a stunted growth in the Brahmaputra Valley and that was reflected in the revenue policy of the Ahoms that delinked production from land revenue. The system of Khen practiced by the Ahom made physical labour the unit of royal revenue instead of a share of the agricultural produce. The system inevitably kept agricultural production at the subsistence level and in the long run this lack of surplus production hampered the growth of trade, commerce and monetary economy. Of course, in the context of problem we are concerned with in this study, the Ahom rule left behind more significant legacies. We have seen that the early monarchies of Kamrupa between the seventh and the thirteenth century A.D. did not undertake the task of involving the indigenous tribal within the mainstream society, economy and polity. Six hundred years of the Ahom rule, in spite of potential alternative provided by Shankarite Vaisnavism, also failed to undertake an effective policy of detribalization. Rather the Ahom rulers did their best to sabotage the process that the Shankarites tried to initiate and pursue.

As a result, innumerable tribal pockets were retained in the heartland of the Brahmaputra Valley not to speak of the periphery. In these diaspora, the plains' tribals, mostly Bodos, have kept intact

their tribal way of life along with their distinct language and culture. This perpetuates the isolation of the plain tribals from the mainstream Assamese society. On the economic front, the situation paved the way for the exclusion of the plains' tribals from plough-based agriculture. This exclusion again creates a problem of serious dimension since it left vast tracts of arable land fallow and the Assamese upper strata, again for the same reason, were deprived of a steady supply of an indigenous agricultural labour force with whose help they could attempt to reclaim these fallow tracts. It is this vacuum that ultimately opened up the way, starting from the early British period and sponsored by both the British and local landlords, for large scale migration of land-hungry peasants from eastern Bengal whose settlement in the valley along with alleged subsequent and continuous migration has become a major issue of the present day political scenario of Assam.

IV

The Ahoms are of the Mongoloid origin and hence they, as most of other peoples of the same origin, were great keepers of records. In fact the Ahom court had a system of recording all important events in a manuscript form which is called buranji (History). These buranji provide us with a detailed account of the political and social goings on of the state. It is somewhat intriguing that almost nowhere in these buranji do we find any reference to the Bodos. There are references to the Kacharis and also there is a buranji that deals with only the Kacharis (Kachari Buranji) but whenever the term Kachari is used, it is used to mean the Dimasa Kacharis of the southern Assam who are different from the Bodos though related to them. In the early historical period, the two groups separated and since then have been maintaining distinct and separate identities in language, culture and way of life.¹⁷ The Ahoms themselves entered Assam at a semi-tribal stage of their development and they did not have any inhibition in transacting with other tribes. In fact at the early phase of their assertion, they absorbed some of the tribes of eastern Assam like the Barahis, the Chutiyas, the Mishmis and the Mattocks. In the *buranjis* there are numerous passages that contain detailed account of these

interrelations. So, under these circumstances, the omission of the Bodos from the Ahom chronicles is significant. It is not that the Bodos were a negligible and unimportant people in the valley during the period. In the accounts of the Koches they are mentioned as an important component of the population and so also in the Vaisnavite texts.

It is not easy to find a reasonable explanation for this negative attitude of the Ahom chroniclers. However, what is clear from available evidences is that the Ahoms did never recognize the Bodos as one of their allies. Of course the Bodos were not an organized political power hence the Ahom were not required to combat them politically as was the case with the Dimasa kacharis. The *buranjis* are political records and there might not be any major occasion that would have made a reference to the Bodos inevitable in the Ahom records. If this explanation is accepted, then we should look into the other side of the picture. As already mentioned, the Koch Chronicles refer to the Bodos quite frequently. The Koch monarchy itself had a Bodo origin and its most celebrated ruler, Naranarayana, though thoroughly Hinduized, was pragmatic enough to use this Bodo connection. Most of his soldiers were recruited from the Bodos and they were free to perform their rites and rituals which at times were not in conformity with scriptural Hinduism. So, there are reasons to believe that since the Koches and the Ahoms fought each other throughout the period under discussion, the Ahoms regarded Bodos as their natural enemies and did not trust them. Hence, though a considerable member of Bodos lived within the Ahom territory, they were not incorporated within the political set up of the Ahom state.

The association of the Bodos with the Koches, on the other hand, would have been more effective in detribalizing the former if the Koch rulers of subsequent days could toe the line followed by their celebrated predecessor, King Naranarayana. But this did not happen. In fact, to avoid a potential civil war Naranarayana, during his own lifetime divided his kingdom. While the western part of his kingdom (the present district of Kochbehar and also the neighbouring region of some other north Bengal districts) was retained for his progenies, the eastern part (at present included in the state of Assam) was handed over to his nephew, the son of Chilarao or Suklandhwaj. The latter

and his successors were weak rulers and were in no way capable of protecting their sovereignty. Caught in the whirlpool of the Ahom-Mughal struggle, their allegiance dwindled between the Ahoms and the Mughals and at times the internal feuds between the princes of the Koch-Hajo (as the eastern Koch Kingdom came to be known later) made the situation worse. So, whereas the western Koch kingdom that came to be known as Kochbehar retained, in spite of occasional setbacks, its territorial integrity and also remained committed to pursue a state policy conducive to detribalization, the Koch Hajo or the Assam part of the kingdom was always in shambles, so that its rulers could hardly develop a socio-economic vision. So, the Bodos in this region remained where they had been barring some pockets where detribalization took place through the efforts of some enthusiastic Shankarite preachers.

In short, the Bodos of present day Assam remained, in general, outside the political system of the Ahoms, social organization of the formative Assamese mainstream and sphere of economic activities of both throughout the six hundred years of the Ahom rule whether they had been within the Ahom territory or Koch Hajo kingdom. Of course when two peoples live side by side as neighbours, absolute segregation is seldom possible. Here also the Brahmanical Hinduism of the mainstream society carved out a space where they could interact with the Bodos for some specific purpose which unfortunately did not do any good to either of the two. This dimension of the interaction also deserves some attention.

Ramsharan Sharma says on the origin of Tantricism:

“Tantricism ... was the ultimate product of colonisation of the tribal areas through the process of land grants. The confrontation between the Brahmana beneficiaries and the tribal people created social and economic problems which were partly solved through Tantricism. On the one hand the new religion welcomed in its rank women, Shudras and incoming aborigines; on the other it recognized the existing social and feudal hierarchy.¹⁸

Sharma's contention is true in its totality where the pioneer Brahmins along with an imaginative monarchy actually worked in collaboration to bring about a social and economic transition in the areas that they received as land grant. We have seen that in early Kamrupa kingdom, though grants of land were made, neither the monarchy concerned,

nor the recipient Brahmins were ever aware of any socio-economic role that the land grants might have performed. The pan-Indian contemporary practice was followed here mechanically—the pragmatic and mundane concern of the system was missing. In the same way, the contact between the Brahmanism and the tribals in the Brahmaputra valley here had its religious manifestation in the form of Tantricism – but not in the way Sharma visualized. Like the half done feudalism, the Kamrupa variety of Tantricism also had a contrived manifestation. It did not emerge as a mechanism for social reconciliation. In its orientation, only those ingredients of the tribal practices were co-opted which were suitable for providing the enclave Hindu society an opportunity for satisfying its perverse desire and lust in the name of religion.

Bani Kanta Kakati finds two distinct layers in *Kalikapurana*, the treatise that legitimized the Tantricism as practised in Assam, in its depiction of the mother-goddess Kamakhya. In the first, 'Kamakhya has been patterned on the earlier conception of the Mother-Goddess as a primordial deity associated with the cult patronized by Vishnu. The other figures Kamakhya as a virgin and as a spouse of Siva belonging to later period.'¹⁹ As to this second layer, Kakati says:

When the *Kalikapurana* takes up her story again, new world has come into being. She is no longer the primordial mother Goddess whom Naraka was conjoined to worship but an amorous wife living in inseparable companionship with her husband for secret love ... The new motif is sex or Kama (eros) and from the point of view every detail has been re-conceived and represented ... Thus this new account glitters with varied emphasis on sex and sense ... The new emphasis on sex and sense is sought to be derived from the presence of the Yoni and the menstruating goddess installed in the place of the older Mother Goddess (the new orientation as an amorous goddess caught on in popular fancy and the stories about the sex appeal of the goddess began to circulate.²⁰

Kakati also narrates how in this later layer there is a deliberate attempt to select myths and legends and to invent new ones for serving a specific purpose. The *Kalikapurana* 'has given something like a canonical sanction to all kinds of sexual aberrations'.²¹

The *Yogini-Tantra*, a work composed later than the *Kalikapurana*, (supposed to be of the 17th/18th century) takes cue from the latter and complements the *Kalikapurana* to propagate further licentiousness. To the composers of *Yogini Tantra* the deity Kamakhya was not

considered sufficient to suit their purposes and hence a new deity, Tripurabala was imported. One aspect of this deity was that she carried a bow and arrows that stood as the symbol of eternal beauty and sex. She could be worshipped both in the Right-hand (dakshinachara) and Left-hand (vamachera) manners. And:

The left-hand worship often required the worship of an actual living girl. There was also the institution of the virgin worship. No caste distinction was to be observed in selecting a virgin and if in the process of worship the devotee was stricken with amour, he went to heaven. Then in the worship of certain other aspects of the goddess, practices seeking of gross sensuality were enjoined. The devotee was to keep night vigils in the company of dancers, musicians and prostitutes. On the tenth day of the autumnal worship people were enjoined upon to sing lewd songs naming the sex organs in the company of finely dressed virgins and prostitutes.²²

Kakati is right in saying that the *Yogini-Tantra*, through such descriptions, created a 'hot-house atmosphere and ancient Assam was depicted in it as a land where ascetism, celibacy and such other concepts had no meaning and where local religion allowed all kinds of freedom including the unrestricted association and union with women. And *Yogini Tantra* more than once asserts that here the religion is of the Kirata origin.²³

Of course, the Kirata people, or the tribals, had their own reasons of retaining cult-practices that provide occasions for Saturnalia when men and women gather and dance and drink merrily culminating in orgy and sexual freedom. Such festivals had their origin in the primitive belief in sympathetic magic that equated fertility of the field and fertility of women as one and the same quality. So Saturnalia was performed either before the sowing or harvest to help the process of primitive agriculture. At the same time, the tribal societies always found it a hard task to retain the numerical strength of their group since their primitive mode of production was incapable of feeding too many mouths. In such societies, periodical regeneration of sexual urge through festivities was a basic necessity—it keeps the process of procreation in order and ensures retention of the numerical strength of the tribe.

The Bodos and other plain tribes had their saturnalia type of festivals. Also, amongst them women used to enjoy or still enjoy

greater freedom in all affairs compared to their Hindu counterparts. Deodhai or the institution of dancing girls amongst the Bodos involves some magico-religious functions considered essential for their agricultural cycle. Evidently, the Brahmanical society of the Brahmaputra Valley conferred canonical sanction on these tribal rituals during the Ahom period. It was not a case of cultural synthesis as happened in other parts of the country where the Brahmanical Hinduism absorbed bulk of tribals alongwith some of their cultural traits as suggested by Ramsharan Sharma. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the tribes were scrupulously excluded from the society and economy developed by the Brahmanical Hinduism. So the reason for this somewhat singular but well designed effort to incorporate some traits of the Kirata (here the Bodos) religion should be sought elsewhere. In fact, neither liberalism nor catholicity was the motive force that prompted the composition of the *Kalikapurana* or the *Yogini-Tantra*—these treatises were designed to make inroads into the tribal society just for recruiting female participants in Tantric rites taking advantage of the comparative freedom that the women enjoyed in such societies. Describing the prevailing situation in the sixteenth century, Bani Kanta Kakati says:

The land was infested with itinerant teachers of the Vamachara Tantric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and phallus. Amongst religious rites the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbals, night vigils on virgin worship and lewd dances of temple women.²⁴

For retaining this atmosphere of orgy and licentiousness, so-called virgins and temple-dancers had to be recruited and the tribal society of the neighborhood became an easy hunting ground for the purpose. The Kirata religion was given canonical sanction only for this limited purpose—it is a legitimization mechanism that provides the upper strata with a religious camouflage to cover its debauchery underneath. The situation typifies the operation of the Brahmanical Hinduism when it operates in stagnation devoid of any socio-economic motive force.

So, the Bodos were kept at a distance by the Ahoms; the Shankarites had the will but not the freedom to operate amongst

them; and the Brahmanical Hinduism offered them a limited opportunity to participate only in its degeneration. The interaction of the Bodos with their materially advanced neighbours had been subjected to this enigmatic fate till the advent of the British in the nineteenth century.²⁵

NOTES

1. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 42.
2. (a) Maheswar Neog, *Shamkaradeva and his Times*, Gauhati, 1965, p. 65.
(b) Hiren Gohain, *Asamiya Jatiya Jivanat Mahapurusia Parampara*, Guwahati, 1987, p. 12.
3. Guha, *op.cit.*, p. 61
4. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 78
6. Guha surmises (p. 68, *op.cit.*) that the Dimasa Kacharis had practised a superior type of cultivation of rice that laid the basis for their state formation. The surmise appears to be simplistic. In recent years, I travelled extensively in the Dimasa Kachari inhabited areas of the North Cachar Hills District and nowhere found the Dimasas engaged in any kind of advanced agriculture. They still adhere to the *jhum* or shifting cultivation of a primitive kind and there is no evidence to show that they are inclined to add any innovation in that traditional practice. Moreover, the cattle-rearing is a taboo amongst the Dimasa and the keeping of cows captivated in cattle-sheds is resented seriously by them effecting adversely the functioning of a government-owned dairy farm at Kalachand near Haflong. The real basis for Dimasa state formation even before the advent of the Ahoms (early thirteenth century) should be sought elsewhere.
7. Guha, *op.cit.*, p. 19
8. Bani Kanta Kakati, *Mother Goddess Kamkhya*, Gauhati, 1967, p. 21.
9. Neog, *op.cit.*, pp. 80-81.
10. Guha, *op.cit.*, p. 103.
11. Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1958, p. 198.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Kakati, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
14. For example, Maheswar Neog, in his *Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaisnavas* (Calcutta, 1982), writes, '... had not the Ahom Kings extended their patronage to the bhakti cult, Assam would have probably presented history of a different hue altogether.' (p. 30).
Then he furnishes us the following information (a) "Kingly (Pratap Singha, 1603-1641) rage fell particularly upon three satras – Deberpar of

Vamsigopaldeva, Govindapur of Jaya-Mukunda or Mukunda Gosain and Dhuwarol of Jayaharideva ... The King asked him (Mukunda Gosain) to demonstrate miracle if he could, and on his failure, ordered his death. Vamsigopaldeva escaped a similar fate ... and one of his disciples impersonated the saint and died a martyr ... In 1648 the Kuruwabahi sattra was destroyed with orders from King ordered all the four (disciples of Mayamaria Gosain), for a test, to a race on horse-back when swords were placed neck-high on their track." (pp. 30-31)

- (b) '...On the occasion of Shradh ceremony of Gadadharsimha, the fourth Mayamariya Gosain, Nityanadadeva, was killed by King's men under strange circumstances". (p. 31).
- (c) 'At the instigation of the Brahmanas, he (King Jayadhvaja Sinha), persecuted the Mahapurusia sects and killed some of their leading members." (p. 33)
- (d) 'But the Svargadeva (King Udayaditya Sinha) brought his own ruin when he ordered that the twelve Thakurs (non-Brahman Mahantas) should receive ordination from the Vairagi (non-Samkarite Vaisnava)." (p. 34)
- (e) "Gadadhar Sinha passed general order in March-April, 1688 A.D. that unmarried monks alone should reside in satras and that the married clerics must leave the institutions forthwith ... He started persecution of Vaisnavas first by deporting Mahantas of the Kala-sanghati Order with their brothers and sons to Namrupa in A.D. 1692 and killing some of them. Vaikunthanath of Mayamara was one of the twelve Mahantas killed by the king's orders at Namrup...A few young Mahantas fled away and thus escaped death...with the king's personal grudge against some of the leading Gosains...he resolved to break their power for good and all. Under his orders many of them were sent to Namrupa and put to death. Auniati Gosain, Keshab Deb, escaped this fate by hiding in a Chutiya village but Ram Bapu, the Dakhinpat Gosain, was captured and deprived of his eyes and nose...Nor did their bhakats, or disciples, fare any better. Those belonging to the better castes...were left alone, but those of low castes...were hunted down, robbed of their property and forced to eat the flesh of swine, cows and fowls. Many of them were 'deported to out-of-the-way places and made to work as coolies on the roads; others were mutilated; others were put to death and few were offered up as sacrifices to idols." (pp. 36-37)
- (f) '...he (Rudra Sinha) under Brahmanical influence issued a decree in 1702 A.D. by which the property of non-Brahman Mahantas having Brahman disciples ...was challenged. Other non-Brahman Mahantas bowed to the orders of the kind not to have Brahman followers, but five of them contested the challenge. They .. were kept in chains in the royal pilkhana with a view to being killed for what was now taken as their audacity. But at some high officer's intervention they were redeemed. Five earthen pitchers marked with lime were tied to their necks, and all of them except Ramananda were displaced from their satras ...In September-October, 1703, some spies reported having seen two Brahmanas in the Mayamaria Satra. The king meted

out punishment to the Mahanta and caned the two Brahmans, whose ears and noses were cut off...The Mahantas of Madhupuriya sect were taken to task for not worshipping idols. They were beaten with canes and driven away with pitchers tied to their necks". (pp. 38-39).

- (g) "She (queen of Shiv Sinha) caused the Mahantas of Mayamara and other satras to come to the place of Durga worship, to bow to the idol and to have their foreheads smeared with vermilion, red sandal paste and the blood of sacrificed animals". (p. 41). Thus Neog's own assumption is negated by data he himself provided.
15. Some other cases of persecution were furnished by S.N. Sharma in his *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati, 1966).
 - a) ... (during the reign of Sukampha) several attempts were made to kill Bar-Yadumani of Bahbari satra suspecting his loyalty to the king. Subsequently, his three sons including Sanatanadeva, the satradhikara of Dining satra, were either killed or tortured at the instance of the then king Nariya Raja.
 16. Neog, *op.cit.*, p. 39
 17. Dr. Rohini Kumar Mohanta, Head of the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University, told me that the Bodo Kachari language and the Dimasa Kachari language significantly differ from one another and though of common origin, the concerned language groups should have been separated from one another for not less than one thousand years for developing such distinct differences.
 18. Ramsharan Sharma, 'Matrilinial Milieu of Tantricism', in *Indian Historical Probings* (Editor R.S. Sharma), New Delhi, 1977, p. 180.
 19. Kakati, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 41-44.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
 25. One should not misconstrue my contention in Chapter I and Chapter II as a propagation of a unilinear theory of progress and development. In no way the author intends to stress that the exposure to and involvement in the plough-based agriculture or incorporation in a caste-based society at its lowest ladder was the ideal course open or only option available to the Bodos for attaining a material condition that would have equipped them with requisite skill and organization to combat, compete or transact with their materially advanced neighbours on equal footings. Rather, the arguments put forward in these two chapters precisely show that the ruling class and its allies in most of other regions of the country either in early historical or in the medieval period deliberately and for its own interest pursued a policy that left some space for interaction with the tribals and this ultimately resulted in absorption or co-option of the tribes in the mainstream society. No one

will perhaps deny that this process helped to a reasonable extent in minimizing the areas of conflicts between different social segments in a given territory. In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam this mechanism was not in operation and the uniqueness of the problems of the plain tribals in Assam had its origin in this failure.

We have the examples of north Bengal and eastern Bengal that testify to the fact stated above. In north Bengal, most of the Bodos had been incorporated in the Hindu society at different phases of history and now they form a caste group called the Koch or Rajbanqsi. They are placed at a lower level of the social hierarchy and listed as scheduled caste. They have their problems of poverty and backwardness, social stigma and economic deprivation, but their identity as a component of the Bengali Hindu society is more or less an accomplished fact, in spite of the recent advocacy by a Naxalite group for mobilizing them to demand a separate state on the basis of their abandoned Bodo-Identity (for the thesis of the movement, see the paper presented by Basanti Raman and Bhaskar Nandy at the seminar on 'From tribe to caste' held between Nov. 8-12, 1994 at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla).

In eastern Bengal, according to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the bulk of the Muslim peasantry is of the Bodo extraction (*Kirata Jone Kriti*, Calcutta, 1951, p. 69). But their tribal past is obliterated completely and though they are perhaps the poorest peasantries of the world, no slogan propagating tribal solidarity would induce them to disown or abandon their present identity.

CHAPTER 3

At the Crossroad

The process of acculturation works in diverse and at times strange ways. There is always, of course, a need for mediation but this mediation may not be a direct or imposed or purposeful intervention. We have seen that none of the dominant social segments could take up the task of introducing plough cultivation amongst the Bodos till the late medieval period. But since late eighteenth century the Bodos started adopting plough cultivation. It is difficult to ascertain where they received the impetus from. The process of adaptation progressed so slowly that we can rule out the possibility of a direct and major intervention of any extraneous force. We can tentatively suggest that the urge for a change in the mode of production developed internally within the Bodo community because of the overall socio-political developments that took place around them since the seventeenth century. These developments can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The emergence of the Koch kingdom and its continuity as an independent or semi-independent state created a class of landholders of the Koch caste. For ethnic proximity they preferred land labourers of the Bodo origin and recruited some Bodos as farm hands. This way the Bodos might have been exposed to the technique of the plough cultivation.
- (2) The western Assam had been under the Mughals for about two centuries and they introduced their own system of land revenue in those areas. Such revenue system entailed production of more surplus.¹ The Choudhuries and other revenue officials obviously had to undertake more intensive agriculture in the region to meet intensive agriculture in the region to meet their revenue obligations and this created a new condition which might have

inspired the Bodos, at least some pioneers among them, to undertake plough.

- (3) Goalpara region where the Bodo population still dominates was a part of the Bangla Suba of the Mughals when the Dewani of Bengal was taken over by the East India Company in 1765. The region, as a part of Bengal, came under the Permanent Settlement introduced by Cornwallis in 1789. Some very big Zamindari estates came into being in the Goalpara district as a sequel to the promulgation of the Permanent Settlement and most of them were owned by Zamindars originating from the Koch aristocracy. They encouraged the Bodo chieftains to be involved in their revenue administration at the lower level.² Such involvements encouraged some leading Bodos to opt for an advanced agricultural system.

Amalendu Guha opines that the Bodos adopted plough through their contacts with more advanced neighbours.³ Without disputing his view, we like to add that such diffusion can take place only when the situation is either congenial or compulsive for such adoption.

However, as already stated, the transition was taking place at a very slow pace. In nineteenth century most of the Bodos were still under influence of shifting cultivation and some of them were also practicing intermediary forms like plough based agriculture with shifting modalities. Amalendu Guha, who makes an intensive investigation into the problem after consulting almost all extant records, comes to the following conclusion⁴:

- (1) The Bodos continued with their shifting hot cultivation as late as the nineteenth century;
- (2) Where they went for the plough cultivation, there too they continued with their semi-nomadic habits and they opted for a settled habitation at a later state;
- (3) It is not possible to say when actually the transition to plough cultivation began amongst them but there is recorded evidence to show that the Bodos were 'going through a process of learning the use of plough till late nineteenth century.'

In spite of all these, it should be agreed that once started, the process

of transition did not suffer any major setback. The pace was slow but it was steady enough to absorb almost the entire Bodo community in the plough cultivation and within another three decades most of them became settled villagers.

The hundred years between the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century is a crucial period that contributed immensely to formation of the Bodo society of the present day. Internally, they opted finally for a new and advanced mode of production that was instrumental in developing a new social situation fraught with far-reaching consequences. At the same time, it is this period when they were exposed to a new kind of administrative set up that differed completely from the system or systems they were so long accustomed to. And alongwith the new system of administration, they had to encounter new economic forces that operated beyond their level of perception and new social ideas that had no immediate relevance to the realities they were confronted with.

The Bodos were hardly in a position either to combat or to take advantage of the developments that were taking place around them. Their social formation was at an incipient stage for directly negotiating a challenge of this kind. But they did not withdraw like some other forest tribes of the country; rather they held their ground with tenacious resolution though there was no outward manifestation of a stubborn resistance. In this war of position, they drew strength from what apparently was their weakness—the transitory stage of their situation. This point deserves a little elaboration.

The fact is that the British policy during the period did not aim at launching a direct assault either on their way of life or on their economic pursuits. There have been attempts to formulate a simplistic theory that the British imperialism robbed them of their land and the tea industry of Assam developed at the cost of the tribals.⁵ Nothing can be farther from the truth. Tea-grants were given in hilly areas covered with dense jungles where no indigenous people, tribal or non-tribal, could dare to take up any kind of economic enterprise. The threat to their way of life as well as existence came from other directions.

First, the tribal areas were regarded potential fields for conversion

to Christianity and so, since late eighteenth century the missionaries started their proselytizing activities. A number of Missions were at work in different regions: in Goalpara the Santal Mission of the Lutheran Church, in Darrang and Kamrup districts the American Baptist Mission and in Mahakalguri area, the Scottish Mission. But none of them could make much headway – conversion rate remained at a low level.

Both Francis-Pereira⁶ and Rev. Endle⁷ describe the indigenous religion of the Bodos as animistic. The statement is at best partially true. Some of their deities like Buri, Marai and others are conceived in anthropomorphic form and 'Bathau', the great god of the Bodos, was already on his way to become 'Bathau-Sib-rai' and to be identified with Shiva. Moreover, the life cycle of the Bodos was essentially linked with these gods and goddesses and to bind them together in an overall scheme, the Bodos also developed a theology of their own, maybe of a crude variety. Their belief in the efficacy of their rituals was so strong that as we have already seen, they, as soldiers of the mighty kind Naranarayana, compelled him to arrange for the worship of Shiva in a tribal fashion. Also they later earned from the king the right to run the temples situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in their own tribal way. So, the Bodo religion was not as unorganized as Francis-Pereira and Endle thought it to be. Also, their long association with the Hindu society, however marginal that might be, helped them in orienting and articulating to a certain extent their religious ideas and developing some kind of self-consciousness about their own religion. This internal defence mechanism and inner strength of the indigenous religion did not allow the missionaries to achieve a spectacular success. Their success lies elsewhere which will be taken up later.

