

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

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7 **Abstract**

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

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19 *Index terms—*

20 **1 Introduction**

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

30 **2 II.**

31 **3 Conceptual Framework**

32 The key concepts of the paper are -'ethnicity', 'nationality' and 'middle class'. At the very outset, it needs to be  
33 pointed out that although the term 'ethnic' is commonly used in the Northeast to refer to groups of people with  
34 distinct cultural characteristics, such an usage does not reflect the reality that these groups are in different stages  
35 of nationality formation [1]. In the first stage of ethnicity, a cultural group differentiates itself Author: Associate  
36 Professor, North-Eastern Hill University Shillong, India. e-mail: susgupta\_in@yahoo.co.in from other groups, but  
37 remains politically insignificant. In the second stage, political consciousness of cultural identity evolves leading  
38 to the pursuit and protection of community interests. In the ultimate stage of nationality formation, right to  
39 self-determination is sought to be asserted through political action and political mobilization [2]. ??aruah [3]  
40 argues in this connection that the Asomiyas, the Bengalis, the Khasis, the Bodos, the Mizos, the Nagas and even  
41 the Karbis appear to have become nationalities demanding the political right to control