Secondly, the Bodos felt the impact of the new regime in the sphere of economy indirectly. The only economic activity they pursued was agriculture, whether shifting or settled, with hoe or with plough and their survival completely depended on this. The new land revenue policy introduced by the British had a direct bearing on agriculture. In the district of Goalpara, the Permanent Settlement was introduced which meant the payment of the assessed land revenue to the

authorities by the zamindar on a particular date of the year without fail. This entailed cash payment by the ryot of his share of land rent to the zamindar within the stipulated date. That was not an easy task for a people just passing through a transitory phase from hoe cultivation to plough cultivation. In other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley the Permanent Settlement was not introduced since these areas came under the British only after 1826 when Cornwallis' scheme of land revenue had already been put under cold storage. But the revenue rates to be paid in cash was doubled in 1868 in the districts of Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.⁸ The rate was too high not only for the tribal peasants but also for the traditional peasantry of the valley since the cash economy itself was still at a formative state there.⁹

The situation was so distressing for the peasants that in some regions they surrendered their land.¹⁰ But the Bodos, though newcomers in the practice of plough cultivation, held the fort stubbornly. They were hardy people and when they took up plough cultivation, they turned into efficient cultivators. And their transitory situation helped them to face the challenge. They had their tribal solidarity intact and where necessary, they mobilized the entire manpower available in the hamlets to prepare land, sow seeds and reap the harvest. Endle gives an elaborate description of such group activities which he saw for himself during the harvest times.¹¹ Also, they had two other advantages over their counterparts of the Hindu society. Their womenfolk were as sturdy and capable as their manfolk and there was no inhibition attached to the deployment of women in these activities. So they were in a position to mobilize more manpower than their Hindu peasant neighbours. Secondly, even marginally well-to-do landholders of the Ahom state were in the habit of engaging pykes or serfs or slaves in cultivation and the British rule put an end to these institutions. So the production of the farms owned by these types of landholders suffered a setback. The Bodos did not have any of those practices and were not affected by their abolition. With newly developed interest in the plough cultivation, the Bodos actually succeeded in maintaining their level of production to an extent that allowed them to survive even paying cash revenue to the

zamindars or the revenue authorities as the case might be.

The tea industry also opened up a new avenue for the Bodos and other plains tribals. Initially recruitment were made from amongst them and as long as the rate of wage was reasonable, the Bodos availed of the new opportunity. But soon there was an attempt by the tea industry to reduce their wages and the Bodo labour force tried to resist the move.¹² However, when the tea gardens started importing cheap labour from outside the province through an indentured recruitment system, the rate of wages fell and the Bodos lost their bargaining power in the labour market. They gradually withdrew from the tea-industry and went back to agriculture. That the Bodos could not be compelled to work at a lower wage proves that they had other economic options to bank upon and they were not destitutes.

To the Bodos, the advent of the British rule was neither a bliss nor curse. They were ill-equipped to combat the challenges the new rule entailed and to reap benefit from the new avenues that it opened up. Literacy, not to speak of liberal education, was yet to have a beginning amongst them. They had no knowledge of monetary economy. And they were not articulated enough to comprehend the functioning of the new administrative set up. But the fact remains that the Bodos were not carried over by the situation the inbuilt defence mechanism of the tribal society coupled with their steady pursuit for adaptation of the plough cultivation provided them with enough strength not to give up the ground.

II

We have already seen that Christian missionaries could not make much headway amongst the Bodos. Christians at present form about six per cent of the total Bodo population of Assam. But this quantitative position should not blind us to the qualitative impact that the spread of Christianity made on the Bodos.

The missionary efforts to convert the Bodos came in stages.¹³ The American Baptist Mission established its centre at Guwahati in 1843 with Rev. Barker as its head. His centre ran a school boarding house and some Bodo boys were accommodated. The first Bodo convert was a boy of 15 named Aphints, an inmate of this boarding house.

However, this conversion took place at Guwahati as the American Baptist Mission was yet to establish a base in the Bodo-inhabited areas.

It was the Anglican Church that made the first move to preach the gospel in the interiors of the Darrang district where the Bodos formed a sizeable segment of the population. Rev. C.H. Hasselmeyer, who came there as a tea-garden chaplain, started working amongst the neighboring Bodos as early as in the 1860s. It was on his advice that Rev. Sydney Endle was sent there in 1864 to assist him. In 1896 when Rev. Hasselmeyer died, Rev. Endle became the chief of the Anglican Church in the Darrang region. Through his efforts a Bodo church was established at Bengbari, the first of its kind in the region. Rev. Endle learnt Bodo language and investigated into the Bodo culture thoroughly. He wrote a handbook of the Bodo language and translated some passages of the New Testament in the Bodo language. This monograph on the Bodo culture, way of life and society, entitled *The Kacharis*, published in 1911, is still regarded as a standard book on the subject.

In the district of Goalpara, the conversion work was taken over by the Santhal Mission of Northern Churches (Lutheran). Initially the prime objective of the Mission was to look after the Santhal Christians who emigrated from Bihar to Goalpara to take advantage of a land settlement plan of the government, and also the Santhal tea garden labourers. Soon the Mission extended its work amongst the Bodos as well. The Bodo to be baptized by them in 1886 was Teklo Basumatari and soon some others followed suit. This Mission had the credit of ordaining the first Bodo Pastor, Ratio Basumatari, which took place in 1914. But the Mission gradually discovered that it was difficult to work amongst both the Santhals and the Bodo and hence some independent arrangement for the Bodos became necessary. So the Mission Home Board sent a Danish couple to work exclusively amongst the Bodos. In 1927 they established a mission station at Gaurang near Kokrajhar. Gradually the Mission extended its activities in Kamrup and Darrang districts and two other Mission stations were established at Bangaigaon and Parkijuli in 1938 and 1951 respectively.

American Baptist Mission that had been working in the Garo hills

also started working amongst the Bodos of the neighbouring Goalpara district. In the areas around Sidli, it succeeded in converting a number of Bodo families. The American Baptist Mission is no longer operating in this region and its followers are now administered by a local body known as the Goalpara Baptist Church Union.

The Roman Catholic Church made a late entry amongst the Bodos. Since the Bodo areas were primarily served by different Protestant Missions, the Roman Catholic Mission did not want to enter into any competition and confrontation. However, an internal feud amongst the Lutherans gave it a change to work among the Bodos. Some rebel Lutherans approached the Roman Catholic Mission at Guwahati to come to their village and Father Seudori immediately came and converted four Lutheran families to Catholic faith. During mid-thirties the Catholics swelled in number in Goalpara district through the efforts of a local convert at the cost of both Lutherans and Baptists. Father Merengo, the Catholic rector of Guwahati, took much pains to learn the Bodo language and ultimately became an expert. He composed the first prayer book in the Bodo language. Subsequently it was revised and edited by another catholic priest, Father Zenon. The Roman Catholic Church, though it came late, made quite a headway amongst the Bodos and at present two Mission Stations, one at Tangla and the other at Udalguri, are functioning as busy centres of its activities.

The Missionary activities in almost all parts of the country from the very beginning were accompanied by some other complementary services that left behind lasting impact on important domains of secular pursuits. In the Bodo region also the impact was not different. The missionaries always showed utmost concern for the development of the indigenous language of the people amongst whom they worked. Also they laboured hard for spread of literacy amongst them. In the Bodo areas the missionaries took up both the tasks in right earnest. Emphasising their role in the field of education, Mushahary writes:

The schools had been instrumental in the work of evangelisation of the Bodos. In early days, primary schools were set up where education was imparted not only to the children of the converts, but also to those of the non-converts in their down mother tongue. The textbooks were written for the beginners in the Boro

language written in modified Roman scripts. Education was, therefore, a great force in the method of evangelisation of the Bodos and every Mission Station was invariably marked by the presence of a school of primary level at least to start with.¹⁴

So, the Christian missionaries played an important role in introducing a system of formal education amongst the Bodos.

The Bodos, in the nineteenth century, were a preliterate people; and their speech did not have a script. They had a fairly developed oral tradition that was considered sufficient for meeting the needs of their simple way of life. So, they did not feel it necessary to borrow any of the scripts used in the neighbouring areas for rendering their thoughts into a written form. When Rev. Endle brought out his Bodo handbook, it became the first book where the Bodo language was rendered in a written form. And his translation of the pieces of the New Testament gave birth to the Bodo literature. The prayer book written by Father Merengo was also a significant addition to this literature. And the Bodo primers used in the missionary schools laid the foundation for the use of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction. In all these exercises, the missionaries used the Roman script modified suitably to accommodate the Bodo phoneme system. So, in all fairness, it can be said that the Bodo language, as a medium of literary expression, was born in the hands of the missionaries. It is not altogether unusual that a major section of the Bodos feel an emotional attachment with the Roman script since it was associated with the birth of the Bodo literature.

III

Dalton in 1872, writes on the religion of the Bodos:

The majority call themselves 'Soronia', that is purified Kacharis, to indicate that they have adopted the custom of the Hindus and abstain from forbidden food. The Soronias keep fowls, but not pigs, and will not eat beef; they are cleanly in their habits. They listen to the occasional exhortations of their 'Guru', and pay him his dues, and that is all that is required of them.¹⁵

This observation correctly depicts the lifestyle of the 'Soronias' but it is not a fact that the majority of the Bodos or Kacharis were Sarania. In the Census of 1881, we find 2,65,418 Kacharis against a handful

of Saranias numbering only 4,718. Perhaps Dalton met or interviewed mostly the Bodos of the upper strata who were Saranias. Also, if asked by an outsider, any Bodo of that period would have claimed himself to be a Sarania because this identity would enhance his social standing in the eyes of an outsider. The fact is that since the days of Shankaradeva, the only upward social mobility available to a Bodo was to enlist himself as a Sarania, in other words, to be initiated by a Shankarite mohanta or preacher who would become his 'guru'. It is the first stage of the Hinduization which had the advantage of opening up the avenue for becoming a Koch in due course which was the culmination of the process. As a sequel to the diffusion of the plough cultivation, there emerged a group of well-to-do farmers amongst the Bodos, mostly from the village chief class, who also became landholders of a modest standing. This class sought social recognition from their Hindu neighbours and there was a craze amongst them to become a Sarania. The Shankarite Vaisnavism by that time had lost most of its liberalism and its preachers found in them easy preys to fulfill their rapacity. Ananda Narayan Dev Goswami was one of the most prominent Vaisnava preachers of Goalpara district and it is said that he initiated Jagat Chandra Musbahary, a moneyed Bodo landholder who was a mouzadar and Rai-Sahib, only on receipt of Rs. 6000.¹⁶

Of course there was resentment against such greedy exactions but there was no open revolt mainly due to two reasons. First, the wealthy Bodos did not have any other option open for ensuring them a social status in the Hindu eye; and secondly, they did not have a leader who could articulate their resentment and show them an alternative. It is as if out of the compulsion of situation a leader came out who had answers to both these problems. His name was Kalicharan Mech, who later came to be known as Kalicharan Brahma. The movement he led is known as the Brahma Movement.

Kalicharan Brahma was born in 1860 perhaps in the month of April.¹⁷ His birth place was Kazigaon village of Dhubri sub-division of Goalpara district. His father was associated with the revenue collection of the wealthy Parbatjowar estate of Goalpara either as a dafadar or an garadan. The zimindari was owned by a family that

originally belonged to the Koch aristocracy and enjoyed a higher social status because of its feudal background.¹⁸ The family was one of those absentee landlords who preferred to live in Calcutta.

Financially, Kalicharan was quite well off and he had the background of a formal education. This, coupled with his father's association with the zamindari administration, gave him a prominent position amongst the Bodos. Dhubri and Calcutta came to be linked by railway in 1902 and Kalicharan took the advantage of this added mobility to visit Calcutta frequently. At the Calcutta residence of the zamindar of Parbotjoar he came in contact with a Hindu Sanyasi, Srimat Paramhansa Sibnarayan Swami, who was the Guru of the zamindar and used to stay at his Calcutta residence quite often. Sibnarayan Swami made a tremendous impact on Kalicharan. He had the opportunity of going through one of the books, *Sarnitya Kriya*, written by Swamijum even before meeting him and he was impressed by the sermons contained in it. Regular meeting with Swamiji reinforced his earlier conviction. In the meantime, in a typical traditional fashion, Kalicharan entered into a debate at Banyaguri, Dhubri, with Ananta Narayan Dev Goswami, the most prominent Vaisnavite preacher of the region, when the latter came to a disciple's house to collect his annual toll. In this debate Kalicharan showed his spectacular capability for arguing a theological case with reasoning, precision and authority. What he attacked most was the rapacity and greed that was legitimized by the Vaisnavite preachers who dealt with the Saranias. This debate also gave Kalicharan enough self-confidence to come out of the Sarania fold and to combat it with simpler tenets propagated by Sibnarayan Swami. So, he took formal initiation from Swamiji in Calcutta in 1907. Thenceforth he made it his life's mission to propagate the religious message of Sibnarayan Swami amongst the Bodos and this religion came to be known as Brahma Dharma. One should be careful not to be confused it with the Brahma Dharma of Bengal initiated by Raja Rammohun Roy.

Unfortunately we do not know much about the life and works of Sibnarayan Swami. He was believed to be a Paschima, which literally means a man from the west but in Bengal and Assam, in local vocabulary, Paschim may mean anything between Uttar Pradesh to

Gujarat. That he was a man of magnetic personality is evident from the way he infused in Kalicharan the urge and zeal to stand against the exacting practices of the Sarania system and to propagate his tenets in a terrain that was difficult. His liberalism is also manifested in his sermons. M.C. Saikia gives the following account of the basic tenets of the Brahma Dharma that was initiated by Swamiji and propagated by Kalichran:

The basic tenets of the Brahmanism are contained in the phrase Chandrama Surya Narayana Jyoti which means that jyoti (light) emanating from the sun is capable of dispelling all darkness and may lead us to Brahma. The pronouncement of the words Om Sat Guru is a necessary adjunct in the realization of the self before formal adoration of the Light. The practice of Home-Yajna is a symbolic adoration of the light. There is an invocatory prayer in praise of this Light which is followed by the Gayatri mantram which is chanted at the time of making oblations in the burning yajna Kunda.¹⁹

It is apparent that the Brahma Dharma draws its basic inspiration from the Vedic and Brahmanical scriptures but some modifications are made that makes it simpler. The cult does not allow either idolatry or sacrifices. A strict follower of the Brahma Dharma is required to abstain from liquor, meat and fish and rearing of pigs and fowls is also prohibited. Home Yajna is the only ritual that is prescribed and no other ritual is considered necessary. The Mahalaya (in autumn) and Maghi Purnima (in winter) are two auspicious occasions which are to be observed with Home Yajna.

It was not an easy task to propagate the new religion amongst the Bodos who were already a confused lot because of the ongoing tussle between Christianity, Sarania Vaisnavism and the indigenous Bathau religion. However, the social standing of Kalicharan helped him to overcome early oppositions. Also the fact that Sibnarayan Swami was the Guru of the zamindar of the estate within which Kalicharan initiated his movement gave him an added advantage. The personality and capability of Kalicharan did the rest. Since his audience was mostly Saranias or potential Saranias, Kalicharan made a frontal attack on the factices adopted by the Gurus for extortion. The everyday experience of Saranias was there to give credence to Kalicharan's campaign.

It is not that Kalicharan received an overwhelming response

instantly; the basic inhibitions of a tribal society stood in the way. Also, the theological message of the Brahma Dharma was too sophisticated to have a mass appeal. But Kalicharan succeeded gradually to enlist involvement of that segment of the Bodo society who were economically advanced and who would have become Sarnias if Kalicharan had not been there with his new religion. Even he succeeded in converting some people who had already become Sarania. Most important amongst them was Charan Mandal, who was one of the prominent disciples of Ananta Narayan Dev Goswami and in whose house Kalicharan had the debate mentioned earlier. Some other disciples of Kalicharan established Ashrams to propagate Brahma Dharma. One of them, Bijoy Krishna Brahma wrote a treatise entitled *Kriya Darpan* in Bengali to popularize the religion.²⁰

His other disciples like Kalicharan Brahma II, Nepal Brahma, Baidyanath Brahma and others were also resourceful and capable men and through their concerted effort the Brahma Dharma started making inroads into the Bodo society, particularly amongst the Saranias. But success in such endeavour also means confrontation; the protagonists of the Sarania faith under the leadership of Raisahib Jagat Chandra Muchahari started making all out efforts to prevent the spread of the Brahma religion. When the members of the Brahma religion petitioned to the Deputy Commissioner to allow them to sue the title 'Brahma' instead of their original surname, the Rai Sahib formally opposed the move, though unsuccessfully. The Christian converts also opposed the Brahma preachers in their areas.

Kalicharan braved all these oppositions not through direct confrontation but through other effective moves. He had a social outlook and vision which his antagonists lacked. He did not confine himself to preaching only but as a corollary initiated a social movement encompassing different spheres of Bodo life. Prime importance was given to the cause of education. The Brahmas opened schools, boarding houses and even a school for girls where vocational training was also imparted. Kalicharan himself met the Chief Commissioner of Assam to demand more schools for the Bodo areas, in which education could be imparted in English.

Along with education, the Brahmas also undertook the task of

introducing progressive reforms in the society. Kalicharan desired to initiate a social movement based on mass participation. He, at regular intervals, started convening mass meetings known as the Bodo Mahasammelan. The process resulted in the formation of a regular organization with an executive committee. To supplement the efforts of this main body, students and women were organized through Chhatra Sammilan and Mahila Sammilan. Through these organizations, Kalicharan and his disciples tried to create public opinion for abolition of brewing and drinking rice-beer, reduction of the bridge price and restriction of rituals that entailed wasteful expenditure. These programmes were addressed not only to the Brahmas but to the Bodo community as a whole. Kalicharan had an economic vision as well. He sponsored the co-operative movement, and encouraged his fellowmen to participate actively in trade and commerce. In another meeting with the Chief Commissioner, he pleaded for raising a Bodo Regiment so that the sturdy youths of the community could get employment. He wanted the Bodos to adapt modern techniques of agriculture. The Bodo-Mahasammilan, in its session at Bhaoraguri, decided to institute a periodical to popularize the ideas of reforms.

So, the movement led by Kalicharan gradually assumed a multi-dimensional form—it started as a religious movement, but over the years socio-economic agenda of vital importance was added to it. That ensured for Kalicharan a position amongst the Bodos that went far beyond his primary role as a religious preacher. And, in the twenties of this century when, as a sequel to the non-cooperation movement and its fall outs, political awareness of diverse varieties in conformity to needs and aspirations of the different segments of the nation, tended to reach the bottom level of the masses, Kalicharan did not feel shy of adding one or two political items to his socio-economic agenda. In 1929 when the Simon Commission visited Assam, Kalicharan submitted a memorandum demanding reservation of seats in the legislative assembly for the Bodos. This representation by Kalicharan marked the beginning of the Bodo politics in real sense of the term.

If one asks, 'What was the impact of the British rule on the Bodo people one will find it difficult to find a suitable answer. But perhaps

Kalicharan and his Brahma Dharma represent the cumulative effect of the British rule on a backward tribe that had been pushed to the sidelines of history for centuries. By any standard, Kalicharan was a remarkable personality. True, he was no Rammohan, but neither was the Bodo society the Bengal society of the nineteenth century. Rather if we take into account the adverse social realities that confronted Kalicharan, we can identify some basic similarities between the two. The Bodo reformer, too, ushered in a renaissance in the Bodo society—a renaissance of a modest scale conditioned by the limitations of the surroundings. His multipronged activities tried to encompass all shades of the Bodo life and his priorities and programmes had a striking similarity with that of Rammohan which of course may not be accidental since Kalicharan always retained a close contact with Calcutta. His zeal for women's education, development of the vernacular language, reforms aimed at social upliftment and the rejuvenation of the economic life of his people—all point to his liberal and enlightened frame of mind.

His objective in propagating the Brahma religion was to carve out a terrain for the Bodos that would provide them an upward social mobility keeping their self respect intact and without being subjected to torturous exactions that had been practiced by the Guru of the Saranias. In this effort his success was remarkable. In fact, since then in the craze to become a Sarania showed a marked decline and, in the words of Saikia, 'Most of the educated Bodo-Kacharis avail of the earliest opportunity to come over to the new religious order.'²¹ The Bodo elite class was born out of the movement led by Kalicharan and for the next few decades whoever amongst the Bodos came into limelight for any kind of attainment or achievement was almost invariably a Brahma. To use the emergence of this elite class is significant because it is this class that gave the incipient Bodo identity an articulated and viable form that gradually culminated into the Bodo assertion of the present day.

VI

The advent of the British rule created new problems for the mainstream Assamese society as well, though the Assamese were

materially far advanced than their Bodo neighbours. As already discussed, the Assamese nationality had a fragile foundation because of inimitable historical reasons and so, when the British took control over the province, they were quite unprepared to negotiate properly the trends and forces emerging out of the new situation. This bewilderment set before them the wrong priorities. The small middle class that had emerged amongst the Assamese did not make any sincere attempt to enhance the unfinished task of the nation-making process of the valley and so the Bodos were never considered at this state to be a potential component of the Assamese society. There is no evidence to show that any of the Assamese organization or periodicals that raised their voices in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century had ever showed any concern for the Bodos. As a result the Sarania cult and its Shankarite Gurus remained the only link between the Assamese and the Bodos. Bereft of the earlier liberalism of the Shankarite Vaisnavism, the Gurus utilized that traditional privilege to convert it into an instrument of exploitation. Thus the only sphere that was available for any transaction between the two communities turned counter-productive. The Assamese took no notice of the degeneration of the Sarania process and could not gauge the significance of the Brahma movement in the context of the nationality formation of the Assamese. In fact, Kalicharan showed a path that would ensure an upward mobility of the Bodos without any reference to the Assamese society. So far the incorporation into the Assamese society as a Sarania was essentially linked with the social recognition of a Bodo individual. The Brahma religion created an autonomous space for the Bodo for earning and enjoying such recognition.

It would be wrong to assume that the Brahma religion could reach the bottom level of the Bodo society. It was the educated and wealthy section that preferred this option. Tribal beliefs are essentially associated with economic pursuits, and rituals are thought to be instrumental in increasing the efficacy of these economic pursuits. So, to be a Brahma, one must come out of the cycle of magico-religious rites performed to promote agriculture. The Bodos of the interiors were not exposed to ideas that would have freed them from age-old

traditions and deep-rooted tribal notions. So, the Brahma religion failed to incorporate the Bodos of the interiors.²² Saikia calculates about one-fourth of the Bodos as the Brahmas, though his estimate appears to be inflated.

But the Brahma Dharma did leave its impact on the Bodos who preferred to follow their indigenous religion. Actually the ideas of the Brahma Dharma contributed much to the reorientation of the indigenous Bathau Dharma. In the forties a group of the Bodo educated youth declined to follow any of the alien religious beliefs. But at the same time they felt that to combat the new challenges, particularly that of the Brahma Dharma, the indigenous Bathau religion deserved to be modified and modernized. So they tried to articulate a philosophy of the Bathau religion, offer rational explanation for folk beliefs and identify their deities with Hindu parallels. That way Bathau comes nearer to Shiva, ai-buri to Durga and Mai-nao to Lakshmi. Some of the important social agenda of the Brahma Dharma were also given accommodation within the objectives of the Bathau religion. And these moves proved to be quite effective, so much so that the Brahma Dharma now does not totally disown some of the notions of their traditional belief. Today, with growing identity consciousness of the Bodos, the Bathau religion is being projected by some quarter as the symbol of their racial tradition and culture pushing the once dominant Brahma Dharma to the background. The Christians offer tacit support to this move perhaps with the hope that once free from the grip of Hinduism, of which the Brahma Dharma is considered to be a component, the Bodos would be open for proselitization to their system.²³

It is interesting to note that the early decades of the British rule had marginal impact on the Bodo economy and almost no impact on the Bodo political life. But the new regime acted as a catalytic agent in creation of new religious options for the people. The Bodo response to the situation, in spite of initial vacillation, ultimately turned out to be fraught with far-reaching consequences. It is through the religion that the Bodos learnt the mechanism of raising socio-economic issues and took up programmes for social regeneration. The Bodo identity and the Bodo consciousness also had their embryonic development in the womb of religious movements. It is thus not

accidental that today Christianity, the Brahma Dharma and the Bathau religion, all have a role to play in the complex arena of the Bodo politics.

NOTES

1. Thus it is stated that Mirzumla's chronicler lamented, "If this country (Assam) were administered like the imperial dominions, it was likely that forty to fifty five lakhs of rupees would be paid by the raiyats." (S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Delhi, 1985, p. 437).
2. The father of Kalicharan Brahma, the Bodo reformer, was a defader and of the Parvatijawar estate of Goalpara.
3. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 69.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Madan S. Paul in his paper, 'Udayachal Movement, Plain Tribals and Social Structure in Assam Valley: A Sociological Exploration' (in *Tribal Transformation in India*, Vol. III, Ed. Buddhadev Choudhury, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 358-367) presents this thesis. This is an ill-conceived expansion of the Planter-Raj thesis formulated by Amalendu Guha in *From Planters' Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1982). Though Guha does not make mention of any large scale or specific case of the displacement of tribals through land grants given to the tea industry, the fact is that even before the British occupation of Assam, the Ahom King Purandar Singh 'granted to be Assam Company an extensive area near Gabharu hills for cultivation of tea in anticipation that in future his subjects would be able to reap the benefit of this new enterprise' (H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company*, Gauhati, 1980, p. 103). These submontane jungle lands had been left unutilized for centuries. 'In a country so depopulated and unsettled, it is no wonder that there was no competition for the acquisition of land' (H.A. Androbus, *A History of the Assam Company*, Edinburgh, 1957, p. 11). Bhaban Baruah, on examination of all revenue materials comes to the conclusions: (1) 'Assam's tea-industry has not usurped the land that truly belonged to the peasants' and (2) 'The impact of the tea industry on the peasant economy of Assam has been basically not adverse but beneficial or helpful' (Bhaban Baruah, *The Sentinel*, April 25, 1991, 'Purander Singh and our Tea Industry').
6. J.E. Francis-Pereira, 'The Rabhas', *Census of Assam*, Vol. III, Shillong, 1911, p. 144.
7. Rev. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, New Delhi, 1975 (Reprint), pp. 84-85.
8. Amalendu Guha, *From Planter's Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 10.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11. Endle, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

12. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
13. For basic information on the spread of Christianity among the Bodos we relied mainly on Dr. R.N. Mushahary's paper entitled 'Origin and Growth of Christianity Among the Bodos of Assam' published in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Seventh Session, 1988, Shillong, pp. 273-282.
14. Mushahari, *Ibid.*, p. 278.
15. E.T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1872, p. 82.
16. M.C. Saikia, 'The Brahma Movement Among the Bodo-Kacharis of Goalpara district', in *Tribal Movement in India*, Vol. I, Ed. K.S. Singh, New Delhi, 1982, p. 241. All basic facts regarding the Brahma Movement amongst the Bodos are taken from this well-informed paper of M.C. Saikia.
17. Saikia (*Ibid.*) gives his date of birth as April 1860, corresponding Baisakh 25, 1267 saka era). But A.D. 1860 does not correspond to Saka era 1267 corresponding Saka era being 1782. But A.D. 1860 quite tallies with Bangla san 1267, so it must be the latter. But according to Bengali calendar, the 25th Baisakh falls either on the 8th or the 9th May, it cannot be in April.
18. Another zamindar of the same origin, Prabhat Chandra Baruah of Gauripur. Dhubri, was made the President of the Bengali Kayastha Association. Pramathesh Baruah, the famous film actor of the 30's and 40's was his son.
19. Saikia, *op.cit.*, p. 243.
20. In the pre-independent period, the language of the western part of Goalpara district was Bengali whereas in the eastern part it was Assamese. For instance, in 1948 there were 250 Bengali lower primary schools in the district against 348 Assamese lower primacy schools. In 1951, the respective figures are 3 (three) and 833. (Assam Gazettee, question of Santosh Kumar Baruah, M.L.A., Goalpara). How this miracle was achieved within three years is a different story.
21. Saikia, *op.cit.*, p. 247.
22. Saikia (*Ibid.*) gives an example that when he asked some Bodo peasants about their reluctance to accept the Brahma Dharma, they 'expressed the view that the offer of rice in the burning Yajna-Kunda might incur the wrath of the goddess Mainao (Lakshmi) and they preferred not to displease the goddess of wealth'.
23. In December, 1994, the author met some Bodo youths, most of them were college students, who were sons of Brahma parents but themselves disowned that identity. They felt that there was nothing wrong with their indigenous religion, whereas the Hindus of their neighbourhood do not regard the Brahmas as the rightful members of the Hindu society.

CHAPTER 4

Initiation in Parliamentary Politics

When Kalicharan Brahma represented before the Simon Commission for reservation of seats for the plain tribals in the Legislative Assembly, he actually responded to the developments taking place around him. The socio-religious movement that Kalicharan himself had kindled created new aspirations and expectations amongst his followers. These followers were educated and education made them not only self-confident but also alert and aware of the goings on in the neighbourhood and beyond it. The organizations they set up for social reorientation while serving their avowed purpose also acquainted them with the art of organizing masses. The successive conventions of the Bodo Mahasammelan along with its permanent executive committee provided the Bodo leadership with a platform where they could discuss and decide on the broader issues pertaining to the interest of the community. The students' wing and women's wing helped expanding the support base and recruitment zone of the newly launched Bodo rejuvenation movement. In short, the Bodo community, by the end of the twenties, was all set to enter the arena of politics that had been fast becoming the prime centre of attraction for all those groups who hoped to gain something by sharing the limited power and authority available under the British dispensation.

The mass upsurge of 1921 as well as its failure to attain Swaraj as promised by Gandhiji was a setback for the nationalists. But its impact compelled the imperialist regime to think of reform that would ensure more effective participation of the Indian people in running the affairs of the state and the Simon Commission was appointed to prescribe the doses of this liberalization. It was clear that more autonomy at the central and provincial administration was forthcoming; at the same time the keen observers of the British policy were also aware

that the imperialist regime would prefer a fragmented representation of the Indian people in the legislature and reservations of seats for different communities in the name of protecting their interests was the surest way of achieving that all important fragmentation. It goes to the credit of Kalicharan and his colleagues that though they were new entrants in the game of politics, they could look through the game and staked their claim in conformity with that design. Of course, there might have been a tip off from some high officials, but we do not have any evidence to show it besides the fact that Kalicharan had access to the high officialdom for otherwise he would not have been allowed to meet the Chief Commissioner on two earlier occasions. It is also significant that for reinforcing the demand of reservation of seats mooted later by Kalicharan Brahma, a delegation of Kachari Juvak Sammilani comprising mostly the youths went to Delhi and submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission on September 14, 1928. Taking into consideration the hazards involved in making the journey to Delhi and arranging a meeting with the Commission, it is apparent that some kind of official backing was there behind the move.¹

It would be unfair to brand the Bodo leaders as the stooges of the imperial authority or accuse them of playing right into the hands of the British. The Brahma elites of the Bodo society desired a rightful place for them in the province and participation in the political process with some kind of maneuvering capability, which was considered by them as an important step towards that direction. The British administration had its own reasons to be sympathetic towards their demand. And it needs to be mentioned that none of the other forces operating around them showed any concern for their growing aspiration. In the Assembly the politicians were busy fighting each other on the well-demarcated valley lines – the Brahmaputra Valley versus the Surma Valley. Even when the question of alienation of lands from the indigenous people of the Brahmaputra Valley to immigrants came up for debate, high sentiments were expressed but none for the plain tribals. When Goalpara Tenancy Act was discussed and passed in March 1929, the question of the tribal tenants seldom came up. Nationalist forces outside the Assembly were busy organizing

the boycott of the Simon Commission. None did recognize the plain tribals as potential political force. At the social level also the Goalpara Zamindars, the Bengali middle class of Dhubri town and the Assamese middle class of eastern Goalpara or Kamrup who at different levels on different occasions showed enough concern for social developments, did never include the Bodos within their scheme of things. They knew about the Brahma movement but they failed to gauge its impact and message. So, the only patron available to the Bodos was the agents of the government and if they played to the latter's tunes, it was because none had offered them any other option.

The encounter with the Simon Commission helped formulating two basic tenets centring which the Bodo politics went on evolving since then. The first one is the concept of reservation. Not only for assembly seats, the idea of reservation became the key word for demanding other benefits like job and land settlement. In other words the idea of reservation became the perpetual issue that stood as a stumbling block in any subsequent attempt of reconciliation between the mainstream Assamese society and the Bodos. The second aspect that developed in the wake of Simon Commission's visit was the mechanism of projecting the Bodo demands as the demands of all plain tribals of Assam. As the most advanced group amongst the plain tribal communities of Assam, the Bodos sought to and are still seeking to establish a kind of hegemony over the other less developed plain tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. The claim went almost unchallenged for more than half a century and only recently this hegemony has been challenged. However, as late as 1987, the All Bodo Students' Union legitimized its claim to speak on behalf of all plain tribals of Assam in the following manner:

The Bodos are the largest plains tribal group in Assam. In Assam the population of the Bodos alone is forty lakhs. Incidentally, the Bodos are politically most conscious plains tribals in Assam and as such they are pioneering the movement for the salvation of all downtrodden plains tribal people of Assam.²

Anyway, in the late twenties and early thirties this claim of consciousness was more valid since the Bodos were more advanced in all spheres at this period than any other plains tribal community of Assam. At the same time, the Bodo leaders cultivated good

relationship with other plains tribal groups, particularly with the Chutiyas and the success added credence to their claim for leading the cause of plains tribals of the province.

That the Simon Commission would respond favourably to the demand of reservation for plains tribals in the Assembly was a foregone conclusion. Hence the Bodo leaders took up initiatives to consolidate the Bodos that might be utilized politically if need arose. The Kachari Jubak Sammilani, that represented before the Simon Commission in 1928 was simply an organization floated for that particular purpose; now the need was felt to promote organizations of more permanent nature. So, in the early thirties, two new organizations came into being. The college-going Bodos formed a Bodo Chhatra Sammelan with Shobharam Brahma Chaudhury as president and Satish Chandra Basumatari as secretary. Later Rupnath Brahma also became a president of the organization. Names of these student leaders are important in the sense that almost all of them and their family members played important roles in subsequent years in the state and regional politics. It needs to be mentioned that all of them were Brahmas. Another organization with a broader base was instituted. That was Assam Tribal League. Kalicharan Brahma sponsored the move for formation of the Tribal League that also took members from other plains tribal groups including the Chutiyas and Mattocks who were included in the scheduled list during that period. The formation of this organization was the first successful attempt to consolidate the plains tribals under the Bodo leadership and the scheme worked well till independence.

As expected, the Simon Commission made provisions for four reserved seats for the plains tribals of Assam. In the Government of India Act of 1935, these provisions were incorporated. First general election of the provincial legislature on the basis of this Act was held in Assam in early 1937. The Tribal League did not contest the election officially, but the four tribal legislators who were elected formed a block in the assembly that came to be known as Tribal League block (at times the term Tribal Party was also used).

In the Assembly that was constituted in 1937 no party had a clear majority. With 33 members, Congress had an edge over others as the

single majority party. But initially the Congress high command was reluctant to allow their provincial legislature parties to go in for coalition governments. Later, of course, it modified this rigid stand under pressure. Anyway, the parliamentary politics and ministry making in such a fluid situation assumed the form of gambles in uncertainties where opportunism, pragmatism, and horse-trading had a field day. The Assembly, during its tenure of eight years (April 1937 to October 1945) had to deal with six ministries including a short spell of Governor's rule. It is somewhat unfortunate that the Bodo and other plains tribal leaders had their maiden encounter with parliamentary politics in such a perverse situation. It soon opened up for the Tribal League an opportunity to taste power and since then during the entire tenure of the Assembly, the Tribal League, or at least its leader Rupnath Brahma made it a point to stay within the power nexus, whatever its colour or composition might be. For the next generations of the Bodo politicians, this example left behind a dubious legacy.

II

For our purpose, it is not necessary to enter into the details of the ups and downs that the ministry led by Sayeed Mohammad Sadullah had to cope with within Assembly between April 1937 to September 1938. However, it soon became evident that the Sadullah ministry might be overthrown if political initiatives of the right kind were not initiated. Gopinath Bordoloi, the leader of the Congress Legislative Party, did not show any interest in such a course of action as long as the Congress High Command maintained its stiff attitude banning formation of a coalition ministry under Congress leadership. But the High Command soon found that such a rigid policy was untenable because of the eagerness of different party units for sharing power with others; so it modified the directive to the effect that the Congress Assembly party might go for coalition provided it has an *ex ante* majority. Bordoloi and his colleagues within and outside the Assembly decided to make an all-out effort to take advantage of this relaxation. For this purpose, Bordoloi started wooing other groups who might come to help the Congress in the forming the ministry. Obviously,

the Tribal League with its four members was his potential target for this 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 and pinpointed the utter lack of primary education facilities in tea gardens and tribal areas. This worked. The Congress and the Tribal League entered into an agreement to bring in a new coalition Government.³

Here, the use of the word bogey is significant. The fact is that Bordoloi's concern for the tribals was quite sudden and was not the outcome of a considered policy. The regeneration of the Assamese society started in the late nineteenth century. In the early twenties, the Assamese middle class participated in the national movement and in the early thirties its role in the Civil Disobedience Movement was quite impressive. But that political process did never even try to involve the tribals. During these decades the Assamese social leaders and intellectuals responded with vigour and sincerity to the problems that they thought vital for the survival and development of society, but none of the problems of the tribals ever figured in their agenda. When Vaisnavite preachers exploited the tribals subverting the liberal Shankarite religion, none took any notice of that and nobody protested. The emergence of the Brahma movement neither received any assistance nor any sympathetic encouragement from the Assamese elite. It originated from Calcutta and enjoyed a kind of autonomy in the Bodo region where it was transplanted. Even with regard to tribal land, the story is the same. It is noteworthy that the alienation of land to the migrant east Bengal peasants had been a hot issue of socio-political debate in Assam since the beginning of this century and by the early twenties it became a political issue of supreme importance. Almost all Assamese leaders, organizations and newspapers had their opinions expressed and circulated through their respective platforms over the issue. But the concern and agony expressed were always for the indigenous Assamese peasants, not for the tribals. So when Bordoloi took up the cause of the long neglected plain tribals, it was no secret that the gesture had its origin in political exigency dictated by the situation. But the Tribal League also by that

time had learnt the rules of the game and it did not feel shy to seize upon the opportunity. So, an agreement was signed on September 10, 1939 at Shillong between the Tribal League (mentioned as the Tribal Party in the document) and the Congress. Gopinath Bordoloi, as leader of the Assam Congress Assembly Party and Bishnuram Medhi, as president of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, signed the agreement. Since it was the first document through which the Bodos along with other plains tribal communities came to share power to the extent provided by the Government of India Act, 1935, in provincial sphere, the full text of the agreement deserves to be quoted. It runs thus:

1. That the Assam Tribal Party will remain an independent party and its members will not be bound to put their signatures pertaining to the creed of Congress.
2. The present system of the separate electorate will continue till the Congress Party agrees to accept the system of keeping separate seats in the joint electorate for the tribal communities in proportions to their populations.
3. The Tribal Communities will be allowed to send their members to the Local Boards according to the electoral system to be determined by the Tribal League in the next session.
4. The people of the Tribal Communities who have embraced Hinduism or Christianity will be included in the Schedule of the tribal people provided they identify themselves as tribals.
5. The plains tribals will be treated as a separate class for government services and in the matter of appointment, preference will be given to them till the quota provided for them in proportion to their number is filled up. In case any candidate from amongst the tribal people does not possess the requisite qualification for any service, no candidate will be appointed in place of such tribal candidates.
6. For spread of education among these communities provisions must be made and maximum amount of financial grants be allocated every year out of the budget for their education.
7. Sufficient number of scholarships and stipends must be given to their students for general and professional education.

8. Sufficient number of scholarships and exemption of tuition fees must be granted in the High Schools and the M.E. Schools, too.
9. One of the members must be inducted as a minister in the ministry.
10. The Government must make provisions for giving settlement of lands to the landless tribals, particularly to the Miri people.

These conditions are considered as demands in addition to the demands laid down in the resolution of the League.⁴

The agreement may be regarded as a document that reflects the aspirations of the Bodos and other plains tribals in the late thirties. The political aspects of the document make one thing clear. The Plains Tribal League was convinced of the benefits that it could draw by retaining the separate electorate that was provided by the Act of 1935. The concession they were ready to forego if only separate seats for tribals to be elected by general constituency was assured. With this sense of separateness the Plains Tribal Leaders entered the arena of power politics for the first time in the history. Secondly, the plains tribal leaders were very much cautious to keep a safe distance from the politics of Indian National Congress even when participating in a Congress-led ministry. This aloofness of the plains tribals from the national mainstream, particularly the national movement, no doubt was the outcome of the Provincial Congress Committee's failure to incorporate any segment of the tribals within its fold. But at the same time it does not fail to show that the tribal leaders also, on their turn, preferred insularity for pragmatic reasons. They kept their option open to negotiate with any other development that the fluid political situation might precipitate and from a practical point of view, they were right in their speculation. It is clear that the plains tribal politics of Assam from the very beginning opted for a pragmatic course with an eye on short term gains. It left behind a legacy that has proved to be harmful to the general interest of the people in the long run.

From the document one can get an idea about the priorities of the plains tribal leadership. Educational facilities and job reservations were the primary concern of the leaders. These were important for the upliftment of the social conditions of the plains tribal, but one cannot miss the absence of any condition that could have benefited

the tribals at the grass-root level, most of whom were illiterate. The plains tribals at that point of time was yet to produce a middle class of any significance, it is only amongst the Bodos that an incipient middle class was in the making. It is evident that this class took an active role in formulating those priorities and their objective was to effect an expansion of the middle class base that could provide the leadership with a numerically significant group from whom it could draw strength for attaining a better bargaining position. Also significant is the clause that took up the land issue. No mention was there of land alienation. The specific mention of the Miris manifested altogether a different kind of concern. The regions of the North Lakhimpur where the Miris were concentrated were effected by flood every year and the change of the course of the Brahmaputra which was a regular feature then also used to render them landless. The document stressed to redress the plights of the Miris caused by those natural calamities. So Bordoloi's plea that 'the tribals were losing their land to the immigrants' did not have any direct bearing on the Tribal League. It preferred to ignore the issue for the time being. The reason for this complacency was that Bordoloi's apprehension was anticipatory; the tribal land was yet to be threatened in reality. Also the tribal leaders were sure that Bordoloi had his own reasons not to allow the immigrants to settle in wastelands. However Bordoloi's plea supplied them with an issue that they took up in right earnest subsequently.

The Bordoloi ministry had to resign following the Congress directive on war issue on November 17, 1939, i.e, fourteen months after Saadullah was asked to form a new ministry. He did not command a majority in the house though there was no impending danger for him since Congress had already declared its decision not to participate in the Assembly proceedings. However, Saadullah was keen to enlist the support of the Tribal League for acquiring a semblance of majority. The support was readily available. The Tribal League agreed to participate in the ministry which for all practical purposes was a Muslim League ministry, Saadullah himself being a member of the League by that time. Rupnath Brahma, who had served in the preceding Congress ministry, again became a minister as the Tribal

League nominee in the Saadullah cabinet. A new truce was also signed between Saadullah and the Tribal League on March 21, 1940. It contained all the provisions of the earlier agreement with Bordoloi and also some new provisions. The important clauses (Not all) are given below:

1. The Assam Plain Tribal Party will remain an independent party and stay as a co-partner with the United Party as long as the Assam United Party will remain in the ministry. It has been expressly said that in absence of the ministry of the United Party, it will not be obligatory on the part of the Plains Tribal Party to remain a party to the United Party.
2. Regarding the Line System, policy embodied in the resolution of November 4, 1939 was accepted as the original policy and conceding that demand. Sir Saadullah held the Line System conference and steps were taken to ensure the protection of the tribal interest.
3. Land settlement will be given to the landless tribals after into taking account of conditions of the landless tribals.⁵

All other conditions were more or less the same as included in the agreement with Bordoloi barring two operational clauses. The Tribal League demanded representation in the Local Boards in proportion to their population and asked the government to place an amendment bill before the Assembly as early as possible to implement this demand. In the Census operation the Hindu or Christian tribals were normally excluded from the tribal category. A census was due in 1941 and the Tribal League apprehended that by such exclusion there might be an attempt to reduce their number. Hence the agreement made provision for taking legislative measures so that "their number is not reduced in the next census".

The first provision makes interesting reading if one compares it with the first provision of the earlier agreement, i.e., with Bordoloi. The Tribal League retained its independence in the earlier agreement also, but the rationale behind this stress for independence was not openly spelled out there. In the latter document it was explicitly stated that the Tribal League would be with Saadullah as long as he retained power. Once dislodged, he was not to count on its support and clear

indication was given that in this case Tribal League would go to the opposite camp if it was in a position to form the government. By this time the Tribal League had learnt that in a fluid political situation and in an unsettled assembly the numerically insignificant four members of the League were in a position to call the shots—no group could form the ministry without its help. Hence it made the best bargain possible: it demanded to eat the cake and have it too. Saadullah had to concede the demand. Tribal leaders also came to know that democracy was ultimately a game of numbers and so they took precaution so that their numerical strength did not show a decline. It is also noteworthy that though the League joined hand with the camp antagonistic to Congress at an hour of national crisis, it had no grievance against the Congress. Rather, in the body of the agreement itself there was a praise for the Congress ministry indirectly.

Besides, assurance was sought for to complete the works initiated during the period of the congress United Party ministry for exemption of taxes, total prevention of opium, removal of illiteracy and spread of primary education for the general improvement of the public and the tribal people.⁶

So the Congress ministry did try to keep its promise and the Tribal League was honest enough to acknowledge it. But still it preferred to ditch Congress as the policy of the Tribal League, as manifested, was to avoid political confrontation of all variety and ally with power of any variety.

In its agreement with Saadullah, the Tribal League raised the question of land settlement and demanded protection of tribal land under the Line System.⁷ In fact some new developments took place in the face of which the Tribal League could no longer ignore the land question. The Assamese people as well as its leaders were agitating for a long time for putting an end to the policy of settling wasteland with East Bengal Muslim immigrants. On the other hand the Muslim League and other spokesman of the Muslim peasantry were consistently pressing for abolition of the Line System which did not allow settlement of Muslim peasants in some regions. In 1937, the Assembly appointed a committee to examine the land question and recommend measures that would be judicious and acceptable to all

concerned. F.W. Hockenull was appointed the Chairman of the committee which was served by members from both the camps. In February 1938, Hockenull committee submitted its report that emphasized that 'Indigenous people alone would be unable, without the aid of immigrant settlers, to develop the province's enormous wasteland resources within reasonable period.'⁸ However, the report, in spite of this finding, favoured the Line System and asked for stricter measures for protection of the tribal land. The report came for consideration when the Borodoloi ministry was in office. Bordoloi himself found it difficult to formulate a land policy that would retain the spirit of the report and at the same time would satisfy the Assamese public opinion which was against any new settlement to the immigrants whether within or beyond the line. So the ministry took time to pronounce its land policy. That delay made the Tribal League apprehensive and its position within the plains tribal communities was also shaken. So the Tribal League decided to pressurize the ministry and convened a meeting on November 4, 1939 to discuss the issue. The meeting adopted a comprehensive resolution demanding statutory measures for protection of tribal land. It is no accident that Bordoloi declared his land policy on the same day. The policy envisaged eviction of all immigrant settlers from protected tribal areas. But new settlement was not abandoned; it was to be implemented for rehabilitating landless people including immigrants.

In the same month (November, 1939) the first provincial conference of Assam Muslim League was held and it rejected the Line and demanded its total abolition.⁹ In the meantime the Muslim immigrant peasantry had already come under the influence of a very capable leader, Maulana Hamid Khan Bhasani. He migrated to Goalpara district of Assam from his ancestral home in Pabna district in 1928 and within a very short time emerged as the undisputed leader of the immigrant peasants who formed one fifth of the population of the district. He became a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937 on a Muslim League ticket. Bhasani undertook a sustained campaign for the abolition of the Line System and Saadullah, who was a moderate in all respects, occasionally found it difficult to adjust with the aggressive politics of Bhasani. But the Muslim League

leadership had to concede that he was the most reliable activist of the party in the Brahmaputra Valley and he organized the Muslim peasantry behind the party as a unified force under a single command. It is because of the support base created by Bhasani that Jinnah could dream of incorporating Assam in Pakistan. Thus, whatever might be in Saadullah's mind, he had compulsions to tolerate Bhasani. But abolition of the Line System was beyond the limits within which Saadullah ministry was functioning because in that case he would lose the support of the Tribal League and Assamese Hindu Minister Rohini Kumar Chaudhury. And Bhasani organized the first provincial conference of the Muslim League at Ghagmari, his headquarters, just to create pressure on Saadullah to do away with the Line system.

In the same November 1939, the Tribal League decided to help Saadullah in the formation of a ministry and to join it. It can well be imagined that the situation was highly surcharged over the land issue and the Tribal League also did not find it easy to take a decision on the issue of joining the ministry. However, ultimately lust for power prevailed though the explanation offered for public consumption was that it was the only way it could pressurize the Saadullah ministry to retain the Line System.

One cannot miss the glaring fact that though the land settlement policy was the most important political issue of the time and the interest of the plains tribals was vitally involved in the matter, the Tribal League did not extract from Saadullah any prior commitment over the issue before lending him support. The ministry took oath on November 17, 1939, and the formal agreement between Saadullah and the Tribal League was signed only on March 16, 1940, i.e., after four months and that too, under a threat of internal revolt within the Tribal League itself. Actually Bimbardhar Deuri, an MLA of the Tribal League belonging to Chutiya community in his budget speech delivered on February 26, 1940, launched a frontal attack on Saadullah for sabotaging the Line System which he termed as an innovation of the farsighted British officers.¹⁰ Deuri himself was a ministerial candidate but he was sidelined because of the dominance of the Bodos led by the Brahma leaders in the plains tribal politics of the province. But when he came out in the open to make the land settlement his

main plank of attack on the ministry, Rupnath Brahma, the Bodo minister of the cabinet became apprehensive because the issue had the potential for eroding his own Bodo support base. So, the agreement was signed hurriedly to prompt any such possibility. But the agreement, for all practical purposes, did not commit anything specific about the kind of protection the plains tribal would get. It was mentioned that the resolution of the Tribal League adapted four months back would be the basic document that would guide the land policy but not part of the resolution was incorporated in the body of the agreement. With regard to reservation of seats in the local board and the census operation, the agreement was specific as to what was to be done. But there was no operative clause for land policy. So, the conclusion is inevitable that the Tribal League leaders were more interested in devising a face-saving mechanism than to achieve anything tangible to safeguard the genuine interests of the tribal peasantry.

Subsequent developments that evolved around the land problem bear testimony to this. Chief Minister Saadullah, true to his commitment, did convene an all-party convention on the Line System on May 31 and June 1, 1940 but its recommendations and subsequent official resolution moved in the Assembly remained vague.¹¹ It envisaged a development plan for wasteland but the immigrants who came after 1937 were deprived of any settlement benefit from the plan. So, the ban was put on the recipients, not on settlement.¹² This flexible approach, along with the fact that the tribal land that was to get protection was yet to be demarcated, made the circumstances extremely vulnerable for the tribals. Guha aptly summarizes the situation:

Line or no line, the law of competition was in full operation. Whatever feeble attempts were made to set up lines in Goalpara, for example, were found self-defeating. Local people could not be stopped there from selling their lands even in the 'lined' villages to the migrants at high prices ... Assamese public opinion—the opinion among articulate Hindus to be more precise—was therefore almost hysteric in denouncing the development scheme.¹³

But no such denouncement came from the tribal leaders. So the government went on with the development plan. It was decided that the scheme would be first given trial in Nowgong district and then in

other districts. Accordingly, a special officer was appointed to draw a plan for other districts. But there was so much hue and cry from the Assamese press and organizations that the report of the special officer had to be shelved. To oppose the land policy of Saadullah, Congress Parliamentary Party also decided to participate in the Assembly proceeding. R.K. Choudhury, the Assamese Hindu minister of Saadullah ministry became reluctant to continue with Saadullah under Congress pressure and he, along with two of his supporters defected, bringing Saadullah's United Party to a minority. So, Saadullah resigned on December 12, 1941 and a spell of Governor's rule followed. Saadullah's development policy was scrapped by the Governor who did not want to open up a new front that might hinder war efforts.¹⁴

However, Saadullah came back to power on August 25, 1942; this time his majority in the assembly was ensured because most of the Congress MLAs were in jail as a sequel to the August movement. Saadullah was again under the pressure of his Muslim League coalition partner to abolish the Line System. Saadullah did not go that far but took a decision to open up fresh areas for the settlement of the immigrants. By this time the Bengal famine had already broken out and there was a fresh exodus of famine-stricken people from Bengal. In the meantime, the Muslim League led Bengal Assembly urged upon the Government of India to pressurize Assam to open up the restricted areas to the land-hungry peasants of Bengal. Saadullah responded by formulating a new plan of settlement avowedly as a part of 'grow more food' programme: Swarnalata Baruah writes:

In order to provide settlement to these fresh emigrants, the Assam Government led by Saadullah adopted at the instance of the Government of India, a new resolution on land settlement on August 24, 1943, under the slogan of "grow more food", which the new viceroy Wavell, who succeeded Linlithgow in October 1943, interpreted as "grow more Muslim". The resolution provided for opening the grazing reserves in the districts of Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup to the land-hungry immigrant cultivators from Bengal, and also opening of surplus reserves in all the submonane areas of landless indigenous people.¹⁵

The scheme had dangerous implications for the plains tribals because it made them potential victims not only in the already threatened regions of lower and central Assam, where immigrants were to be

settled, but also in the safer zones of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar where their land was exposed to the indigenous Assamese. From tribal view point, it was of no difference whether their land was taken over by the immigrants or the indigenous people. Since this plan could not be given a trial under public pressure Saadullah again came out with a new proposal in January 1945. This proposal was acceptable neither to the Congress nor to the Muslim League. Bhasani, as the president of Provincial Muslim League, again demanded total abolition of the Line System on January 28, 1944, in the Muslim League provincial conference held in Gauhati. Bhasani-Saadullah clash created a crisis for Saadullah ministry and he had to resign and form a new ministry after concluding a somewhat dubious deal with Congress. But the land question was too complicated a problem to be resolved through such a marriage of convenience and under the pressure of the Muslim League Saadullah was compelled to think of granting some special privileges to the immigrants. That resulted in an impasses and the Assam Assembly was dissolved in October 1945. Saadullah was allowed by the Governor to run the caretaker government till the next general election scheduled to be held in January 1946.

This somewhat elaborate narration of the land policy and politics attached to it is given to bring home an important aspect of the role of the Plains Tribal League and its leaders. Between November 17, 1939 to February 11, 1946, Sir Saadullah formed three ministries. All through there, the land question was a major concern for him and he and his Muslim League colleagues were always bent upon sabotaging the Line System overtly or covertly and each time was resisted by the Assamese public opinion. But in the meantime the government's stand on the land question became an open secret and at the local level both officials and interested parties found out ways and means to violate the Line System which received some kind of immunity from the higher ups. And in all those ministries led by Saadullah, Rupnath Brahma, as the representative of the Tribal League, was a cabinet minister. Thus whatever happened during this period to the fate of tribal land, was done with the direct or indirect connivance of a government of which the Tribal League was a component. We have no record whatsoever that shows that the Tribal

League as an organization or Rupnath Brahma as its representative in the government did take any positive stand on the issue. On the other hand, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, true to his commitment to the Assamese Hindu Community, on a number of occasions threw his weight to counteract the pressure that the Muslim League exerted on Saadullah.

Since during the post-independent decades the Bodos and other plains tribal organizations had attached and are still attaching much importance to the problem of encroachment on the tribal land, the indifference and inertia of the Tribal League leaders towards the same problem when it was first brewing up had to be accounted for. One reason may be that the Tribal League was dominated by the Bodos and the Bodo leadership was monopolized by the Brahmas. The Brahma movement had its positive aspects. But one cannot deny that its protagonists in their bid to catch up with the advanced sections of the Bengalees and the Assamese, who were their neighbours, knowingly or unknowingly, effected a breach between the movement and the grassroots level realities that confronted the Bodo society. The movement, as a result, created an incipient middle class, but in the process it lost its organic link with the common layer of the society to a considerable extent. Aspirations of the Brahmas evolved around education, scholarships, jobs and whatever political power available under a colonial system. They felt that it was only through these middle class occupations, that it could compete with its neighbours and consolidate as a class their own position *vis-a-vis* their neighbouring societies. This attitude was typical of the middle class of the any other society born within colonial constraints but the difference lies in the fact that the Bodo middle class represented by the Brahmas was not born through any process of inner transformation of society; its origin and development drew almost all of their inspirations from external sources, and thereby the priorities set forth by the Brahmas seldom took into account the basic needs of the common Bodo masses. And the peculiar number game that dominated the legislative politics of Assam between 1937 and 1945 gave the Bodo leaders an opportunity to learn the intricacies of the power politics at an early stage and they found the situation extremely

suitable for the gratification of their middle class aspirations. No wonder that the land problem of the common people would have a secondary position in their priority list.

The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, throughout the land debate, acted as the spokesman of the Assamese Hindus. Of course its arguments for the reversal of the land policy regularly expressed concern for the safety of the tribal land. But at no point of time the Congress tried to involve the plains tribals in the politics that it spearheaded over the land question. It would have been possible for Congress to organize; hollowness of the leadership of the Tribal League and thereby to create an alternative leadership of its own in the tribal areas. That also would have ensured involvement of the tribals in the mainstream politics of the country. But the Congress failed to adopt-such a course of action. The irony of the situation was that the Simon Commission wanted to segregate the tribals through creation of a separate electorate. The Congress by its action accepted and confirmed that segregation. Its tribal policy was to patronize the tribals from a distance without involving them in its politics. When the support of the tribal legislators became essential for the formation of ministry, the Congress preferred to co-opt them on their terms leaving the tribal leaders free to pursue their narrow politics of isolation and self-interests. The failure of the Congress to frame a broad-based policy capable of involving and incorporating the tribals was responsible for cleavage that subsequently disrupted peace and tranquility of the state.

In the late forties a meaningful experiment was undertaken by a lesser known political group to bring the plains tribals nearer to the mainstream politics of a different variety. The Revolutionary Communist Party of India, a break-away group that differed with the main body of the CPI over the question of participation in the 1942 movement, penetrated in a number of tribal pockets in northern and western Assam. The leader of this group was Pannalal Dasgupta, a Calcutta-based revolutionary, and he succeeded in recruiting some energetic young Assamese activists like Sailen Medhi, Dhireswar Kalita and others. They made quite a dent amongst the plains tribals and this interaction produced Bishnu Rabha, the most colourful and

versatile leader that the plains tribal society had ever produced. In Bishnu Rabha one can discern a rare combination of intellect and emotion, creativity and vision; and equipped with these attributes, he formulated a hypothesis for building up a composite Assamese society where the tribals would be an equal partner.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the RCPI resorted to adventurist politics of armed struggle against the newly born Indian state and the movement was crushed by the state. Rabha failed not because of any inherent flaw in his thesis but for the operational aspects of his politics that was destined to be a non-starter. Thus co-option, collaboration, compromise and expediency continued to reign supreme in the mutual political relationship between the Assamese and the plains tribals led by the Brahmas.

NOTES

1. Amalendu Guha writes, 'The commission received altogether twenty seven memoranda—many of them officially inspired from various groups and organizations of Assam. They were concerned more with sectional than with national interest', *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 165.
2. All Bodo Students' Union, 'Divide Assam Fifty Fifty' (Pamphlet), Kokrajharh, 1987, p. 8.
3. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
4. Quoted from Appendix 'A'. Enclosed with the Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the Plains Tribals' Council of Assam on May 20, 1967.
5. *Ibid.*, Appendix 'B'.
6. *Ibid.*
7. The Line System was the system formulated by the British government to keep some areas of the province free from settlement of immigrant peasants entering Assam from Bengal. 'Under this system, an imaginary line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas, specified for their exclusive settlement. (Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 206). The device was first mooted in 1916 and adopted in 1920 and subsequently underwent as number of modifications. Since the twenties of the 20th century, this line system had always been an issue of hot debate between the leaders of Assamese Hindu community and the spokesmen of the immigrant Muslims. Since the late thirties the issue assumed a political overtone because of the conflicting support base of the Muslim League and Provincial Congress.
8. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Weekly *Janashakti*, Sylhet, June 28, 1940.
13. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
15. S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 665.
16. For details see article by Sailen Medhi, 'Asomer RCPI Biplab' in *Compass* (Bengali Weekly), Ed. Pannalal Dasgupta, Calcutta, June 13, 1979.

CHAPTER 5

Parting of Ways

What was the immediate impact of the independence of India on the Bodos and other plains tribals? In a memorandum submitted to the Central government twenty years later, it is expressed in the following words:

Following the attainment of political independence, a profound wave of new hope for bright future pervaded through the length and breadth of India. This wave touched the hearts of the scheduled tribes of the plains of Assam also and they thought that the National Government of the free and secular India would do justice to the tribals and they can eschew the political tide and safely devote more attentively to socio-cultural and economic tide of the rehabilitation of their society. That is why the plains tribal leaders changed their political organisation, the Tribals' League into a socio-cultural organisation. To bring about a psychological effect among the plains tribal, along with the change of their policy, the name of their organisation was also changed from Tribal League to Tribal Sangha. Thus the Tribal Sangha, the only organisation of all the plains tribals of Assam came forward with an open heart to co-operate with the state government of Assam.¹

The statement is correct only in a broad sense because the transitory phase was not as simple as stated here. The Tribal League retained its alliance with the Muslim League in the Assembly till the general election of 1946, but in the election it contested as an independent party, neither allying itself with the Muslim League nor with the Congress. As the Congress fielded its candidates in the seats reserved for the tribals as well, there were contests between the former and the Tribal League. Though the fight was neck to neck, the fact that the Congress polled 49.2% votes against the Tribal League proved that the Congress had already become a force to be reckoned with in the tribal areas. This electoral result, along with the emergence of the Congress as the majority party in the Assembly, led the Tribal

League to respond favourably to the Congress overture for an alliance. Of course, the tribal leaders, before entering into an alliance, sought a clear assurance from the Congress as to the reservation of seats in the Assembly. In fact, as early as 1938 the Congress had wanted the scheduled castes and tribes to have reserved seats in the legislature, but they were to be elected by a joint or general electorate. In fact the Tribal League had agreed to this principle in September 1939 when it participated in the Bordoloi ministry. The agreement that was signed between the Tribal League and the Congress clearly mentioned that the present system of the separate electorate would continue till the Congress Party agreed to accept the system of keeping separate seats in the joint electorate for the tribal communities. So there was no real reason for any difference of opinion on that score, but still the issue could not be resolved immediately. One of the reasons was that some of the tribal leaders thought that the new constitution of India that was in the making might, while creating reserved seats for the plains tribals, deprive them of contesting general seats.² However, Bordoloi succeeded in convincing the Tribal League that such an apprehension was completely misplaced. At last, in July the Tribal League joined the Congress Assembly Party.³ That may be regarded as the first step towards the dissolution of the Tribal League as a political party.

Also two other major issues had to be dealt with during this period of transition. It is for the first time that the Tribal League took up the issue of protection of tribal land in right earnest with the government and the government was urged to do something concrete to prove its credibility. Bordoloi agreed and accordingly in December 1947 Assam Act, XV was codified. The Act provides constitution of areas into belts or blocks for the protection of those classes who on account of their primitive condition and lack of education or material advantages are incapable of looking after their welfare in so far as such welfare depends upon their having sufficient land for their maintenance.

The Act makes extensive provisions for the protection of land of the classes for whom it was meant. The Tribal League was quite satisfied with these provisions. Accordingly, ten tribal belts and twenty-three tribal blocks were constituted through proper notifi-

cation. But there was a major flaw in the Act, implication of which came to the limelight only later. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam, after twenty years of the passage of the Act, pointed out that 'one interesting point may be noted that nowhere in all the relevant provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue regulation the word tribal is used...'⁴ As the implementation of the Act depends mostly on the discretionary power of the government officials, the absence of the word 'tribal' keeps open the scope for a liberal interpretation of the categories who can claim benefit under the Act. And that did happen. However, the enactment of the protective measures notwithstanding its limitations may be regarded as a major achievement of the Tribal Leagues.

The second one, in a sense, was an achievement of Bordoloi. Before independence, the Constituent Assembly was faced with the problem of formulating a policy for the protection of the socio-cultural distinctiveness and economic interest of the different tribes of Assam. To look into the matter in all its manifestation, a Committee was formed with Gopinath Bordoloi as its chairman. Bordoloi, mainly on the advice of the Khasi Land Mizo leaders with whom he had developed a good understanding, suggested measures which were ultimately incorporated in the sixth schedule of the constitution that provides for autonomous district councils for the hills districts. Bordoloi persuaded the plains tribal leaders not to press the demand for plains tribals inclusion in the sixth schedule. There were some valid reasons for Bordoloi's plea. The hill districts of Assam were inhabited by distinct tribes occupying specific territories where they formed an overwhelming majority. These areas could be easily demarcated and identified as units where the sixth schedule could be enforced. The plains tribals of Assam in the forties were living in the plains of Brahmaputra Valley side by side with other peoples. It was difficult even at that time to carve out any viable region where the habitation of the plains tribals would have justified creation of a district demographically. This administrative difficulty apart, Bordoloi was then visualizing a unilingual Assam or at least a unilingual Brahmaputra Valley by incorporating the plains tribals within the Assamese nationality. He did not want to put an initial block to this

potential prospect by creating a separate kind of polity for the plains tribal which would inevitably have given rise to isolationist tendencies.

The Tribal League had its own reasons to toe the Bordoloi line. The Bodos were the most dominant component of the League and their position was further consolidated since Morans and Chutiyas opted for derecognition of their tribal status in the new Constitution. As a result the Bodos became sole authority to represent the tribal cause because others plains tribes including the Miris (later came to be known as the Mishings) and Lalunge (now called the Tiwas) were far behind them numerically as well as in material advancement. The new Constitution, it was clear, would grant universal adult suffrage and the Bodo leaders were not unaware that this would allow them to use their numerical strength to great advantage. It was also clear that the Congress would stay in state power for quite sometime and the pragmatic Bodo leaders were now eager to become a part of the ruling group not as an ally but as a full-fledged component. Bordoloi was the supreme of Assam Pradesh Congress and it was only he who could ensure suitable accommodation of the Bodo leaders in the state Congress which would have been otherwise difficult because of the hobnobbing of the Bodo leaders with the successive Muslim League ministries before independence. Thus, Bordoloi found it easy to persuade the Bodo leaders to abandon any idea of staking any claim for benefits of the sixth schedule on a give and take basis. Unfortunately Bordoloi died in August 1950, but his commitments to the Bodo leaders was respected and in the 1952 general election, the Bodos fought under the Congress banner and Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury became a Congress MP and Rupnath Brahma, a Minister of Assam—thereby two topmost leaders of the Bodo community—found respectable positions in the new power structure. This is the background that facilitated the dissolution of the Tribal League. In other words, the Tribal League as a whole was co-opted by the ruling Congress party.⁵

While at the upper level this game of co-option and conciliation was going on, some more positive symptoms surfaced at the level of the masses. Already we made a reference to the endeavour of the

Revolutionary Communist Party to involve the Bodos in its activities. This created a new kind of awareness amongst a section of the Bodos. Bishnu Rabha, who epitomized this new consciousness also furnished the plains tribals with a thesis for contributing to the creation of a composite Assamese culture which he termed as the *Kamrupi* culture.⁶ The revolutionary experiment to reach that goal failed, but the essence of his preachings was not completely lost. On the other hand, under the First Five Year Plan, some development works, involving handicrafts, irrigation and agriculture, were undertaken by the government and in spite of incapable handling by the officials, some benefits did reach the tribal masses. That created an atmosphere of hope and expectation. The middle class base of the Bodos was also expanded to a certain extent. The congenial situation inspired the Bodos to develop a better relationship with their Assamese neighbour which their advanced section felt necessary also for ensuring state patronage. Naturally a large number of educated Bodos became bilingual using their mother tongue at home and Assamese as the language of culture and education. That influenced the psychology of the general masses and a big chunk of them returned Assamese as their mother tongue in 1951 and 1961 census. It is only under this circumstance that the number of the Bodo speakers shows virtually no appreciable rise in these two census. And this stagnation of their numerical position enhanced the number of the Assamese speakers.⁷ Even in 1971, when the identity consciousness of the Bodos became assertive, the census figure shows that whereas 6,10,459 claim themselves as members of the Bodo tribe, the number of Bodo-speakers was 5,33,713. In other words about 80,000 Bodos did not speak their mother tongue, and as M. Hussain points out: 'the loss of tribal identity in the Brahmaputra Valley has always been to the gain of the Assamiya nationality.'⁸

The situation more or less fit in with the framework put forward by Imtiaz Hasnain:

No doubt, the rapid social change as a result of modernization and urbanization, uniform educational opportunities, linguistic practicality, and pragmatic desire for better socio-economic conditions, and increasing pressure of dominant group on the geographically isolated and dispersed linguistic minority groups did make a dent on the language maintenance behaviours.⁹

But in the case of the Bodos, this phase was purely temporary. This is the difficulty with such framework that becomes handy in explaining a development up to a certain point, but fails to predict whether the 'language maintenance behaviour' would continue in the same direction or there is a possibility of reversal. In the present case, during the first decade after independence, most of the factors mentioned by Hasnain collectively worked to inspire the Bodos to accept Assamese; but after two decades there was a reversal of the process which is manifested by the 35 per cent decennial growth of the Bodo speakers in 1971. And this did happen in spite of the more vigorous presence of most of the factors that in the earlier decade had produced quite the opposite effect. If a framework identifies some factors being casually linked with a certain process of development it can be presumed that a reversal of the process would be possible only in the absence or weakening of these factors. Otherwise the framework collapses under the weight of its own logic. So, the analytical framework presented by Hasnain with a claim of 'explaining and predicting the language behaviour of social groups in a multilingual setting' fails to enrich us with any insight to appreciate the language behaviour of the Bodo people.

We will desist from depending on such rigid and inherently mechanical approach for appreciating and explaining the different aspects of the Bodo behaviour pattern during the post-independent decades. Rather we shall try to narrate the developments that directly or indirectly contributed to produce responses which today we identify under a common term as the Bodo assertion. No doubt a framework is necessary for deeper understanding of a problem, but since we are yet to develop an analytical tool dependable enough to answer most of the questions involved in the process of socio-political developments of the kind we are concerned with, it is better to rely on hard facts than on methodological red-herrings.

The first decade following independence was the period when the Bodos genuinely felt an urge to develop a better understanding with the Assamese society. The upper strata took the lead in that direction with obvious pragmatic considerations. But to the newly developing middle class the urge was genuine. It needed an expanded space for

its accommodation and the members of this class genuinely felt that it was only the goodwill and the broadmindedness of the majority community that could have provided them with that space. Moreover, the educated Bodos desired to express themselves to a wider audience and it was only through Assamese language that they could do so. Medini Choudhury, the novelist and Bhaben Narji, the essayist were the product of this desire. And above all, there was Bishnu Rabha who showed what the Assamese society could gain in the arena of culture, art and literature from the plains tribals if a congenial atmosphere was created. The Bodos even came forward to establish a common front with the Assamese when the question of incorporation of Goalpara district with West Bengal came up before the States Reorganisation Commission in 1954-55. Though most of the Bodo-inhabited areas of that district had been a part of Bengal since the days of the Mughals to 1874, the Bodo leaders opposed the move. During the post-independent period, all the primary schools of Western Goalpara had Bengali as their medium. But after independence, when the Assam government decided to stop financial grant to the Bengali-medium schools, the number of Bengali medium primary schools in Dhubri subdivision of Goalpara came down from 250 in 1948 to three in 1951. The Bodos of the area, who had been accustomed to learning in Bengali were put at a disadvantage.¹⁰ But they accepted the situation without protest for identifying themselves with the Assamese aspirations. Also with the same motivation, the educated Bodos co-operated with the Assamese middle class in establishing branches of Assam Sahitya Sabha, the core organization that monitors the Assamization process of the state.

These gestures of goodwill and cooperation were misunderstood by the Assamese middle class as the signs of weakness and surrender. Because of inherent historical lacunae this class was never sure of itself and it tried to accomplish the unfinished task of nationality formation in a hurry and if necessary, forcibly.¹¹ As early as 1948, the feeling of this class was expressed by a Congress number of the Assembly (Nilmoni Phookan):

Regarding our language, Assamese must be the State Language of the Province. There can be no gainsaying of it even if the Governments stand or fall by it. All

the languages of the different communities and their culture will be absorbed in the Assamese culture. I speak with rather authority in this matter regarding the mind of our people that this state cannot nourish any other language in this province.¹²

Gopinath Bordoloi, the Chief Minister, also did not make any false promise when he said in the Assembly: "For the homogeneity of the province, they (non-Assamese) should adopt the Assamese language. It is not the intention of the Government to make Assam a bi-lingual state."¹³ It was perhaps a slip on the part of the Chief Minister to pronounce the intention of the government that way. What would be the language of a state under the democratic system does not actually depend upon the intention of the government but on the people or peoples of the state. On the other hand in deliberation of his party MLAs, there is a reference to 'our people'. These people were obviously the Assamese people whose cause he championed. Phookan was emphatic about the mind of his own people but did not concern himself with the feeling of the people who were not his. One who knows Assam, of course, can easily discern that Bordoloi and Phookan were speaking to complement each other. Phookan spoke as the representative of the Assamese middle class which was the ruling class of Assam. And since independence, this class 'has largely succeeded in projecting its own class and fictional interest as the interest of the Asamiya nationality, of the people of Assam.'¹⁴ Bordoloi was the leader of this class and hence when he spoke of the 'intention of the Government' he simply expressed the feeling of this class which successfully projected its own interest 'as the interest of the people'. It needs to be mentioned that the Assamese middle class had complete control over the state power and most of the chronic problems of Assam had their origin in the fact that this control had been established and maintained ignoring the empirical realities of the polyethnic poly-linguistic Assam.

However, this assertive language policy which has been termed as 'aggressive nationalism' by R.B. Vagaiwallah, the Census Superintendent of Assam,¹⁵ did not affect the Bodos directly during the early years. The Assam government was then primarily concerned with dealing with the Bengali language, which has been manifested in its education policy which has been mentioned earlier. In other spheres

like land settlement also the government used the linguistic identity as a criteria for consideration, but the Bodos were spared. For instance, the government of Assam issued a circular prohibiting settlement of and to the non-indigenous people and while defining indigenous people it was stated; “indigenous persons of Assam mean persons belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any of the indigenous languages of the region.”¹⁶ So, till then the Bodos did not find their language to be an impediment to their economic pursuits.¹⁷

It is not that the language consciousness of the Bodos was quite in an under developed stage in the fifties. Their advanced section adopted Assamese, but at the same time they were keen to develop their mother tongue. It is comparable to the situation of the British, provinces of the eighteenth century where the advanced section learned English to develop their respective vernacular languages. In the early fifties some Bodo youths felt that something had to be done for the development of their own speech that was yet to develop as a literary language. The outcome was the establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952. The first President of the Sabha was Ravinendranath Basumatari, a very young enthusiast who had just come out from the college. Most of the other members of the executive committee were also young in age.

Bodo Sahitya Sabha came into existence without much fanfare and thereby its potential significance was missed by the Assamese. The title of the Sabha itself was inspired by Assam Sahitya Sabha, the giant organization run by the Assamese middle class for propagating Assamese language and culture throughout the state. It was and still is the basic organization that has enough clout to dictate to the government its linguistic and cultural policy. Financed heavily by the state, it is capable of distributing favours of immense magnitude to those who toe its line. All state awards concerning art, culture and literature are processed, directly or indirectly, through and by Asom Sahitya Sabha. In short, the cultural hegemony that the Assamese middle class has established over all other groups throughout the state may be attributed to the aggressive agenda of Asom Sahitya Sabha. The Bodo youths, while naming their literary organization, were

obviously inspired by the wealth, grandeur and authority of this organization and had a dream of building up Bodo Sahitya Sabha in the same model with similar objective. Its beginning was humble, but its founders cherished a great dream. The setting up of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) was itself a token protest against the language policy of the Assam government but that message was lost. None of the major Bodo leaders was associated with BSS initially and that reassured the state government to proceed with its language policy. In 1987, All Bodo Students' Union in a memorandum submitted to the President of India observes:

Assam is a multilingual, multi-racial and multicultural state. But yet the Assamese people always try to impose Assamese language upon the non-Assamese people including the indigenous tribal people. As such, here arises the clash between the Assamese-speaking people on one hand and the tribals and other linguistic minorities on the other.¹⁸

It took some time for the Bodo political leaders to take cognizance of this basic fact of Assam politics. But to the workers of the cultural and literary field, the fact became clear quite early. It was Asom Sahitya Sabha that contributed by its overzealous postures to the rapid development of cultural awareness amongst the Bodos. In 1950, Asom Sahitya Sabha first raised the demand for recognizing Assamese as the only official language of the state. The government was not unsympathetic towards the demand, but it was apprehensive of the reaction of the hill districts, particularly the districts of Khasi hills, the Garo hills, the Naga hills and the Mizo hills. So it bought time and at the same time encouraged the use of Assamese in the official transactions whenever and wherever possible. But the Assamese middle class became restive for statutory recognition of a de-facto situation. In April 1959, Asom Sahitya Sabha resolved in its annual conference that within one year the government should make Assamese the sole state language. To press the demand, September 9, 1959 was observed as the Demand Day with usual fanfare. Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha was hesitant which is apparent from his statement:

There are two important reasons which warrant enactment of a state language. First, to make the official communications easily understandable to the common men; and second, to break the barrier of language which now splits the diverge

population of the state. The Government apprehends that if this issue was decided only on the basis of majority and minority, its object would be defeated.¹⁹

The objective of the Chief Minister was to go for the enactment only after convincing the hill districts of its desirability. Otherwise, he knew all of them would opt out of Assam. Sahitya Sabha had already inducted its natural ally, the student community in the movement, and in no time the movement took a violent form, the victims being the Bengalis. Hardpressed by the situation, the Chief Minister was compelled to introduce a bill in the Assembly which subsequently became the Assam Official Language Act, 1960.²⁰

A unilingual Assam had always been the dream of the Assamese middle class since the British days.²¹ Asom Sahitya Sabha, since its inception in 1917, had been propagating this as the singular goal of the Assamese people. It is for this reason that the reaction of the hill districts was of no concern for them. If these districts opted out, that would strengthen the process of homogenization of Assam – that was the dominant feeling of the period. So, the enactment of the Assam Official Language Act was hailed by the Assamese middle class as a major victory and it was celebrated.²²

In this euphoria, a small development was not noticed by the Assamese people. When the debate on the issue of the state language was at its zenith, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha met and adopted a resolution. It received practically no attention from the political circles and the vocal Assamese press also preferred to ignore it. This indifference was due to the fact that the resolution of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha did not produce any immediate political effect. The Bodo MLAs, all of whom were in the Congress Legislative Party, remained loyal to the ruling group and none did express any resentment over the text of the Assam Official Language Act. So, the dissenting voice of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was dismissed as a whimsical extravagance of some frustrated youths. However, as a pre-emptive move, the ruling party arranged to coopt Ranendra Basumatari, who was the first President of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, within its fold. Basumatari was initially given a Congress nomination in an Assembly seat and subsequently was made a minister. This was thought to be sufficient to stifle any murmur of protest that might be voiced any Bodo group.

But the tactics, though they were effective on a short-term basis, ultimately did not produce the desired effect. Doubtless the resolution of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had a political implication and power politics within the Bodo society also played its due role in its formulation; but the fact remains that it was a product of a specific historical situation when for the first time an indigenous community represented by its more radical section decided to oppose the cultural hegemony of the Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley. This decision was momentary and the mere historical worth of this specific point of departure from the past line has made the resolution a testament around which the subsequent cultural aspiration of the Bodos has been evolving. The resolution for its historical significance deserves to be quoted in full:

Whereas the repercussion of the official language issue in Assam has threatened the very unity of the nation, in particular the unity of the state of Assam, the Bodo people of Assam view the development with grave concern. It has given its anxious thoughts over the issue and came to the conclusion that 'Hindi', the official language of India should be the only official language of Assam for the following reasons'.

1. The unity of India has to be maintained in order to preserve the newly won independence. The issue of the official language in Assam has threatened the unity having given the fissiparous tendency which is harmful for Assam and for India as a whole. To put an end to this tendency the best course open is, in the opinion of the Bodo people, to accept 'Hindi' as the official language of the state of Assam placing thereby every linguistic group in the state on the same footing; that way putting the people of Assam one step forward towards learning Hindi.
2. It cannot be denied that Assam is a multilingual state. Every linguistic group desires to keep alive their literature and get education in their own mother tongue. The biggest linguistic group in the state is that of Assamese which can claim only 54 per cent. According to the opinion of the S.R.C. a language should be spoken by seventy per cent or more to be recognized as an official language of a state. Looked at from this point of view

the declaration of Assamese as Official language of Assam will mean imposition on the people of other linguistic groups.

The people of the Hill districts and Cachar are almost one and all ignorant of this language. Even in the Brahmaputra Valley districts, mainly the northern parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang and some parts of Nowgong and North Lakhimpur districts the uneducated rural tribal people, mostly the Bodo people, are totally ignorant of this language. The purpose for the adoption the official language of a state is to better and smoothen the administration. In this the adoption of Assamese as an official language will totally fail.

3. In Assam, the Bodo speaking people are the largest tribal group. They have preserved their language and culture all these years under adverse circumstances. They desire very legitimately to preserve them in future also. They consider that to maintain their separate identity and to develop themselves most speedily, their children must be given education in their mother tongue. This will not be possible if Assamese is recognized as the official language of Assam because, in that case, Assamese will have to be learnt by the Bodo children putting thereby an extra burden upon them which will put them at a disadvantageous position *vis-à-vis* the Assamese-speaking students.

The resolution has different layers underneath and a closer scrutiny would reveal that below the surface the resolution contained in embryonic form most of the perceptions and strategies that have been deployed subsequently for the assertion of the Bodo identity. The suggestion for adoption of Hindi as the official language of Assam may appear at the first sight as a pious wish of some simple-minded tribal youths unaware of the complexities of the vexed problem. But the fact was otherwise; the suggestion to adopt Hindi as the official language of Assam was incorporated in the resolution on two important considerations. First, the Bodo people had seen the zeal and aggressiveness with which Assamese was being propagated by some influential section of the majority; they had rightful apprehension that once recognized as official language, Assamese would be imposed on all and in every sphere and thereby their Bodo

language would face extinction. So, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha preferred to adopt a negative policy than to allow imposition of Assamese. This negation of Assamese at all cost subsequently became an ingredient of the Bodo assertion that became more explicit during the script movement of the seventies. Anyway, the move of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha also advocated the case of Hindi. This was done as a strategy for placating the central government whose support the Sabha needed to combat the policy of the linguistic expansionism pursued by the Assam government.

NOTES

1. Quoted from Memorandum submitted by Plain's Tribal Councils of Assam in 1967.
2. The Tribal League expressed this apprehension in a memorandum submitted to Constituent Assembly; in 1946, see P.S. Dutta (ed.), *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 165-166.
3. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p. 305.
4. Memorandum of the PTCA, May 26, 1967.
5. It is often alleged that the 'Bodo and other, plains tribals of Assam were denied the elaborate constitutional protections contained in the sixth schedule of the Constitutions. (D.P. Mukherjee and S.K. Mukherjee, *Contemporary Cultural and Political Movements among the Bodos of Assam*). *Tribal Movement in India*, Vol. 1, Ed. K.S. Singh, Delhi, 1982, p. 256). It is not the whole truth. The Tribal League or any other plain-tribal organization did not seek protection under the sixth schedule. In its memorandum submitted by the Tribal League on March 20, 1947, to the Constituent Assembly it demanded protection under the fifth schedule of the Article 189 (a) and this was reiterated in subsequent memorandum. It gave maximum stress on the modalities of the formation and functioning of the proposed Scheduled Tribe Advisory Committee. And Bordoloi Committee also suggested that all matters related to the protection and representation of the plains tribal should be left with the Advisory Committee. The plains tribals were not mentioned in the fifth schedule as there was existence the Amendment Act of 1947 that protected tribal land. The Tribal Advisory Council was set up in 1958.
6. Medini Choudhury, a Bodo litterateur, writes a significant novel where the life of Bishnu Rabha in the background of the RCPI movement has been comprehensively dealt with.
7. R.B. Vagaiwalla, the Census Superintendent of the State in 1951, remarks: With the solitary exception of Assamese, every single language or language

- group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of people speaking the same. All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951 – Census of India, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Vol. XII, Part 1-A, pp. 410-414.
8. M. Hussain, *The Assam Movement*, Delhi, 1993, p. 174.
 9. Imtiaz Hasnain, 'Linguistic Consequences of Ethnicity and Nationalism in Language Contact Situation: From Equilibrium of Conflict Perspective' in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, (Ed.) Mrinal Miri, Shimla, 1998, p. 526.
 10. The mechanism adopted for converting Bengali medium schools to Assamese medium schools was to sanction grants specifying as a pre-condition those only Assamese as the medium of instruction. For instance (a) The Director of Public Instruction of Assam vide his memo no. 41766/77 dated 20.11.47 wrote to Additional Director, Public Instruction: "The grant is sanctioned on condition that the medium of instructions should be nothing but Assamese".
(b) Secretary, Provincial Primary Education Board wrote to the Secretary, Subdivisional Primary Education Board, Dhubri vide letter No. P.SB. 15/48/534-48.
"The grants are sanctioned on the condition that the medium of instruction must be Assamese".
The concerned grants were meant for plains tribal schools of Gardanpur, Ramphalbil, Baisamguri, Islakhata (Girh, L.P. School) and Banargaon.
(c) Letter written to a Garo medium school, by the Secretary, Provincial Primary board says:
"I have honour to let me know if you are agreeable to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in your schools".
(Quoted are from Assam Assembly, Proceedings, 1952, pp. 631-32)
 11. The reasons for this lacunae have been detailed in Chapter I and II. Also see Hussain, op. cit., p.23.
 12. Speech of Nilmoni Phookan, MLA (Congress), in the Assembly (Assam Assembly Proceedings, 1948, pp. 581-582).
 13. *Ibid.*, p.511.
 14. Hussain, op. cit., pp. 91-93
 15. *Census of India*, 1951, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Vol. XII, Part 1-A, p. 414.
 16. *Assam Gazette*, September 6, 1950, p. 1404.
 17. Whereas the plain tribes of Assam did not openly react against the language policy of the government in the early fifties, the hill tribes did. The executive committee of the Mizo Union met on February 12, under the Presidentship of Mr. R. Thanhlira, protested against the attempt at imposition of the Assamese language in the Middle Schools in the Lushai Hills district: The resolution adopted says:
"If the intention of teaching the Assamese language in the Hill districts was

to bring the hills and plains people to a closer understanding, then the language of the hills should also be taught in Assamese schools. So long as this reciprocity is absent, the Mizo people cannot but conclude that the sole aid is to influence and dominate the Hill people through the Assamese language". (*The Statesman*, Calcutta, February 13, 1954)

18. Memorandum by All Bodo Students Union, H.Q., Kokrajhar, November 13, 1987.
19. Translated from a report published in *Weekly Jugashakti*, Karimganj, October 29, 1960.
20. Internal squabbles for power within Assam Congress added to the aggressive nature of the State Language movement, 1960. Bimla Prasad Chaliha replaced Bishnuram Medhi as Chief Minister in the last part of 1957 though Chaliha was not an MLA at that time. The central leadership of Congress lent its support to Chaliha in this ouster job. Medhi, having organic link with the Assamese caste Hindu society, was more acceptable to the Assamese upper strata...The Medhi group within Congress with its social support base added fuel to fire during this agitation of 1960. Otherwise, in 1955, Bishnuram Medi officially submitted to the States Reorganisation Commission that the Government had no intention to bring forward any legislation to make Assamese the State language. He said, 'the language problem would only be settled with the minorities.' (*Assamese Movement*, Calcutta, 1990, p.69): Medhi's stance on the language issue did not produce any adverse reaction because of the social control that he had on the Assamese caste Hindus.
21. It is for the fulfillment of this dream that the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and the Congress Ministry of Assam led by Gopinath Bordoloi allowed the Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet to go to Pakistan through the mockery of a referendum. The observations of Swarnalata Baruah, a front-ranking Assamese historian, is worth-quoting:

In the Assam Valley, the public opinion demanding separation of Sylhet from Assam remained consistent. The APCC also in its election manifesto had pledged itself to work to that end and Bardoloi even wanted that a portion of Cachar should also go along with Sylhet (Ref. Bardoloi to Patel, February 18, 1946. Sardar Patel's Correspondences 1945-50, Vol. III, Ahmedabad, 1972, 194-96). Though under the changed circumstances (meaning, now it was not sending a portion of Assam to Bengal within India, but sacrificing a portion of India to Pakistan which a Congressman was not supposed to do' author), it was not now possible to reiterate this openly, the Assam Valley Congressmen managed to get a referendum in July 1947. The verdict in favour of separation of Sylhet (to Pakistan) gave a feeling of relief to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. (*A Comprehensive History of Assam*, p. 614)

So, when the nation was doing its best to save whatever it could from the clutches of Muslim League, the Assamese Congress leaders were conspiring to present to Muslim League on a platter the most prosperous district of the province.

22. For instance, Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua, the leading zamindar and public figure who was elected the President of the Assam Association in 1903 had all through sponsored the cause of Bengali language and culture in Goalpara. He claimed himself to be a Bengalee and was elected the President of Bengali Kayastha Mahasabha. Amongst the peasantry also, a large section wanted retention of Bengali in Goalpara. It is because Goalpara was a part of Bangla Suba of the Mughals and the district passed on to the British in 1765 with the granting of the Dewani of Bengal to the Company by Emperor Shah Alam. As late as 1938, Motiur Rahman Mia who represented rural West Goalpara seat told the Assembly:

We are Bengalees. Our mother tongue is Bengali. Under the circumstances of this Assamese language be imposed as a new burden on our shoulders, on our children's shoulders and if we are deprived of our mother tongue, then that will amount of depriving our children from opportunities of education. (Speech in Bengali, translated by Amalendu Guha, op. cit, p. 259)

The situation took a different turn after independence when Bordoloi government decided not to allow land settlement or issue of land to the people whose mother tongue was not Assamese or any of the tribal language (see foot note 16 of this chapter).

CHAPTER 6

Towards Confrontation

The feeble voice of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha went unheard because of the lack of political backing behind it. At the same time, the volatile situation created by the media, cultural organizations and student bodies through an organized and concerted effort for mobilizing public opinion behind the demand for recognition of Assamese showed that language itself could become a very effective political weapon. S.K. Chaube is right when he asserts that language is the favourite political issue in Assam.¹ But in 1960, it was only the Assamese who used that favourite issue for mounting political pressure on the professional politicians. Since then the mechanism was taken up by other linguistic groups as well. In 1961 the people of the Bengali-speaking Barak Valley built up a massive movement demanding official status for Bengali and the movement was led and controlled by a parallel leadership that emerged bypassing the mainstream political parties. A new kind of linguistic awareness developed amongst all the communities of Assam as a sequel to the movements and counter movements that took place between 1959-60 over linguistic rights.

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha took cue from these instances and decided to organize its own movement initially with a demand which was, though modest, remained unfulfilled for a decade. In 1953 the Bodo Sahitya Sabha placed a demand for introduction of the Bodo language at the primary level in the Bodo inhabited areas before Bishnuram Medhi, the then Chief Minister of Assam. The government sat over the demand for three years and acted upon it only in 1955-56 when it became necessary to keep the Bodos in good humour for the time being so that no Bodo organization put forward any adverse suggestion to the States Reorganization Commission. In 1956, the government came out with a textbook supposed to be a Bodo primer which to

their bewilderment the Bodo scholars found to be really an Assamese reader interspersed with some Bodo words here and there. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha refused to accept it as a Bodo primer and since then the issue has been shelved in cold storage.

This time, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha drew up an action programme to pressurize the government. Large-scale preparations were made and thanks to the awareness created in the wake of the language movements of other varieties during the preceding years, the Bodo people responded spontaneously. On November 16, 1962, a huge procession of 15,000 people came out at Kokrajhar under the banner of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha demanding recognition of Bodo language at the primary level.² It was impossible for any professional politician to ignore a demand that was backed a procession of 5000 people and so the Bodo MLAs' immediately took up the matter with the government. The state government also had grown wiser through its experience of the Barak Valley movement³ and with no loss of time appointed a one member committee with Rupnath Brahma, the Bodo Minister, to examine the demand. On his recommendations, on May 18, 1963, Bimla Prasad Chaliha, the Chief Minister of Assam introduced ceremonially Bodo language as the medium of instruction up to Class III at the Government High School of Kokrajhar.

The procession of November 16, 1962, was the largest mobilization till then ever organized by a Bodo organization, political or non-political. Its success gave the Bodo Sahitya Sabha the necessary confidence and at the same time convinced them of the efficacy of action programmes in achieving cultural goals. The Bodo leaders of the ruling party also received the message that this apparent cultural outfit had the potentials of assuming the role of a super-political' body capable of effectively influencing the political opinion of the Bodos. They, thus, initiated measures to appropriate the success that was achieved by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. It is for this purpose that Rupnath Brahma was asked to operate as a single member committee that was to become instrumental in conferring recognition to the Bodo language. Introduction of a language at the primary level is a minor affair and normally it does not deserve the presence of the Chief Minister for ceremonial inauguration. But Chaliha came and

he also ensured presence of other plains tribal leaders in the ceremony. All these were done to give the impression that it was not the agitation of the Bodo Sabha, but the generosity of the Congress government through which the recognition came. And for consolidation of the gains, Ranen Basumatari, the founder President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha was made a minister subsequently.

II

Language was not the only issue that had been disturbing the Bodos throughout all these years. There were other issues less emotional but equally vital that needed redressal. Most important amongst them was the land issue. During the first decade after independence, the question of land settlement went to occupy a back seat for the time being. As early as 1960, the Tribal Sangha, the non-political successor of the Tribal League, submitted before U.N. Dhebar, Chairman of the Scheduled Areas and Schedule of the Constitution for inclusion in it the areas inhabited by the Plains Tribals of Assam.⁴ Earlier, the Tribal leaders had the expectation that the Advisory Council for the Welfare of the Plains Tribals as assured by Gopinath Bordoloi would be effective in redressing the grievances' particularly with regard to land alienation. But that hope was belied. Firstly, it took more than ten years for the government to form the council. Secondly, as it was not a statutory body, the government officials felt no obligation to abide by its recommendations. Complaints at the upper level also yielded no result. So they demanded constitutional protection under the sixth schedule. But the Dhebar Commission, for some reasons, did not properly examine this demand. The Commission simply remarked that "Assam is already faced with perplexities in the Hill Districts and Cachar".⁵ No doubt, this cannot be a justification for rejecting or bypassing the demand of the Tribal Sangha of Assam.

Since 1965, the Tribal Sangha has been trying hard to draw attention of the government to the problem of land alienation. In March 1965, Kokrajhar District Tribal Sangha alleged in a resolution adopted in its annual conference that in Sidhi and Bijni Tribal Block thousands of bighas of land has either been transferred to or encroached upon by non-bonafide people. "Thus," the resolution says,

“as a result of the illegal occupation and transfer of the tribal land, the genuine landless cultivator claimants of the Belt and Block areas are being deprived of getting land settlements, leading them to the extreme miseries and sufferings in search of cultivable lands in other areas.”⁶

The second allegation made in the same resolution brings to light an interesting aspect of the land policy of the government of Assam. The resolution says:

The District Tribal Sangha has observed with grave concern that in May 1952 the Government alienated an area of 4037 bighas of cultivated land from the Bijni Tribal Block constituted in 1947 and included it in the Panbari Reserved Forests, and, in 1961, an area of about 1000 bighas of cultivable land of the said block was included in the Bishnupur Colony which has been created to accommodate the refugees from East Pakistan, thus making the land problems of the landless tribals within the tribal block more dangerous.⁷

In 1950, the government of India requested Assam government to increase state's total area under forest reserves. The state government responded by taking a slice from the tribal block area. In the case of refugee rehabilitation, the mechanism adopted by the government of Assam was more innovative. The central government had pressed Assam government for arranging some land where refugees could be settled. The state government initially declined saying that Assam did not have enough surplus land even to settle landless people of native origin.⁸ But as the Centre came out with a promise of cash fund for acquisition of land for the refugees which would be sanctioned individually in the name of the recipients as loans, the prospect of handling this fund appeared to be too alluring. The enthusiasm of Motiram Bora, the then Finance Minister of Assam found expression in the Assembly:

We do not allot any money (for the refugees). All the expenditures is borne by the Government of India. They provide all money. In the matter of acquisition of land, we acquire the land but the money is paid by the Government of India for the acquisition of land etc. through loans. As a matter of fact we have no complaint. The Government of India is providing us with necessary funds.⁹

This way the state government virtually started operating a real estate business by selling the *Khas* (owned by the government) land to the

refugees with central government fund. But for this purpose also it was not at all necessary to acquire tribal land because Assam had at that time 19 million acres of cultivable fallow waste lying vacant for want of hands. But the state did not want to touch them. So, whether it was for extension of forest area or for settlement of refugees, it was the tribal block that became the target.¹⁰

A delegation of the Assam Tribal Sangha met the Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha on March 28 and 29, 1966 and apprised him of the situation. The central committee of Assam Tribal Sangha met on May 21 and 22, 1966 and adopted as many as seven resolutions pointing out the specific areas where large scale land alienation was going on. They urged upon the administration to take immediate measures for restoring these encroached areas back to the tribal block. The Chief Minister was also asked by the resolution to take concrete and positive steps in this regard within August 1966. But instead of taking action, the government of Assam, more precisely some influential officials, initiated a move to include some other categories of people in the list of bonafide classes that deserved to be settled in the tribal blocks.¹¹ Here, the initial notification of 1947 came handy because the term 'backward classes' was a flexible one, and inclusion in this category was quite within the jurisdiction of the state government. The tribal aspirations and the governments' attitude were thus posited to confront each other.

III

The introduction of the Bodo language as the medium of instruction had a fall-out that was destined to cause some troubles. On entering the high school the Bodo medium students found it difficult to cope with the studies, as at the secondary level the medium was Assamese. Naturally a demand was raised for the recognition of Bodo at the secondary level at least up to class VII. The state government did not take the demand seriously and this indifference was instrumental in arousing a group of Bodo intellectuals and social activists to think afresh about a political course of action that would enable them some kind of autonomy in dealing with their own affairs.

So, the land problem provided the Bodos with the material basis

and the language issue the emotional content to think seriously of a new political set up that would ensure them protection of their land, their way of life and cultural aspiration according to their own genius and tradition. But this favourable objective situation did not immediately and automatically produce the subjective initiative to articulate and press the demand. The grievances were genuine but the degree of dissatisfaction and disenchantment was not equal in all sections of the Bodos. The senior leaders of the community were hesitant to take an extreme position as most of them were Congressmen with a strong sense of loyalty to the party in power that in a way manifested the faithful adherence to the legacy of the Bodo politics since the Tribal League days of 1937. These Congress-leaders still had immense command over the Bodo community as most of them emerged from the families of chieftains and they were in a position to invoke old tribal bond of kinship and other allied sentiments for mustering support behind them. At the same time, as they were mostly Brahmas, they formed the early elite class of the Bodos which had contributed most to the Bodo-awakening. It was not easy to brush aside this leadership who thought the raising of demand for any kind of autonomy at the moment would be premature and it would not be possible to carry the people with such a demand.¹² This stance of the senior leaders might have its origin in pragmatic reasons, but subsequent election results proved that the Bodo Congress leaders were still in command of the Bodo situation. The forces that were eager to go ahead immediately for 'autonomy' were composed of two categories, viz, the seniors, mostly elites, who for some reason or other had been left outside the pale of Congress organization and the emerging youth leaders who were sincerely committed to the Bodo cause. But these two categories, in spite of the material and emotional basis of their cause, were not eager to confront the Congress as they were well aware of the social support base of the Congress leaders.

It is quite noteworthy that a statement by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi actually triggered off a series of political reactions that culminated in raising for the first time the demand for 'autonomy' by the Bodos. On January 13, 1967 Mrs. Gandhi made a statement to

the effect that the central government was examining a proposal for reorganization of Assam on a federal basis composed of federating units having equal status not subordinate to one another. The Prime Minister was actually concerned with the problem of the Hill tribes of Assam and the reorganization proposal was mooted to resolve the problem. In a subsequent discussion held with a Mizo delegation the Prime Minister did not rule out the possibility of inclusion of the plains tribes in the proposed structure as a federating unit, of course, if other conditions were satisfied. These pronouncements immediately set forth various responses amongst the concerned peoples and the dissatisfied segment of the Bodos interpreted them as a signal for launching a movement demanding some kind of autonomy for the plains tribes of Assam. In almost all memorandum and representations submitted by different organizations to the central government demanding one or other kind of autonomy invariably have a reference to this statement of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) puts its reaction in plain words:

While Shrimati Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, announced the policy of reorganization of Assam on federal basis before the delegation team of Mizo Union in New Delhi on the 18th January, 1967, the Goalpara District Bodo Students' Union warmly welcomed the policy and since then demanded a separate state for the Plains Tribals people of Assam...As stated earlier, with the declaration of policy of reorganization of Assam on federal structure on the 13th January, 1967, by the then Prime Minister Smt. Gandhi a political renaissance arose among the Bodos.¹⁴

IV

In the realm of the Bodo politics, the pronouncement of Mrs. Gandhi produced the effect of a thunderbolt and the reactions that followed were so fast that the Bodo Congress leaders failed to keep pace with it. There was a general impression that the Centre desired the Bodos should now demand autonomy and the Bodo case would go in default if they failed to raise the demand now. This impression was based on wrong calculations because of two reasons:

- (1) Till then the Bodos and other plain tribals had never officially

presented their case for autonomy before the Centre and it was extremely unlikely that the Centre would suo moto initiate an exercise for the Bodo autonomy; (2) Had that been the scheme of the Centre, the Congress High Command would have asked its Bodo followers to raise the demand. It had no reason to depend solely on the spontaneous reaction of non-Congress forces for execution of a plan dealing with such sensitive issues. The Bodo leaders of the Congress knew well that at least till then the Centre had no mind to examine the Bodo issue and hence they were not ready to take any stance on the issue. But the younger generation of the Bodo activists became restive. Some of them really believed that the Centre had a scheme of giving some autonomy to the Bodos; others were pro-autonomy people who knowingly allowed and encouraged a wrong notion to get currency so that they could create a pro-autonomy sentiment taking advantage of the situation.

It was felt that whatever was to be done needed to be done in a hurry. Since it was not possible to hold a state level conference at a short notice, it was decided through informal discussions that for raising the demand of autonomy immediately, a conference of the Bodo leaders and workers of the Kokrajhar sub-division would be convened first. So, on February 27, 1967, the Bodo leaders and workers of the Kokrajhar subdivision met under the presidentship of Madaram Brahma, a veteran educationist, litterateur and social activist. The conference took four major decisions:

1. As on earlier occasions, this time also the Bodo leadership would propagate the cause of all plains tribals of Assam;
2. A demand for full autonomy was to be raised immediately for preservation of the economy, culture, language and way of life of the plains tribals of Assam;
3. An organization entitled Plains Tribals Council of Assam was to be formed for spearheading this movement for full autonomy;
4. An action committee was formed with its headquarters at Kokrajhar to organize a well-represented convention of plains tribals for formalizing the organisation of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PICA).¹⁵

This action committee travelled throughout the state and organized

district adhoc committees in all districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. On March 18, delegates of districts adhoc committees met in a conference and gave the final shape to the Plains Tribals Council of Assam. To accommodate the Mishings (Miris), Birucharan Doley, a Mishing leader, was elected president and Samar Brahma Choudhury and Charan Narzary, both Bodos, were made Vice-President and General Secretary respectively. Thus the Plains' Tribals Council of Assam was born to bring about a new situation in Assam politics.

The formation of PTCA was preceded by the formation of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). On February 15, 1967, i.e. twelve days before PTCA was born, different students' organizations of the Bodo areas met at Kokrajhar and decided to work under the banner of a centralized organization. It was from this platform that the demand for an autonomous region for the plains tribals was raised for the first time. It was claimed subsequently by the ABSU that "the Bodo students took the initiative to form a political party and thus the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) was created on 27th February, 1967 at Kokrajhar."¹⁵ With regard to other regions of the country, such a claim of a Students' body would not have been taken seriously, but in the special context of Assam the claim of ABSU could not be discarded simply as a boastful pronouncement of some youngsters. It needs to be mentioned that in Assam, the dominant role of the students in some particular areas of political activity, has been a steady factor since the pre-independence days and it is this kind of politics through which most of the gains of the Assamese middle class have been attained. Since the Bodos took a cue in this respect from the Assamese majority, this significant aspect of Assam politics deserves some elaboration.

Meena Deka while assessing the roots of the continuity of the political legacy of Assam observes:

... In fact student organizations were influenced to a great extent by the demands and aspirations of this middle class. Although the year 1947 saw India free herself from the shackles of colonialism in Assam, the regional problems continued to be the concern of the students of Assam, problems which were basically the legacy of the colonial regime. Thus students movements and agitations in post-independence period entered a new phase on the major and popular issues of Assam like industrialization, food crisis, introduction of state language and medium

of instruction in the universities to ensure the linguistic and regional identity of the Assamese people.¹⁶

No one can miss the fact that the issues mentioned should not have concerned the student community in a normal situation. Here lies the peculiarity of Assam's political scenario since the beginning of this century. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, as the branch of Indian National Congress, was the only major political party in Assam during the pre-independence decades. After independence, some left parties also emerged though Congress continued to be the most influential organization. But at no point of time could the Congress or any other political party establish its hegemony over the Assamese people. This hegemony was monopolized by an elite group of Assamese middle class who operated above the head of established political parties. It was the organizations like Asom Sahitya Sabha¹⁷ and Assam Jatiya Mashasabha controlled by few individuals that actually used to guide and dominate the Assamese mind and on issues like language, land policy and job priorities they had the power to dictate terms to political parties. Assam Jatiya Mahasabha is no longer there, but Asom Sahitya Sabha is still functioning with more resources to play a decisive role in these matters. And the method they adopted to compel the party in power to toe their line was to incite the student community to take the issue to the streets and confront the government by creating law and order problem, the degree of which varies in accordance with the extent of the actual mobilization of the student community. It was in this way that the monolithic organization of All Assam Students Union was built up. In a sense the student community is the reserved force of the Assamese elite which has been unleashed from time to time when the former wishes to assert its hegemony over the state and authority over the government.

As already stated, the Bodo movement has learnt this specialized kind of tactics from the majority Assamese community, to be more accurate, from the Assamese elite. So the Bodo intellectuals fashioned the Bodo Sahitya Sabha on the model of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. Since its establishment in 1953, particularly since its success in introducing Bodo language at the primary level in 1963, the Bodo

Sahitya Sabha had taken up the task of determining the future agenda for Bodo consolidation. It was the elite group that controlled the Bodo Sahitya Sabha who were also instrumental in the formation of the All Bodo Students' Union. And within fifteen days of its formation it compelled the senior leaders who were not that much attached to the Congress to form a parallel political platform to go ahead with the demand of autonomy. This assertion of the Bodo elites effected through the mobilization of the student community made it clear that the Bodo movement was going to combat the Assamese hegemony with the strategies formulated by the latter Assamese themselves. Anyway, PTCA, within two months of its birth, formalized the organizational aspects of the outfit by accepting a constitution¹⁹ and expanding a network of branches almost in all plains tribal pockets of the Brahmaputra Valley. But its success in the non Bodo areas was not that much impressive though it had a non-Bodo president. However, the PTCA went ahead with its basic objective, viz., the propagation for autonomy of the plains tribals. On May 20, 1967, it submitted to the President of India a memorandum that says inter-alia:

That the Plains Tribals' Council of Assam considers that it will be a great injustice to the plains tribals of Assam if their genuine grievances, sentiments and viewpoints on the issue of the proposed reorganization of the state of Assam on federal basis are not given due importance and sympathetic consideration... The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam deem that full autonomy within the framework of the Indian constitution will alone help the plains tribals grow according to their own genius and tradition. The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam have since long been demanding full autonomy comprising the pre-dominantly tribal inhabited areas of the plains of Assam.

We will analyze in details the contents of this and other memoranda later. The significant point to be noted here is that though PTCA demanded autonomy, it did not specify the precise nature of that autonomy. This ambiguity was not a slip, but a part of a well-considered strategy. Firstly, PTCA was not in a position to anticipate the model of the federal plan envisaged by the Centre and so it thought it prudent to keep its own demand flexible. Secondly, PTCA was also ready to negotiate with the Assamese leaders and Assam government on the issue and it kept the door open for that.

Moreover, PTCA opted for a cautious approach because it did not want to enter, at this early state, into any confrontation with the Congress. Aware of the command the Bodo leaders of the Congress-fold possessed, and also willing to keep the Centre in good humour for extracting as much concessions as possible through negotiation, the PTCA leaders were not willing to take an open and definite anti-Congress position. As a part of this strategy the PTCA leaders decided initially not to participate in elections. But a political project once set in motion, normally creates a situation when the leadership finds it difficult to contain the emotion of the people generated through its propagation. Immediately after the submission of this memorandum a by-election took place in one of the Bodo-dominated constituency and the PTCA, under the pressure of its younger activists, had to take a decision to deal with the situation afresh. To cope with the mood of the younger generation, the PTCA took decision to boycott the election and urged upon the people not to participate in the electoral process. But this call received scant response. The reason was that the call was given in a half-hearted manner and the organization was not geared up for implementing such a major political programme. Also the ground was not prepared to involve the Bodo masses in the programme. Next year, in 1968, a by-election to a Lok Sabha seat was announced and this time the PTCA took up the challenge in right earnest and started a full-fledged campaign for the boycott of the election. This time the state government did not take chances and arrested almost all leaders of the PTCA and kept them in jail for four months. This repressive measure actually brought an end to the efforts of the moderates of the PTCA who hoped for reconciliation with the Congress and thereby to achieve a negotiated settlement. Also by that time it became quite clear that the central government was not inclined to consider the question of the autonomy of the plains tribals while drawing the plan for federal reorganization of Assam. The Centre had its own problems in doing so. Already the Assamese mind was agitated over the attitude of the Centre in granting some kind of autonomy to the hill districts and agitational programmes were taken up by an organization in a phased manner named Asom Federal Birodhi Karma Parishad. The organization

cropped up all of a sudden through the initiatives of some influential elites and immediately it succeeded in ensuring the support of the Assamese press and Assamese student community. So, on January 13, 1968 Assam Unity Day was observed with demonstrations throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and on January 24, 1968 the students called a bandh. Also a call was given to boycott the Republic Day ceremony on January 26, 1968 and the NCC cadets abstained from the Republic Day parade. As usual, the agitation culminated in the break-out of a full scale riot on the same day that made commercial and trading communities of north Indian origin its prime targets. The total loss was estimated to be about 100 million rupees.²¹ To appease the Assamese sentiment the central government made it clear that it would not go for any plan that might disintegrate the heartland Assam. Hence PTCA was left with the only option of confrontation with Congress and the Centre.²⁰

V

Though PTCA, during the early years of its existence, avoided confronting the government over the issue of autonomy, there were other areas where the Bodo public opinion and the policy of the state government were at loggerheads. The issue of the medium of instruction was one such area and we have already seen how the emotional content of the issue was capable of generating tremendous wave in the public mind. The unimaginative and unsympathetic attitude of the state government often contributed considerably to add fuel to the fire already burning. It is not accidental that the display of student power on January 26, 1968 in Guwahati was followed by a genuine desire by the Bodo students and youths to confront the government over the question of the medium of instruction. The issue had been raised earlier by Bodo Sahitya Sabha which demanded again on January 5, 1968, for introducing the Bodo medium initially up to class VI standard with phased upgradation up to class X in due course. Two meetings between the delegates of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the Chief Minister took place on January 15 and January 31 respectively. But there was no settlement.²¹

The impasse was created because the officials of the department

of education took an absurd position on the issue. They maintained that the Bodo language could not be used for the secondary stage as it was not recognized as a regional language. They felt that such use would go against the central policy. The Chief Minister was also convinced by the argument and sought time for consulting the central government on the issue.²² It does not require much imagination to see through the game of the state government that preferred to chase a red herring. The argument of the officials was invalid for more than one reason. First, education was a state subject at that time. It was included in the concurrent list only after a decade. The state government had full authority to introduce any language as a medium of instruction and the Centre had nothing to do with it. Secondly, the state officials were quite aware that the Centre would not involve itself in a controversy involving such an emotional issue on the eve of its declaration on the controversial plan of federal reorganization of Assam. Particularly after the incident of January 6, 1968, the central government was not in a position to take a decision on an issue with which it has no statutory concern and which was bound to have an adverse reaction on the Assamese majority. Thirdly, nowhere was it suggested by the central government that language used as the medium of instruction at the secondary level must have the recognition as a regional language. In fact the Centre had never defined the concept of a regional language. On the contrary, in Assam itself Khasi, Garo and Manipuri were recognized as the medium of secondary education though none of them were recognized as a 'regional language'. Thus it was quite apparent that the plea of the Assam government to consult the Centre over the question was nothing but a shrewd ploy to shelve the issue for years to come.

No wonder that the Bodo mind was agitated over this attempt to shelve the demand and Bodo Sahitya Sabha gave an ultimatum to resolve the issue within a fortnight. And as expected, the All Bodo Students' Union took the charge of the movement at that point. Henceforth the movement undertook a programme of a series of meeting, picketing, rallies etc., that culminated in a mass rally of not less than 25,000 people at Kokarjhar and a total bandh in the Bodo-inhabited regions on March 4, 1968.²³ The excitement ran high when

four student leaders were arrested by the police and the Deputy Commissioner was compelled to release them on public demand.

The situation worsened further when ABSU opted for a line of direct confrontation with the government by declaring that it would not allow holding the High School examination of the Board of Secondary Education in the Bodo areas if the government failed to come out with a positive decision before the examination. The scheduled date for the examination was March 12, 1968 and before that in Kokrajhar town, the epicentre of the Bodo activities, tension rose to the climax. The government deployed a large number of the armed forces to maintain law and order and ABSU mobilized a vast force of volunteers to combat the government. The Education Minister of Assam came to Goalpara to negotiate but he could not give a firm assurance and thus the tension continued till March 11, 1968. It was only at 6 pm of March 11 that Ranendra Narayan Basumatari, the Bodo Minister of the cabinet, informed the leaders of the movement telephonically from Shillong (the then capital of Assam) that the cabinet had decided to accept the demand.²⁵ By this time the mistrust between the two parties had reached such a peak that the Student leaders declined to accept the verbal assurance from their own minister and demanded a written assurance from the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara. He could give this assurance only at 10 pm and so the movement was called off at 11 pm on March 11, 1968.

This somewhat detailed account of the second phase of the medium movement of the Bodos is given here to bring home two significant points. First, the entire course of the development shows how the obstinacy and incapability of a government department can create confusion of such magnitude that is destined to leave behind permanent scar on the body politic. When Bodo language was recognized as a medium of instruction at the primary level, it was known to all and the Bodo Sahithya Sabha made no secret of it that the next move would be to introduce Bodo as the medium of instruction at the secondary level. The Education Department of Assam did not think it necessary to initiate any preliminary exercise for assessing the pros and cons of this ensuing demand and when it actually came, an unprepared education department put forward an

absurd plea to nullify the Bodo demand. Thereby it only exposed itself and the plains tribals had an opportunity to gauge the extreme apathy with which the Assamese ruling class wished to approach their genuine aspirations. In a poly-ethnic state like Assam this kind of attitude is bound to produce long-term misunderstanding and misgivings. Secondly, at the political level too, the problem was not given due weightage. In 1963, when the Chief Minister himself went to Kokrajhar to reap the benefit of the introduction of Bodo medium for his party, it was only expected that he or his party would do everything possible to consolidate the gains thus accrued. But there was no follow-up action in that direction. And to deal with a genuine demand of a significant segment of then state's population, the Chief Minister preferred to rely on the advice of the officials of the education department. Perhaps he was guided by the impression that the minister and MLAs, all of them being Congressmen, would be able to convince the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to postpone the demand or at least to defer the ultimatum for the time being. But the non-Congress leadership of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had their own political calculations to utilize the issue and some others were genuinely concerned with the development of the Bodo language. Newly formed PTCA found the issue perfectly suitable to expand their political base. And ABSU, in its bid to assume the role of the Bodo counterpart of All Assam Students Union, was not ready to budge an inch. Thus Chief Minister Chaliha not only failed to make a political settlement of the issue, he also found his own Bodo followers pressurizing him to concede the demand. The latter had no other alternative because otherwise they would have lost their own support base. Ultimately, in spite of the obstinacy of the Education Department the Government had to come down to honour the Bodo sentiment.

The net result of this tussle was that Chief Minister Chaliha and his Congress colleagues lost what they had gained in 1963 by introducing Bodo at the primary level. On that occasion it was a gift of the government to the Bodo people; but in 1968 it was a straight victory for the Bodo agitation against a government that had shown all signs of obduracy. The Bodo sentiment was grievously injured and the cleavage between the Bodos and the Assamese was expanded. Politically, the Congress did not suffer any immediate loss so far as

the electoral result was concerned. The Congress leaders of the Bodo community were still dominant at the social level and they retained their hold for the time being. But this was destined to be short-lived. PTCA had discovered the way to put the Congress at a disadvantageous position and the issue of language became its trump card. Through a well-designed use of this card, gradually PTCA was able to make a dent in the Congress strongholds and by mid-seventies it earned the rightful position to speak on behalf of the Bodo community. Of course, this rise of PTCA at the cost of the Congress became possible because Assam Pradesh Congress and the government ran by it continued a policy that ignored completely the susceptibility of the Bodos, particularly in the context of the latter's newly developed awareness for the preservation and development of their language and culture.

NOTES

1. S.K. Chaube, 'Plain Tribals in Assam Politics', *North Eastern Affairs*, Delhi, 1973. p.73.
2. D.P. Mukherjee and S.K. Mukherjee, 'Contemporary Cultural and Political Movements Among the Bodos of Assam' in *Tribal Movement in India*, Vol.1, Ed., K.S. Singh, Delhi, 1982, p.262.
3. In Barak Valley, on May 19, 1961, the first day of agitation for recognition of Bengali, the police opened fire on the picketers at the railway station at Silcher and killed 11 of them including a girl. The agitation took the form of a mass upsurge following the incident.
4. P.S. Dutta (Ed.), *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, Delhi, 1998, p.167.
5. Quoted in the Memorandum submitted by Plains Tribals' Council of Assam to the President of India dated May 20, 1967.
6. Resolution adopted in the 15th conference of the Kokrajhar District Tribal Sangha in March, 1965, incorporated in PTCA memorandum of May 20, 1967.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Assam Government Press note dated May 6, 1949.
9. Assam Assembly Proceedings, 1953, p. 1027. More intriguing is the fact that always land acquired for this purpose was settled with non refugees, mainly Assamese Government employees. A piece of land acquired in vicinity of Shillong (which was the capital of Assam then) for refugee settlement was divided and distributed in the following manner: between 1950-51 Assamese 72, Bengalees 4, Khasir 2, Punjabi 1; and in 1952 Assamese 129, Bengalees 14, Khasi 1, Nepali 1, Bihari 1, (source;

- Memorandum submitted to the States Reorganization Commission in April 1954 by Cachar States Reorganization Committee, Silchar, p.32.)
10. Appendix III of the memorandum submitted by Cachar States Reorganization Committee.
 11. The press statement issued by some tribal leaders published in weekly *Ganachabuk* (Bilingual), Dhubri, June 11, 1966.
 12. Statement issued by the Tribal cell of APCC on February 17, 1967 published in *Dainik Asom* (Assamese daily), Gauhati, Feb., 18. 1967.
 13. The Prime Minister Indira Gandhi did not issue any official statement expressing the government's inclination to deal with the case of the plains tribals in this proposal for federation. It is the Mizo delegation that mentioned it while talking to the press in Aizwal and from that it was circulated through the Gauhati Press. So, there is still some doubt whether the Prime Minister actually meant it, though no contradiction of the news item was issued by the government.
 14. *Why Separate State?*, A memorandum submitted to the President of India by All Bodo Students' Union, Hq. Kokarajhar, Nov. 10, 1987.
 15. Statement of ABSU, Feb.28, 1967.
 16. Meena Deka, 'Students' movement in Assam', in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Shillong, 1987, pp. 491-92.
 17. During the last two decades Asom Sahitya Sabha has expanded its branches in rural areas and at present the organization has a mass base amongst the Assamese people.
 18. In 1960, Bimala Prasad Chaliha first announced that he had no intention of making Assamese the official language of Assam till the minority linguistic groups voluntarily came forward to accept it. Asom Sahitya Sabha and its allied organizations reacted sharply to this statement and Chaliha alongwith Assam Provincial Congress committee had to change this decision within one month when riots broke out in the Brahmaputra Valley following a student procession in Guwahati on which the police opened fire as it had gone violent. In 1972 again the Assam government was initially reluctant to make Assamese the only medium of instruction at the university level, but had to concede the demand when the students took up the cause and riots broke out in different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Till this day, the surest way to coerce the government to accept an absurd demand supposed to be in the interest of the Assamese community is to assign AASU with the task.
 19. *Assam Tribune*, Gauhati, April 12, 1967.
 20. Mukherjee and Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p.275.
 21. Dilip Kumar Chattopadhyaya, *History of the Assamese Movement*, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 61-62.
 22. Chaube, *op. cit.*
 23. *Assam Tribune*, March 5, 1968.
 24. Mukherjee and Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p.264.

CHAPTER 7

From Confrontation to Militancy

PTCA initially avoided contesting elections though it did not pursue the programme of election boycott following its failure to execute the boycott in 1967 and 1968. The real reason behind this political asceticism was not the apathy for the electoral process: it was rather a strategy. Most of the leaders of PTCA were young, but they were not altogether novices in the complicated game of power politics. Some of the front ranking men of PTCA opted to operate from the other side of the fence as they had a feeling that the Congress had deprived them of their rightful position in the party. Samar Brahma Choudhury was the typical example of these leaders who suffered from this kind of a sense of deprivation. He was the son of Sitanath Brahma Choudhury, the first Bodo M.P. who was returned on a Congress ticket in 1952. Samar Brahma Choudhury was also the son-in-law of Rupnath Brahma, who enjoyed a tenure of ministership almost unbroken from 1937 till his death. He had been groomed as the political heir-apparent of these two influential leaders and amongst the Bodos there was none who could be cited as a probable rival of his secured position. But for creating a cleavage in the ranks of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, leaders of provincial Congress inducted Ravindranath Basumatari as the next Bodo representative in the state power structure. That was a jolt to Samar Brahma Choudhury who under compulsion took the initiative towards the formation of PTCA. Some other leaders of the PTCA also had similar background for opting an anti-Congress political line. But since almost all of them came from similar social background, they knew the grip the Congress leaders had over the Bodo people. Thus they preferred a cautious course of action so far as electoral politics was concerned.

This caution was manifest in the first memorandum PTCA

submitted to the central government in 1967. There, PTCA practically worked out a rationale to challenge the legitimacy of plains tribals legislators to speak on behalf of the plains tribals. They put forward the argument that the legislators did not represent tribal interests since their constituencies were always composed of non-tribal majority. The plea-deserves to be quoted:

There is a guiding principle under Section 9 (1) of the Delimitation Commission Act, 1962, which provides that reserved seats for scheduled tribes shall, as far as practicable, be located in areas where the proportion of their population forms the majority of the total population. But contrary to this principle, the Scheduled Tribes constituencies in the plains of Assam are delimited in such a way that tribal population ranges from 28 per cent to 48 per cent only to the total population of the constituency, though in most cases it could be raised from 60 per cent to 70 per cent. As a result of such delimitation the non-tribal voters become the dominating as well as deciding factor. This has natural impact on the minds of political aspirants as well as of the elected members of the Legislative Assembly and Parliament. Consequently the plains tribal MLA and MPs' hesitate to represent the sentiment of the tribals and focus their cause, lest the non-tribal voters become offended.

One cannot deny the force of this argument. But PTCA did not substantiate its allegation by showing that it was possible to raise the proportion of tribal voters to anything between 60 per cent and to 70 per cent in one or more specific constituencies through marginal adjustments of delimitation exercise. Subsequently, when PTCA succeeded in developing a parallel organization in all Bodo areas, its election performance showed that the situation was not as bleak as PTCA had portrayed. Because in 1978 PTCA's success was quite spectacular and since then either PTCA or BPAC monopolized the electoral politics of the Bodo areas in spite of the fact that there was no marked change in delimitation of the constituencies. However, the argument that PTCA used in the memorandum came quite handy when it decided to participate in the election in 1971 and failed to show any tangible result in the election of 1972 in which it could manage to win only lone seat. For better performance PTCA had to wait for some more time and for creation of a more favourable situation. The actual chance came when the Assamese majority and the state government as its representative again took an aggressive posture for curtailing the linguistic rights of the minorities.

II

In the early seventies, the Asom Sahitya Sabha was pressurizing the government of Assam as well the two universities of the state to declare Assamese as the only medium of instruction at the level of degree examination. In other words, the demand was to make Assamese the only medium of university education. There was serious hurdle in implementation of the demand. Firstly, in the Barak Valley of Assam, there was no indigenous Assamese population and Bengali is the mother tongue of the people there.¹ As expected, the people of the Barak Valley resented the decision. Secondly, the plains tribals, particularly the Bodos, apprehended that in the event of the universities of the state turning unilingual, the future development of their mother tongue would be doomed forever. However, following the regular pattern of Assamese assertion, All Assam Students Union took up the issue from the Asom Sahitya Sabha and riots broke out in Mongoldoi, Kharupetia (Darrang), and several villages in Nowgong, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh.² According to official sources, about seven thousand houses were burned down not to of speak of properties damaged and destroyed. There were thirty two deaths of which three occurred from police firing.³ Almost all the victims and largest were the Bengalees of the Brahmaputra Valley who had not in anyway opposed the move of the Asom Sahitya Sabha or the Assam government.

It was for the first time that the Bodo people thought it necessary to come closer to the Bengalees of the Barak Valley for combating the aggressive linguistic design of the Assamese elite. A new body was formed entitled the Linguistic Miniority Rights Committee (LMRC) where the Bodos and the Bengalees had representatives. This coalition declared its intention to launch a movement if Assamese was imposed on them. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha also came out with a threat to oppose tooth and nail the government's decision to make Assamese compulsory in the Bodo medium secondary schools.⁴ All Bodo Students Union also joined the movement for protecting the linguistic rights of the Bodos and thereby emerged as the only students organization of the Brahmaputra Valley to directly confront the AASU. Ultimately of course, the central government

interfered and K.C. Pant, the then Minister of State for Home Affairs, brought about a truce by working out a formula that allowed retention of English as the medium of instruction for a period of ten years along with Assamese. PTCA all through supported the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and ABSU and took active part in the formation of the LMRC.

It is a fact that the intensity of reaction over the medium of instruction issue was more noticeable in the Assamese speaking areas of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Bengali speaking areas of the Barak Valley. In the Bodo areas the reaction was not that intense. ABSU did not take any action programme for opposing the move of the government and restricted itself in issuing statements and holding some meetings. The only significant political move on the part of the Bodo leaders was to go for an alliance with the Bengalis. This development in a sense was a landmark in the poly-ethnic political scenario of Assam. Not that the LMRC continued as a viable organization for a future realignment of forces. Rather its lifespan virtually came to an end with the truce that ended the controversy for the time being. But the real importance of this phase of the Bodo assertion lay elsewhere. Though the Barak Valley is far away from the Bodo areas of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Bengalis there felt concerned about the Bengali settlers of the Bodo areas. And with these settlers, the Bodos had a conflict of interest because of the alienation of the tribal land which was caused by the influx of these settlers. Hence the Bodo leaders normally avoided a coalition with the Bengalis of all shades and regions though both had common grievances against the Assamese hegemony. The medium of instruction issue helped minimizing the gap between the two communities. Though it did not felicitate a permanent or lasting alliance between these two communities, the formation of LMRC at least prove that though the land question was of prime importance to the Bodos, they would not hesitate to push it to a back seat temporarily for the sake of their cultural identity. In a way LMRC paved the way for the subsequent lasting alliance between the ABSU and All Cachar-Karimganj Students' Association (ACKSA) of the Barak Valley.

The attempt to make Assamese the only language of academic

discourses and the vigour with which the Assamese middle-class tried to impose its desire on the minorities-indigenous and non-indigenous alike-convinced even the ordinary Bodo that within the political map of Assam the Bodos would not be able to preserve their linguistic identity. PTCA now found it easy to specify the kind of autonomy they wanted; it was no longer necessary to keep it vague. In 1967 it was simply a demand for the creation of a non-specified 'Autonomous region', but on January 7, 1973, the PTCA demanded a 'Union Territory' with the name Udayachal. A map of Udayachal was drawn that included vast area of the Brahmaputra Valley where plains tribals were concentrated. This demand for a separate state immediately caught the imagination of the students and youths and the Congress started losing its grip over the Bodo masses. So, the immediate effect of the AASU movement for making the Assamese the only medium of higher education, in a way, contributed directly to the demand for a separate state for the Bodos.

III

When the stage was all set for a vigorous campaign for Udayachal, there was a diversion. The script that was to be used for Bodo language had been a matter of controversy for sometime and in 1974 reached its culmination. Though the movement known as the 'Script Movement' ultimately strengthened the separatist mood of the Bodo people, for the time being it tempered the process of mobilization that was started in 1973 for achieving the demand for Udayachal. The script movement also added a new dimension to the Bodo assertion that ultimately proved costly for PTCA.

The debate over the script to be used for the Bodo language had a long history. As already stated, Rev. Sydney Endle published his valuable work *A Hand Book of Kachari Grammar* in 1884 and as Bodos did not have a script of their own, he used the Roman script in a modified form suitable for Bodo sounds. According to some other sources, the Assam government itself used the Roman script for the Bodo language in 1904 when there was an attempt to introduce Bodo as a medium of instruction.⁴ However, in spite of these early attempts to use the Roman script, when the Bodo Sahitya Sabha initiated a

movement for the development of the Bodo language, the early Bodo literature appeared in the Assamese script. It was done not as part of any consciously formulated policy, but as the most expedient thing to do under the existing circumstances. Since then most of the Bodo literatures had been published in the Assamese script including the Bodo primer that was introduced officially in 1964. Though there is a claim by some Bodo intellectuals that already in 1960 some Bodo intellectuals were thinking of using the Roman script for the Bodo language, there is no evidence to support this claim. Initially the Assamese script was adopted as a natural option and none thought anything unusual about it.

It was only in 1964 that the question was raised by some Bodo students residing in Shillong and they placed a proposal for adoption of the Roman script before the 6th annual conference held at Malguri of Goalpara district on February 22 and 24, 1964.⁵ The demand could not make much impact and as such it was again placed at the next session in 1965 at Masalpur. The fate was not different in this session as well. So, in the eighth session of 1966, the interested students who were behind the demand for the Roman script organized the young delegates and put pressure on the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The elder leaders of the organization were reluctant to accept the demand outright and sought an escape route by referring the matter to an Expert Committee for examining the script question. But the Expert Committee could not prepare a report within the period specified and in the ninth annual session of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha the Expert Committee was dissolved and a new 'Bodo Script Sub-Committee' was formed.⁶

From the above account it becomes evident that the demand for the Roman script did not get an easy passage in the session of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha itself. Two successive attempts in this direction in the sessions of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha failed. It is obvious that the five members Expert Committee was not unanimous in its opinion and hence they could not submit a report. It is only in 1968 that the supporters of the Roman script succeeded in dominating proceedings of the ninth session to form a sub-committee favourable to them.

These developments have something to do with the internal

tension of the Bodo society that did not surface on earlier occasions. It is interesting to note that the demand for the Roman script was first mooted by some students who were studying at Shillong. Only a handful of the Bodos could actually afford to send their sons and daughters to Shillong for study. Only the children of the Christian Bodos were sponsored by different churches to undertake higher studies in different missionary colleges of Shillong. The centre of the Bodo movement was at Kokrajhar of Western Assam where there was a concentration of the Bodos, but the demand for the Roman script originated not in Kokrajhar, but in Shillong. B.K. Daimari summarizes the situation in the following words:

Propagated by a small group of Bodo students and leaders of Shillong, the idea of adopting the Roman Script spread among the Bodo intelligentsia and the acceptance of it by the BSS involved the whole Bodo community.⁷

But it is a simplistic summerization since it did not say the process that ultimately culminated in acceptance of the Roman script by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. In fact this narration of eighteen pages is the most comprehensive account of the Script Movement of the Bodos but he scrupulously avoided the dissenting voices raised by some dominant Bodo intellectuals over the Roman script issue. If one remembers that since the early fifties in Santhal Pargana also there was a demand for the Roman script for Santhali language, the temptation is irresistible to discern a pattern in such a movement. These movements developed because of the inspiration received from the missionary activities by the Christian segment of the tribe. That is why the Bodo demand for the Roman script originated in Shillong, where headquarters of all Christian churches of north east India were situated, and not in Kokrajhar, the seat of the non-Christian, predominantly Brahma intellectuals. And the resistance to the Roman script was also voiced by some of the Brahma leaders and intellectuals and a Christian-non-Christian dimension was added to the script issue. The subsequent trend of the Bodo politics was substantially influenced by this dimension as we shall see later.

Anyway, the Bodo Script sub-committee prepared its draft proposal in February 1969, and submitted its report for acceptance at a special conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha held at Udalguri in March

1969.⁸ As expected, the sub-committee recommended adoption of the Roman script. The considerations on which the recommendation was made is given by Daimari:

The ten point 'consideration' strongly recommended the Roman Script for the Bodo Language on the grounds of its 'quick and easy learning' possibility which needs only twenty six letters...whereas there are more than 300 (three hundred) letters including compound letters and other variation in Assamese, Bengali or Devanagari scripts. It is suitable and easy for mechanical manipulation, that is, printing, sending message etc. The consideration also argued Roman Script to be commercially economic and exclusively suitable as a medium for writing down scientific subjects and technical matters. It also recommended Roman Script on the ground of maintenance of uniformity of spelling and pronunciation amongst all sections of the Bodo people of different places, states and lands using different dialects and state languages and also to enable to maintain link amongst the Bodo speaking people living as they are in other countries outside India such as Nepal, South Bhutan, East Pakistan and Western Burma.⁹

Any neutral observer would find these considerations quite logical and reasonable and apparently there was no scope for attributing any ulterior and adverse motive to the recommendation of the sub-committee. But in the complex and complicated linguistic scenario of Assam, the script question was essentially linked with some other issues that had nothing to do with academic and intellectual dimensions attached to it. So, the immediate reaction of the Assamese elite to the sub-committee's recommendation was to brand it as a machination of the missionaries.¹⁰

The reaction was the natural outcome of the Assamese apprehension that the Bodos, whom it regarded as a potential component of the Assamese nationality, would drift away permanently from the process of assimilation through the adoption of the Roman script. The fact is that Asom Sahitya Sabha actually organized a workshop of writers in November 1974 to decide the question of the Bodo script and it came to the conclusion that 'for the cultural integration and development of tribal languages in the state, Assamese script is enough and suitable'.¹¹ There were a series of talks between Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Asom Sahitya Sabha which failed to reach an agreement. Thus Daimari remarks, 'One should make a point to note about the strong opposition given by the Assamese elites who clustered themselves within and without the Asom Sahitya Sabha'.¹²

Whereas the Assamese apprehension of the Bodo desertion from the Assamization process was correct, its elite failed to appreciate the fact that the reason for this desertion was multi-dimensional and the use of the Assamese script could not halt the process. In fact, in the north-east the script never play, any role in the process of integration. The Assamese and Bengali script are the same, but that could not stop the periodical conflicts between the two communities. The Assamese also could not grasp that the eagerness of the Bodos to abandon the Assamese script was the symptom, not the cause of the rift that had been developing between the two communities. There were internal differences amongst the Bodos themselves over the script issue. The writers' workshop organized by the Asom Sahitya Sabha was attended also by some Bodo writers. They were opposed to the adoption of the Roman script. Actually most of the elder generation of writers were not sure about the efficacy of the Roman script check as the vehicle of the Bodo language. That is why the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, controlled by the younger people, decided to hold the next general conference at Mahakalguri, a village of north Bengal where Christians were in a position to dictate the terms. And it was this conference, held in 1970 that approved and accepted the recommendations of the Script Sub Committee. Had the conference been held at Kokrajhar, the supporters of the Roman script would certainly have found it more difficult to get the recommendations approved. It needs to be mentioned that a major section of the Bodo elites were still then unwilling to alienate themselves completely from the Assamese mainstream and they knew quite well that the adoption of the Roman script would make the breach between the two communities wider. It would be wrong to regard them as renegades. What they wanted was to keep open the scope for maintaining a meaningful relation of give and take with the Assamese majority. This difference of attitude amongst the Bodos themselves had multiple manifestations that influenced the Bodo political life of subsequent days at different levels and to different degrees.

However, once the decision to adopt the Roman script was accepted by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1970, the Bodo leaders of different fronts decided not to pursue with their respective viewpoints

and to offer a common front on the script issue. So in subsequent meetings of the executive committee of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a detailed programme for adoption of the Roman script was worked out. However, till 1974, the Sabha could not do much for the implementation of the programme as it had to give more attention to the problem returned to the introduction of the Bodo language at the secondary level beyond class VI. When that issue was resolved in June 1973, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha took up the issue of the Roman script at right earnest.

As already mentioned, the Assamese elites were opposed to the move for the Roman script and this attitude was reflected in the stance taken by the government of Assam on the issue. The latter did not show any concern for the endeavour of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to find out a suitable script for the Bodo language and did not respond to any of the representations made on the issue. This lukewarm response prompted the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to choose a course of action that would bring the issue to the forefront and compel the government to come out with a policy statement. Thus in the 15th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha held at Khelmati near Tezpur on March 15 and 16, 1974, it was decided to introduce the Roman script in the Bodo medium schools unilaterally by the Sabha itself avoiding the normal procedure of acquiring education department's consent for the purpose. Daimari informs:

To accomplish this decision the BSS on 22 April 1974, organised an inaugural ceremony, in which the Roman script was declared as the common script for the Bodo language and literature throughout Assam and outside and openly declared the introduction of *Bithorai* (*Balab-se*) the Bodo primer written in Roman script. The General Secretary of BSS appealed to all the teachers of the Bodo medium Primary Schools to introduce the above-mentioned Bodo primer *Bitharai* in class I.¹³

Accordingly some Bodo medium primary schools introduced this textbook and started imparting lessons in the Roman script. The situation thus developed was interpreted as an open challenge to the government and as expected, instead of initiating a dialogue with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the government preferred to follow a course of confrontation. An order was immediately issued to stop payments to teachers who had accepted *Bitharai* in the Roman script as the

text book for teaching Bodo language and all other grants to those schools were also stopped forthwith. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha reacted to these measures by taking up a prolonged agitational programme. It started with class boycott and then the second phase was observed by organizing mass picketing in front of the sub-divisional and district headquarters of the Bodo-inhabited region. In this programme thousands of Bodo volunteers participated. At this stage, the Bodo politicians interfered to bring about a postponement for the time being. The Bodo MLAs and ministers were aware of the increasing popular support behind the movement and they were right in their apprehension that the situation would go out of hand if not resolved at the initial stage. Since all the Bodo MLA's and ministers were Congressmen, they hoped to persuade the government to agree to an amicable settlement. So, these people's representative, along with Bodo Sahitya Sabha, submitted a joint memorandum demanding the Roman script to the Chief Minister. A combined delegation also met Chief Minister (Sarat Chandra Sinha) on September 1974, but the meeting could not produce any positive result. This failure brought the Bodo Sahitya Sabha back to its agitational programme.

This third phase of the social movement was marked by violence, police firing and deaths. On November 18, 1974 the police opened fire on the demonstrating Bodo volunteers' at Binji and in Kokrajhar. At Rangiya the police had to resort to lathi-charge. At Udalgiri again the police opened fire. In those incidents six Bodo volunteers were killed. Two CRPF jawans were also killed by the frenzied mob.¹⁴ The government accounts depicted the Bodo agitationists as violent but the Bodo organizations accused the police for opening fire on peaceful demonstrators. It is not possible to discern the truth from these claims and counter claims.

This spirited mass movement ultimately came to a same end. On November 28, 1974 the movement was postponed as the state government asked for a talk to resolve the issue. However, a series of discussions that took place between the Education Minister and other officials and the Bodo delegations failed to lead to an agreed solution. Ultimately, the Bodo leaders met the Chief Minister on February 14, 1975, who suggested to involve the Centre in the matter. The Centre was no newcomer in the field; it was concerned with the issue and

had hence initiated a discussion with the Bodo leaders since August 1974. The central government, from the very beginning, was eager to introduce Devanagari as the script for the Bodo language. Dharanidhar Basumatari, the lone MP of the Bodos was also won over by this lobby because Indira Gandhi supported the move and Dharanidhar, as a Congress MP did not dare to disagree with her. Ultimately, the Commissioner of Linguistic Minority also came out officially with the proposal in favour of the Devanagari script. The apathy of the state government and the pressure of the central government placed the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in a situation as Daimari apply describes:

The BSS finally fell between the jaws of the two Governments. The State Government remained unbending and unyielding to the problem of the Bodos, while the Central Government had been constantly trying to persuade the BSS to accept in Devanagari script. Ultimately, on April 9, 1975, the two BSS representatives, Ramdas Basumatary and Thaneswar Bodo, during their stay in Delhi, prepared a proposal and submitted to the Prime Minister.¹⁵

Strangely enough, the proposal of the two Bodo representatives, besides recommending the Devanagari script, also envisaged scheme for implementation of the proposal and there the Centre's generous assistance was sought.¹⁶ The central government took no time to accept the proposal and virtually in unusual hurry it made an official declaration that the government had entered into an agreement with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha over the acceptance of Devanagari as the script for the Bodo language. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha met in its annual conference on April 25 to April 27, 1975, in which the Devanagari script was formally accepted by the Sabha.

We do not know the exact developments behind the scene that compelled the two representative of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to accept the Devanagari script. It is certain that some kind of pressure was exerted but the specific nature of this pressure is not known, the details of this manipulative phase will probably remain unknown forever. But only one thing is certain: most of the activists of the script movement expressed their strong feeling against the deal that was made between the central government and the representatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The representatives of the Bodo Sahitya

Sabha were branded as traitors by a number of Bodo activists: the local dailies and periodicals were flooded with letters that urged upon the Bodos to disown the Delhi truce. It is only with extreme difficulty that the leadership could get the truce endorsed by the delegates in the 16th Annual Conference held at Dhing in 1975. Till this day, in spite of the official acceptance of the Devanagari script, most of the Bodo youths having a literary and cultural aspiration hope to revive the issue for shifting to the Roman script.

The script movement of the Bodo is significant for more than one reason. First, it was initiated by the youths based in Shillong and most of whom were Christians. All earlier movements of the Bodos were initiated by senior social leaders based in Kokrajhar area having their allegiance to the Brahma religion. It would be simplistic to attribute a specific religious dimensions to this new development, but it cannot be denied that the Script Movement marked the beginning of the emergence of a new brand of young leaders who subsequently challenged the leadership of the old guards and ultimately snatched away the reins of the movement for Bodo assertion from the older leaders. Secondly, the Script Movement manifested both the strength and weakness of the Bodo movement. It showed beyond all doubts that the Bodo people, particularly its younger components, were ready to make supreme sacrifice for the Bodo cause, but at the same time the Bodo leadership was not strong enough to withhold pressure from the power that be. Thirdly, the truce that made the Devanagari script the vehicle of the Bodo language revealed the theoretical weakness of the basis of the Bodo movement. When the Bodo Sahitya Sabha formulated its thesis for opting the Roman script, its arguments centered around linguistic and phonetic advantages and practical suitability of the Roman script. At the same time the negative sides of the Assamese and such other Indian scripts were also elaborated in the formulation to strengthen the case for the Roman script. But when the Devanagari script was accepted—none of these arguments were taken into consideration. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha initially equated the disadvantages of Assamese and Devanagari script and the Expert Committee appointed by it clearly stated that there are more than 300 (three hundred) letters including compound letters and other variations in Assamese, Bengali or

Devanagari script and hence rejected all of them as unsuitable for adoption. So, by accepting the Devanagari script the Bodo Sahitya Sabha swallowed back all of its own arguments and made a volte face of unusual kind. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha failed to offer any viable justification for its change of heart besides the feeble logic of national integration. Thereby it gave credence to the propaganda mooted by its critics that its stance was motivated by an unjustifiable desire to get rid of the Assamese script, that the desire had no logical basis, and that it was simply a manifestation of the negative attitude that a section of the Bodo elites developed against the Assamese culture and people. Needless to say that the vital decision that helped strengthening this impression contributed substantially in expanding the already existing cleavage between the Bodo and the Assamese.

IV

The political fallouts of the script movement were also important. Though the movement had a political dimension, the entire question of the Bodo assertion was essentially linked with their cultural identity. Both PTCA and ABSU gave unconditional support to the movement. On earlier occasions, such movements for cultural and linguistic rights were also led by the political leaders but the script movement proved to be a bit different. It was led mainly by the younger leaders who were not directly associated with the PTCA and the elder leaders of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha also found themselves in a subordinate position under the pressure of the younger leaders who mobilized and controlled the people who participated in the movement.

In these circumstances, the leaders of PTCA became apprehensive as to the mood of the Bodo people who showed tremendous capacity to fight for their rights during the Script Movement. It was felt that to retain the grip over this situation it was necessary to give the people an effective programme of action. In 1973, when PTCA upgraded its demand from an 'autonomous region' to a 'separate statehood' and christened the proposed state as Udayachal and circulated a map demarcating the boundaries of Udayachal, PTC attracted a large number of youths behind the organization to fight for the demand.

But the Roman Script Movement diverted that trend and created a new situation that threatened the very authority of PTCA as the spokesman of the plain tribals. It is not easy to chalk out a programme for a movement when the entire energy of the potential participants of the movement had been exhausted in the Script Movement and when the people in general were suffering from a sense of frustration because of the moderate success, if it could be called a success, attained in that movement in spite of so much sacrifice. Hence PTCA opted for a cautious course of action. It reiterated its demand for Udayachal, asked the people to be ready for the impending movement, but refrained from taking the issue to the street. The leaders rather started negotiation with other political parties who did not oppose the demand for the Bodo autonomy. This diplomatic effort ultimately brought PTCA closer to CPI and CPM and also some erstwhile socialist leaders approached PTCA to develop a better understanding of the Bodo problem. PTCA thus earned some credibility with the non-Bodos and started consolidating its position again amongst the Bodos. Even its leaders thought of taking up an agitational programme to press their demand for Udayachal. But in June 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared national emergency and banned all kind of political activities. PTCA was not a militant organization and its leaders were essentially moderates. Any movement launched at that moment would have meant challenging the emergency. Neither organizationally nor psychologically PTCA was prepared to go that far. So, the movement for Udayachal was postponed for the time being.

The emergency was withdrawn in early 1977 and PTCA was now free to take up a political programme. But by this time its topmost leaders had developed a cordial relationship with the socialist leaders of Assam who formed the nucleus of the Janata Party in Assam. In the parliamentary election of 1977, PTCA allied itself with the broad alliance of the opposition parties and its candidate Charan Narzary was elected to the Parliament defeating his Congress rival. It was a major political success for PTCA and it also proved the soundness of PTCA's new strategy of allying with the broad democratic movement of the state. But at the same time PTCA misjudged the mood of the

Bodo people, the real support base of the party. On April 1977, Charan Narzary and Samar Brahma Chaudhury, as spokesman of PTCA, made the announcement that PTCA had given up the demand for Udayachal and would work for autonomy of the Bodo region within the political set-up of Assam. The reaction of the Bodo youths to this decision may be gauged from the following observations recorded by All Bodo Student's Union ten year later:¹⁷

At this, there was a strong reaction, the party hardliners and the youths and students of ABSU boldly resented and pressurized the PTCA leaders not to give up the demand of Udayachal while the two PTCA leaders were reluctant to accept. Thus the two PTCA leaders belied the mass people's political aspiration of separate state. The young PTCA was also dissolved undemocratically by the two bosses of PTCA.

Samar Brahma Chaudhury, the most treacherous opportunist and evoked (with devil master mind)¹⁸ PTCA leader bartered Udayachal in lieu of Ministership in Janata regime and he got the cabinet ministership of Forest in State Assembly and thus completely gave up the demand of Udayachal.

It is till now an issue of debate whether PTCA was right in abandoning its demand for a separate statehood. It can be argued today that ABSU itself ultimately accepted a kind of autonomy that falls far short of statehood; even a District Council enjoys more power than the Bodoland Autonomous Council the formation of which brought its agitation to an end. But the fact remains that PTCA made a grave political mistake by officially announcing its abandonment of the demand for Udayachal. No doubt the Assamese mainstream hailed the decision and with its support PTCA managed to retain its hold over the Bodo politics for about a decade, but when the real challenge came up from the consolidation of the Bodo hardliners, its Assamese allies not only failed to dole them out, but also contributed considerably to add to its predicament.

Initially the Janata-PTCA alliance worked well, though PTCA had to encounter vigorous political tirades launched by the Bodo hardliners. But the short lived Janata regime under Golap Borbora pursued a liberal policy at the beginning that actually minimized the ethnic and linguistic tension of the state and that congenial situation did not give the hardliners much scope to operate. The situation continued for more than a year and then the Janata government was

faced with a political challenge of unprecedented magnitude that culminated in the Assam agitation that continued for six years. The agitation brought about a radical and qualitative change in the political scenario of the state and the Bodo aspiration itself became a secondary motive force in those years even within the Bodo society itself.

However, PTCA could not retain all its supporters within its fold during the first year of its alliance with the Janata Party. In May 1979, there was a split in the party and the hardliners, mainly students and youths, formed a new party designated as PTCA (Progressive). Amongst the senior leaders, only Binay Khungur Basumatari joined the new party as president. The party set forth some new notions for the Bodo politics. The most important was its rejection of the name Udayachal which was substituted by a new coinage, Mishing-Bodoland. This abandonment of a Sanskrit name and acceptance of an English one attains a new significance when it is seen in the light of the fact that the President of the new party, Binay Khungur Basumatari, was the first Bodo leader of any consequence who emerged from non-Brahma background. He was a Christian and he hailed from Darrang district where the Brahma influence was the minimum. The headquarters of the party was also established at Harisingha, a village of Darrang district. The second rank leaders of the party were mostly youths who had their education at Shillong in missionary colleges. PTCA (P), in spite of the efforts of its young supporters, could not enlist the support of the elder people and also its influence in the Kokrajhar region was insignificant. However, the party formed the nucleus from which effective opposition to PTCA emerged. It also kept the issue of the creation of a separate state alive. PTCA (P) submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India on July 8, 1980 demanding a separate union territory for the plains tribal with the nomenclature of Mishing-Bodoland.

The main body the PTCA did not suffer much loss organizationally from this split. In late seventies, precisely since October 1979, the political situation of Assam underwent such a major transformation that the entire Bodo question, just under the pressure of circumstances, became an insignificant issue in the eyes of the others. The Assam agitation against the so-called foreigners dominated the political

scene and all other issues were marginalized in the process. The Bodo leaders themselves found it difficult to keep their identity question alive and at the same time they were faced with a situation that compelled them to work out a strategy *vis-à-vis* the agitation led by all Assam Students' Union. For PTCA the decision was not an easy one. The chauvinist overtone of the AASU was too open to be missed by the Bodo leaders, but at the same time there was an allurements that if the movement succeeded in its anti-Bengali objective, it could back to the ouster of the Bengali migrants. All through the Bodos resented the settlement of these immigrants in the region that they perceived as their traditional habitat. PTCA leaders thus decided to follow a middle course. They did not render official support to the AASU but informally gave their moral support to the movement. It was well-nigh impossible for a political party to maintain a stance of this kind in the midst of the political turmoil that swept Assam in between 1979-86 and ultimately for all practical purposes, PTCA abandoned the demand for autonomy altogether and in 1983 made an agreement with the Centre by which it accepted recognition of the Tribal Development Authority as the solution of the Bodo problem. At the same time, PTCA formulated a working alliance with AASU and other pro-agitation forces.¹⁹

On the other hand, from the very beginning PTCA (P) under the leadership of Binay Kungur Basumatari was opposed to the Assam agitation. This break-away group identified Assam agitation as an anti-tribal movement guided by a zeal for complete Assamization of the tribals. All Bodos Student's Union tried to bring about a reconciliation between PTCA and PTCA (P) but ultimately failed.²⁰ The latter continued with the demand for a separate state and submitted a number of memoranda to the Centre. The first one was submitted on the 8 July 1980 to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in New Delhi. Also PTCA (P) organized a huge demonstration at Boat Club, New Delhi, between April 19 to April 22, 1983 demanding Mishing-Bodoland for the plain tribals of Assam.

All through this period, ABSU tried to bring about a reconciliation between the two PTCA's. But the effort could not succeed and ABSU blamed the arrogance of the PTCA main body for this failure.²¹ So

the students' body came closer PTCA (P) and the former took initiative to project PTCA (P) as the sole representative of the Bodos. To achieve this goal, ABSU covered a convention of all tribal organizations of the plains of Assam from April 17 to April 19, 1984 at Harisinga in Darrang district. The projected objective of the convention was to discuss the problem of unification of two tribal parties. But from the beginning the PTCA main body declined to cooperate with the efforts of ABSU and did not send its delegates to the convention. However, the convention was held and it decided to form a new political party of the plains tribals. Practically it was PTCA (P) which dominated the convention and it took the new name of United Tribal National Liberation Front (UTNLF). Binay Khungur Basumatari was elected chairman of the new party.

However, UTNLF could not make much dent in the strongholds of PTCA which continued to dominate in Goalpara and Kamrupa district. UTNLF had to be contended with its base in the Darrang district where Christians were the stronger force. But the emergence of UTNLF is important for three reasons. First, when Assam agitation was going on in full force making all other issues of the state insignificant, UTNLF kept the issue of the Bodo identity alive. In 1983, when AASU gave a call for boycott of the assembly poll and successfully imposed its decision in most of the constituencies of the Brahmaputra Valley, PTCA (P) decided to participate in the election and Binay Khungur Basumatary became the first MLA of the party. So, when PTCA (P) was converted into UTNLF, it was represented in the Assembly through Basumatari, its chairman. Secondly, UTNLF carved out a definite vista for future Bodo politics. Its basic formulation policy was not to play a second fiddle to any of the political parties led by mainstream Assamese leaders. Thirdly, the emergence of UTNLF under the sponsorship of ABSU marketed the permanent breach between PTCA and ABSU. Thus in 1984, PTCA lost forever the younger force that could have been its potential support base. UTNLF ceased to be a major political force with the premature death of its chairman, but PTCA had to pay a heavy price for this breach with the only organized front of the Bodos.

When Assam accord was signed in August 1985, it became clear

that Assam Gana Parishad, the newly formed party that came into being out of the consolidation of the forces that ran the Assam agitation, was going to capture state power. Naturally PTCA went all the way to woo Assam Gana Parishad and made an election alliance with it. The alliance paid dividend as Samar Brahma Chaudhury was elected MP and four other candidates of PTCA were elected to the Legislative Assembly. In one sense this success of PTCA generated a kind of confidence which was not proportionate to its real strength amongst the Bodos. Though exact figures are not available, it is a safe conjecture that the electoral success of PTCA was not the outcome of the support it received from the Bodo electors. It was rather a reflection of the massive support it received from the Assamese voters. No doubt this support came handy for PTCA for mastering an impressive electoral success but in the long run this phenomenon itself became a burden under which PTCA was ultimately buried.

Though PTCA entered into an alliance with AGP, the alliance did not mature into a coalition ministry. In other words, it rendered help to the formation of a ministry functioning of which it could in no way influence. That would not have mattered if AGP was guided by sober leadership. But the young leaders of AGP decided to go for rapid Assamization of the tribals in particular and the non-tribals in general. In the memoranda submitted by ABSU and UTNLF demanding separate state there are elaborate details of the forcible attempt of the AGP government to Assamizing the tribals. One of the ABSU memoranda says:

The intention is very clear. The Assamese people and the Assam Government want to Assamize and assimilate the non-Assamese through the imposition of Assamese language and culture. The Assamese people and the Assam Government have not yet realised the mistake with Assamisation and assimilation policy. Still they want to force others to read Assamese and accept their policy of Assamisation and assimilation.²²

As usual the primary front that was opened by AGP for Assamization was the linguistic front. As ABSU narrates the problem:

...Just after assuming power, the AGP Government imposed Assamese language as compulsory third language upon the non-Assamese medium students in

secondary schools through a Circular given by the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) on the 28th January 1986.²³ The ABSU vehemently opposed the Circular, announced some programmes of movement for the withdrawal of the SEBA Circular and at last compelled the Government to suspend the same... Again, after assumption of AGP Government in Assam, the State Government has given notifications in various state services laying the pre-condition of the knowledge of Assamese language. As per this notification, a job seeking candidate must appear in an interview in Assamese language, i.e., he must pass the written test in Assamese language, he must know how to type in Assamese and the must undergo viva-voce in Assamese language and if the candidate fails all these tests, he will not get the job. Is it not discriminatory to other non-Assamese indigenous people of Assam? How can a Bodo medium candidate fulfill all these rigorous tests? In this way, systematically, Bodo medium students and candidates have been deprived of their legitimate rights of getting jobs.²⁴

Contesting the Assam Government's argument, ABSU says:

The arguments of the Assamese people and Assam Government are like that: the Assamese language is the official language of the state, a link language among different communities of Assam, a language for the integrity of Assam and that is why everyone must read Assamese, must speak Assamese, and those who do not speak Assamese, are not Assamese or indigenous people of Assam. Assam is only for the Assamese—they think. Their arguments are fallacious... these arguments are nothing but only a defensive and strategic languages for the imposition of Assamese languages for the imposition of Assamese language upon the non-Assamese; but the inherent intention is to Assamise, assimilate and dominate the non-Assamese, whether they be indigenous or outsiders but those who live in Assam. Again, if their argument is so, the Bodos, the Kacharis, the original and widespread in Assam can also ask—why not the Assamese people read, speak and accept Bodo as a whole for a link language and for the integrity of Assam. Will the Assamese agree?²⁵

The second front opened by AGP government was eviction from the forest land which had always been a sensitive issue for the Bodos. The Assam Accord that brought an end to the Assam agitation in August 1985 includes a clause (clause X) that prescribes for eviction of encroachers. The clause was incorporated in the light of ABSU's plea that there was a large-scale alienation of tribal land as a result of the illegal settlement of the immigrants. Initially the Bodos found nothing wrong with this clause; they even hoped to gain by it. But when AGP government initiated operation citing this clause it became apparent that its target was not the immigrants, but the

tribals who used the forest as their natural habitat from the time immemorial. ABSU makes a strong case against the eviction of tribals:

The All Bodo Student's Union strongly opposes the AGP Government's policy of eviction operation of tens of thousands of poor landless tribal families from the forest and Khas lands of Assam. The Government of Assam has already issued eviction notices and started eviction operation. The ABSU also vehemently opposes the clause 10 of Assam Accord and the Assam Forest Protection Force which has already trained up would be misused to evict, harass and massacre the Tribal people living in the Forests of Assam. The Accord which was originally arrived at for detection and deportation of real foreigners has been diverted with an ulterior motive against the Tribals of Assam. On the other hand, the non-tribal encroachers of Tribal Belts and Blocks have not been evicted at all under the clause no. 10 of Assam Accord itself.

PTCA failed to restrain AGP from pursuing these policies and ABSU and its allies took up this opportunity to castigate PTCA for its involvement with AGP politics. PTCA found itself in a precarious position because AGP was quite adamant in its resolution to prove its credibility to its supporters i.e., the Assamese middle class, and hence it did not take into consideration the sentiments of the tribals. ABSU by this time had given itself completely in the hands of the forces opposed to PTCA and the latter was thoroughly discredited by the sustained propaganda launched by its detractors who hammered mainly on the anti-tribal policy of AGP which had already become a fact of life for the tribals. And ABSU gradually assumed the role of the champion of the Bodo cause by passing all others including UTNLF which became weak following the untimely death of its founder President B.K. Basumatari.

As long as PTCA was dominant in Bodo politics, ABSU's role was always secondary—normally it used to look after the operational aspects of the activities that were mooted and sponsored by PTCA or Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The movement for the Roman script brought about a change in the relationship between ABSU *vis-à-vis* two other representative organizations of the Bodos. Following the split in the PTCA, ABSU had gone further away from the PTCA main body and when the latter abandoned the demand for Udayachal, the relation between the two became openly antagonistic. With Bodo Sahitya Sabha the relation remained cordial but it was ABSU that held the rein of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha.

In short, ABSU successfully projected itself as the only political force to represent the Bodo cause since 1985 and for all practical purposes the measures taken against the Bodos only helped this consolidation of ABSU. Assuming this new role, ABSU submitted its first memorandum to the Prime Minister of India on 22nd January, 1987. Since then the movement for the creation of a separate state became the major concern of ABSU. PTCA had proposed the name of the prospective plain tribal homeland as Udayachal and UTNLF visualized it as Mishing-Bodoland. ABSU came forward with the proposal for a separate state which was to be named Bodoland. The demand, along with the nomenclature of the proposed state, caught the imagination of the people and it was this slogan for Bodoland that gradually brought about a consolidation unprecedented in the history of the Bodo people.

ABSU's emergence as the sole spokesman of the Bodo interest and the forceful movement launched by it for the creation of Bodoland actually marked the culmination of the process of the Bodo assertion that had its beginning in the late nineteenth century. There is a qualitative difference between the ways the earlier plain tribal leadership functioned and the approach of the young leaders of ABSU. Both Tribal League of the earlier phase and PTCA of the post-independence decades had been moulded and led by two Bodo leaders but the latter were always reluctant to project themselves as the champion of the Bodo cause alone. They, in all strength spoke for the interests of the plain tribals in general and were careful to retain this through nomenclatures like Tribal League or Plain Tribal Council of Assam. All Bodo Student's Union was the pioneer to come out of this inhibition. It not only rejected the non-specific name of Udayachal mooted by PTCA but also the composite Mising-Bodoland—a name sponsored by UTNLF which has been an ally of ABSU for a decade. It was the feeling of ABSU that the Bodos no longer required to camouflage their cause under the garb of general demand of the plains tribals.

The self-confident new leadership of the Bodos at this stage felt that the time was ripe for the Bodos to speak on behalf of the Bodos and at the same time they felt that they had the right to speak on

behalf of other plains tribals as well as they were the most developed segment amongst them. This new kind of awareness marks the culmination of the long quest of the Bodos for carving out their rightful place in the history and society of multi-ethnic Assam, and this assertion is fraught with new possibilities that is destined to dominate the socio-political scenerio of the region in the coming decades.

NOTES

1. This Bengali speaking region was incorporated in Assam in 1874 by the British for meeting the revenue deficit of the newly formed province of Assam.
2. Dilip Kumar Chattopadhyaya, *History of the Assamese Movement*, Calcutta, 1990, p.66.
3. *Assam Assembly Proceedings*, Vol. 1, 1973, pp 3-4.
4. Pamphlet of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Sept 25, 1974.
5. Bijoy Kumar Daimari, 'The Bodo Movement for the Roman Script', *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Eighth Session, 1988, Shillong, p.207.
6. *Ibid.*, p 208
7. *Ibid.*, p 217
8. *Ibid.*, pp 208-9.
9. *Saptahik Nilachal* (Assamese Weekly), Guwahati, December 11, 1974.
10. *Dainik Asom* (Assamese daily), Guwahati, November 7, 1974.
11. Daimari, *op. cit.*, p 215.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
13. *Dainik Asom*, November 27, 1974.
14. Daimari, *op. cit.*
15. Daimari, *op. cit.*
16. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha's communication to the Prime Minister, dated April 9, 1975.
17. Memorandum submitted to President of India and others by All Bodo Students Union, Nov 10, 1987.
18. Such language is seldom used in a memorandum. It gives an idea of the magnitude of distrust and hatred that was created amongst the Bodo politicians themselves during the late eighties. And the unfortunate part of the situation was that this hatred ultimately led to violence and Samar Brahma was subsequently killed by the militants.
19. Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister by United Tribal Nationalists Liberation Front on July 10, 1985.
20. P.S. Dutta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, Delhi, 1993, pp 272-73.

21. Memorandum of ABSU, November 10, 1987.
22. *Ibid.*
23. It needs to be mentioned that it was this circular against which there was a large-scale movement in 1972 in the Bodo areas and the Bengali-speaking zone of the Barak Valley. Ultimately the circular was kept in abeyance through the interference of K.C. Pant, the then Minister of State, Home Affairs, Government of India. The AGP Government brought out this Circular from the cupboard and tried to re-impose it on non-Assamese students. As in 1972, this time also, besides the Bodos, the non-Assamese students of the Barak Valley demonstrated against the circular. On July 21, 1986, when Prafulla Kumar Mohanta, the AGP Chief Minister, visited the Barak Valley, students at Karimganj staged a demonstration on which the police opened fire and killed two students.
24. Memorandum of ABSU, November 10, 1987.
25. *Ibid.*

Epilogue

The term 'assertion' is a relative term and one is free to use it for identifying different positions adopted by any community at a given point of time. However, in this study, the term has been used in its common lexical sense meaning insistence upon recognition of one's claim, right or position. Such insistence, obviously, derives its rationale from a perception of separateness and to identify the starting point of the Bodo assertion, it is necessary to locate the precise development that betrays an awareness accompanied by conscious effort on the part of the Bodos to carve out a space for themselves as a separate ethnic group and in the process distancing themselves overtly or covertly from the mainstream Assamese society.

We have seen that some lacunae persisted throughout the historical period that hindered the process of the natural and gradual assimilation of the Bodos within the mainstream Assamese society. However, a community has its own perception of upward mobility and that perception is normally conditioned by the options available. The Bodos, till the nineteenth century had the Assamese as the only developed community around them and the well-to-do and the advanced members of the Bodo community, whenever felt the urge of earning a recognition in the eye of the people, had the only option of enlisting themselves as Sarania that would enable them ultimately to be incorporated in the Koch community. The process served for the time being, the modest aspiration of the Bodos since the number of people seeking higher social recognition was limited.

But the British rule created a new situation and its impact was also felt within the Bodo society as well. Though the Bodos were slow to pick up the new opportunities opened up by the administrative innovations of the new regime, by the end of the nineteenth century a substantial section amongst them was aware of the changing scenario and some of them actually took advantage of the prevailing situation for uplifting their material status. Inevitably a craze for social

recognition developed. By this time, the Vaisnavite preachers had lost most of the zeal practiced by their predecessors and they seized upon the opportunity as a boon to fulfill their greed and rapacity. We have seen how this attitude ultimately became counter-productive and Kalicharan Brahma initiated a process that created an autonomous sphere for accommodating the Bodo aspirations for upward social mobility. In fact the birth of the Brahma Movement marked the beginning of the assertion of the Bodo identity. Naturally it was the advanced section of the Bodos which embraced the Brahma religion and these neophytes, under the guidance of the preacher Kalicharan Brahma, used the new faith as a vehicle for treading along new vistas of social reorientation.

It is noteworthy that though the Brahma movement drew its entire inspiration as well as its theological moorings from Hinduism, it did not conform to any of the ingredients of the Shankarite Vaisnavism, the most dominant form of Hinduism available in the surroundings. In all probability the avoidance was deliberate. It is so not only because Kalicharan's movement was an open revolt against the greed of the Vaisnavite mahantas but also because Kalicharan visualized the future course of Bodo separateness in all its totality which is evident from the political position he took before the Simon Commission. The independent status of the Bodo community, according to Kalicharan, could be claimed and attained, only by distancing it from the Assamese as far as possible and to achieve this objective, it was imperative that the new religion should be something quite different from that of the Assamese. Kalicharan's initial agenda was no doubt social, but he did not feel shy to give it a political twist when an indulgent British administration made situation favourable. So, the foundation of the future Bodo politics was securely laid, but he perhaps could not foresee the violent potentials ingrained in it. The protective umbrella of the mighty British under which he operated did not allow him to see it.

In spite of the positive contributions of the Brahma movement, it is difficult to say whether the tenets of the Brahma religion were in conformity with the needs and requirements of the Bodo people of the period. We have seen that the theological formulation of the Brahma religion is quite complex and the way of life prescribed by it

is rigid to the utmost. The pre-literate Bodos of the early twentieth century had their own perception of religion and the Vedantic formulations chalked out by Kalicharan were not only alien to them but also beyond their comprehension. Kalicharan could persuade only a microscopic minority to come to the fold of his religion but the vast masses never felt any urge to follow suit. Those who came forward to take advantage of the social upliftment programmes sponsored by the Brahmas also remained indifferent, if not hostile, to the religion practiced by the pioneers. The outcome could not have been otherwise as evident from the fact that even a far advanced people like the Bengalis also responded in the same way to the movement initiated by Rammohun Roy.

The fact is that the Hinduization, as a means of detribalization, succeeded only under certain specific circumstances. Since the antique days of the Mauryas, the tribals were assimilated within the fold of Hinduism but almost in all cases the process made concessions here and there so that the religion propagated could conform to the tribal worldview. Tribal deities were incorporated in Hindu pantheon either through upgradation or by equating them with recognized Hindu divinities. At times the tribal deities were allowed to retain all or most of their tribal attributes and they were treated as variations of major Hindu deities and suitable myths were created and circulated for rationalizing such adaptation. Tribal rituals also entered the Hindu domain in the same way—at times in a modified form and in some cases retaining almost all the tribal attributes. Such religious compromises were accompanied by corollary economic pursuits. The tribals were persuaded to abandon shifting cultivation and the nomadic life attached to it. They were taught and trained to adapt plough cultivation and opt for settled village life. No doubt the pace of the process was slow but it was capable of producing remarkable and enduring success in the long run. It can be said safely that the village communities of the heartland India were the product of this slow but steady process of socio-economic transformation.

The impact of the British rule changed the objective situation of the country and the aforesaid traditional model was no longer in operation. Kalicharan had to seek his inspiration elsewhere and his

contact with Calcutta played a decisive role here. He was much impressed by the nineteenth century regeneration of the Calcutta gentry and accepted the tenets of the Brahma Samaj as his model. In doing so he ignored completely the material and social condition of the people for whom his project was designed. Kalicharan's new religion aimed at delinking the Bodos totally from their tribal beliefs, traditions and rituals, in other words, from the tribal way of life. What he failed to comprehend was that the kind of religion he visualized could have been acceptable only if backed by a conducive economic infrastructure. The tribal religion of the Bodos had a symbiotic relation with their economy based on shifting cultivation. Kalicharan's religious agenda asked the Bodos to distance themselves from the tribal way of life but the objective situation did not ensure them an alternative economy. So the Brahma religion could make an impression only on those Bodos who somehow managed to shift to a middle class profession and their number was extremely limited. The Bodo masses remained completely outside the Brahma influence. For the time-being, the Brahmas took the fullest advantage of their privileged position. They monopolized whatever official patronage available in the name of the community. They retained this position for more than five decades. But the cleavage between the masses and the advanced section, which was in a sense a by-product of the Brahma movement, ultimately surfaced in a vicious form effecting a horizontal division of the society and Kalicharan, in spite of all his honest intentions, cannot be absolved of his responsibility for this negative turn of events.

II

The Assamese gentry could not grasp the fact that the emergence of the Brahma movement would create a perpetual barrier in the process of the Assamization of the Bodos. The Assamese periodicals of the period did not even care, to take notice of this new phenomenon. On the other hand, the emerging nucleus of the Bodo middle class, like all other neophytes, failed to appreciate the negative aspects inherent in the tenets of the Brahma movement. They seemed to feel quite secure in their alienation from the Bodo masses.

But the shrewd officials who ran the British administration did not make any mistake in making a correct appraisal of the entire situation. The alienation of the Bodos from the Assamese suited well with their officious policy of the divide and rule. And in the numerically handful Brahma converts they found a potential ally with whom an easy bargain was possible. We have seen how the district officials picked up Kalicharan to oppose the Congress move of boycott and used him to demand a separate plain tribal electorate before the Simon Commission. Thus, the Bodo politics was born out of imperialist design and even an otherwise distinguished leader like Kalicharan did not mind adopting an opportunist stance before the Simon Commission and thus expediency and pragmatism, associated with the birth pang of the Bodo politics, have become two constant factors to dominate the Bodo public life.

The recommendations of the Simon Commission were codified in the Government of India Act of 1935 and in this Act the separate electorate for the plains tribals was granted. This provision paved the way for the formation of the Tribal League within the legislature that was elected in 1937. The Bodo leaders of the Tribal League showed how apt they were at the game of power politics with a meagre strength of only four members. Of course the situation was favourable since it was a hung house. At the beginning the Tribal League was with the European team dominated by Tea-planters, and with them they supported Sir Muhammad Sadullah and his Muslim League ministry. When Sadullah cabinet lost the confidence of the house, Tribal League sided with the Congress and got a minister in the bargain. Again when the Congress ministry resigned in the wake of the Second World War, the Tribal League joined the newly formed Muslim League ministry led by Sadullah. None could blame the Tribal League for this rank opportunism as it had already made a declaration that the party would support whoever commanded the majority.

It may be mentioned that this period between 1937-45 was a critical one for the country as well as the province of Assam. The outbreak of the World War, Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League demanding Pakistan, the August movement and the brutal police torture in the lower Assam districts, Sadullah government's open door

policy for large scale Muslim immigration in Assam, threat of the Japanese invasion in Assam—all these developments took place during this period. It needs to be mentioned that the Bodo leaders, while shifting their political loyalty from one party to another, did not care to take into account any of these developments. They not only ignored issues involving vital national or regional interest, they even preferred to adopt a soft line where the interest of the plains tribals themselves was involved. Encroachment on the tribal land reached its zenith in the forties under the patronage of the Muslim League and strangely, all those years the Tribal League remained a faithful ally of the Muslim League ministry. And at the same time when Tribal League correctly assessed that independence was imminent, it did not find it difficult to make a fresh deal with the Congress on the eve of the general election of 1946. True to expectation, the Congress secured a majority in the Assembly and Rupnath Brahma became a minister of the Congress Cabinet as the nominee of the Tribal League. Thus the provincial autonomy of the Act of 1935 provided the Bodo politicians enough opportunity to learn the tactics of staying with power and it appears that it was the only politics they learnt during the decade preceding the independence of the country.

III

On August 15, 1947 India became independent and in 1950, India was proclaimed a Republic of which Assam became a state. Adult franchise was introduced and some major changes were made in the system of representation. The situation brought about some changes in the objective situation that inspired the Bodo leaders to revise their strategy as well. The Tribal League, to cope with the new situation, decided to merge with the Indian National Congress. It is for the first time that the Bodo leaders thought it prudent to participate in the mainstream politics under the banner of a national party of course, the decision may not be regarded as a proof of any change of heart on the part of the leaders who had been propagating the golden virtue of insularity throughout the preceding decades. As a matter of fact analysis would reveal that this newly found zeal for mainstream politics had its origin in the mundane desire for electoral gains.

Under the Act of 1935, the plains tribals formed a separate electorate and this electorate was to send four members to the Provincial Assembly. The new constitution of independent India abolished separate electorate and the new electoral procedure provides for renewed constituencies for the tribals and other scheduled communities but they were to be elected by the general electorate composed on the basis of the universal adult franchise. Thereby the plain tribals lost their captive constituencies but in return gained a large share of the Assembly seats under the reserved category. For example, in the first general election of 1952, seats reserved for plains tribals were eight. Moreover, they were and still are allowed to contest in general seats. But to win these seats, the candidates were to depend on the general voters because in none of the reserved constituencies the tribal themselves were in a majority. So the Bodo leaders allied with Congress for ensuring a major share in the provincial power structure. The Congress, on the other hand, thought it easier to placate the small elite group of the plains tribals than to initiate a new kind of politics for incorporating the tribal masses within mainstream of the national politics. Thus, from this mutuality of interests there evolved the mechanism of co-option that ensured accommodation of a small group of tribal elites under the hegemony of the Assamese ruling class.

This mechanism worked well for a decade and a half. But gradually there was an inevitable rise in number of aspirants desiring to be co-opted. Congress found it difficult to make room for all of them since there was a proportionate rise of Assamese aspirants who demanded entry into the ruling class and the Congress could not give the tribals any more concession without antagonizing these aspirants who had emerged from its primary support base i.e., the Assamese gentry. This is the background that gave birth to the Plain Tribal Development Council of Assam (PTCA), which grew as the parallel force challenging the monopoly of the Congressite Bodo leaders who so far had managed to grab the entire share of the state patronage in the name of and on behalf of the Bodo community as a whole. But this breakaway group was also dominated by the Brahmas and they also represented the same political culture. They staked their claim not

for a new social contact but to carve out a place for themselves within the existing power structure of the State.

This basic character of PTCA became obvious when the power equation in the state underwent an apparent transformation following the general election of 1978. It was for the first time since independence that the Congress failed to come to power in Assam and the newly formed Janata Party formed the government. The social base of the Janata Party was not different from that of Congress—like that of the Congress the inner core of the Janata Party was also stuffed with the representatives of Assamese gentry, the only difference was that they came from that segment of the Assamese society who felt that they had been deprived of their rightful place in the power structure during the Congress regime. The leadership of the PTCA also had the same grievance and Janata Party found a ready ally in it. Samar Brahma Choudhury, the son of Sitanath Brahma Choudhury, who had cherished the desire to become the heir-apparent of Rupnath Brahma but could not be accommodated by the Congress for the emergence of Renendra Basumatari, was inducted in the Janata ministry as the representative of the PTCA. Brahma Choudhury, along with the newly elected PTCA M.P. Charan Nazary was given a free hand by the new government to deal with all matters related to the plains tribals of Assam. But this monopoly of power had a price tag attached to it. The PTCA had to abandon the demand for a separate state. It is to be noted that ABSU in the eighties mobilized public opinion against these two leaders branding this decision as the great betrayal to the Bodo cause. However, as long as the Janata government continued in power, Brahma Choudhury and his colleagues were successful in containing the disapproval of the Bodo masses by distributing favour to the leaders who mattered, thanks to the position he held in the government. The end of the Janata government came in the early 1979 in the wake of the Assam movement. The surcharged atmosphere created by this violent movement changed the entire political scenario of the state. The western Assam, where the Bodos had their maximum concentration became one of the most important nerve-centres of the Assamese movement.

In this situation, it was imperative for PTCA to take a positive stand either for or against the movement. But PTCA opted for a dubious role. It was apprehensive of the chauvinist objectives of the Assamese movement but at the same time had a longing to use the movement to oust the immigrants from the Bodo-dominated areas. The longing was balanced by an apparently contrary desire to placate and use the non-Assamese sentiment for combating the ugly manifestations of the Assamese chauvinism. In other words, PTCA did not want to burn its bridge with the non-Assamese. The strategy was correct but its execution required a Bismark which the PTCA did not have. What PTCA did was to pursue a policy of glorious inaction. For six long years, from 1979 to 1985, PTCA sat on the fence neither supporting nor opposing the movement and only political activity it indulged in was to issue some dubious statements that could be interpreted either way. In the Assembly poll of 1986 Asom Gana Parishad, a newly formed party that emerged in the wake of the Assam agitation, ousted the Congress from power and formed the government. PTCA readily sided with the party in power and offered its support to the government. AGP was guided by the philosophy of the Assam agitation and hence represented the interest of the Assamese majority. It was no wonder that this government took a series of measures that went directly against the tribal aspiration. PTCA M.L.As did not dare to put effective pressure on the AGP on whose patronage they depended much. This failure, on the part of the PTCA opened up new opportunity to their opponents to oust their henchmen from the leadership of ABSU. Thus a new group of leaders, mostly youths with Christian schooling and support, captured All Bodo Students Union and launched a violent movement for a separate Bodoland. Bodo People's Action Committee or BPCA became its political platform. We need not go into details as to how the ABSU-BPCA combination virtually uprooted PTCA from the arena of the Bodo politics through a method of blood and iron. The important factor that is relevant for our purpose was that the ABSU-BPCA, combined in course of time, formed an alliance with the Congress which was in power at the Centre and the central government machineries were used, for boosting up the activities of the

Bodo allies with the sole objective of discrediting the AGP government. The alliance, at its formative stage, was clandestine but it came into the open following the election of 1991 when BPCA became an open ally of the Congress in the Legislature. AGP, on its turn, floated the Bodo Security Force (Br.S.F.), an armed outfit which undertook the task of ethnic cleansing 'in Bodo-areas and since then it has been indulging, in routine raids on non-Bodo villages killing unprotected civilians including women and children. ABSU activists were also favourite targets of Br. S.F. In other words Br.S.F. has adopted the tactics that was adopted by ABSU for subduing PTCA. The liaison between AGP and Br. S.F. has never been established officially, but People's Democratic Front, the political wing of Br.S.F., that came into being hastily before the election of 1986 has formulated an alliance with AGP in the Assembly and hence Br.S.F.- AGP link became more or less an open secret.

There can be little doubt that the Bodo assertion is backed by the logic of history—its late emergence in no way can weaken the claim of the Bodo people for having a rightful place under the sun. But it is altogether a different matter whether the Bodos can hope to have a fair deal under the leadership of the politicians of the kind that have been dominating the Bodo politics since the thirties of this century. The Bodo politics, it should be admitted, suffer from two fundamental defects since the days when provincial autonomy came into operation in this region.

First, the advanced section of the Bodos, who decide matters related to their assertion and aspiration, has always been a lot who always offered themselves for co-option. In the late thirties, the same MLAs' were accommodated both by the Congress and the Muslim League in spite of the fact that the two parties represented contrary political objectives. In the post-independence decades, the expansion of the middle class base created a situation where a vastly increased number of contenders had been fighting for share of the booties that came with the state power and no single party was in a position to accommodate all of them within its fold. Hence a new pattern of the Bodo politics emerged. The ruling party of the state always found faction of the Bodo aspirants as its ally whereas the disgruntled faction

sides with the major opposition party in the hope of future accommodation. The history of PTCA, ABSU, BPAC and PDF speaks the same story. All of them give lip service to the demand of the separate state when not in power. But as soon as a faction is co-opted by the ruling party, it abandons the demand which is then taken over by the faction opposed to the former. This shifting of position by the Bodo parties with the change of ruling party in the state has now become a rule and as a result, the credibility of the Bodo demand has been undermined.

Secondly, it is apparent from the literature associated with the Bodo demand that it is essentially an imitative one. The most comprehensive statement concerning the Bodo demands is available in the character of demands placed by the ABSU to the President of India on November 10, 1987. There are ninety-two demands in the charter, but only two or three of them are associated, that too remotely, with the problem of economic upliftment of the Bodo masses. Most of the demands are for creating facilities for sophisticated and advanced education (like establishment of IIT, central university etc.), or setting up of elite centres of cultural pursuits like T.V. centre, radio station etc. The Bodos have a literacy rate of only 17 per cent and the Charter has not taken into consideration whether the Bodo society is equipped with the infrastructure for utilizing or sustaining such institutions. In fact, the priorities have been determined not by the real needs of the Bodo society, but by imitating the demands put forward by the AASU. Thus a wide gap is there between the ground realities of the Bodo society and the perception that moulds the action programme of its elite leadership.

At the moment, the Bodos are passing through a phase of chaos and confusion. Violence of all varieties accompanied by bloody infighting is reigning supreme in the region inhabited by the Bodos. Only a qualitative change of the Bodo politics can bring about an end to this situation but unfortunately there is no sign of emergence of such change in near future.

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The term Bodo has been used by the older generation of scholars 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 and its wider denotation deserves to be abandoned in recognition of the emerging socio-political vocabulary; the Bodo means the plain tribes of western and northern Assam known earlier as the Bodo-Kacharis. In this monograph also the term Bodo is used in this new sense, meaning the Bodo-Kacharis of the Brahmaputra Valley. Only that aspect of Bodo history has been considered in this study which can be traced on the basis of evidences, direct or indirect, and at the same time which is capable of throwing some light on the complex process of formation of the Assamese nationality *vis-à-vis* the evolution of Bodo society. This monograph is an attempt to trace different phases of history through which the Bodos emerged as the most dominant ethnic minority of Assam.

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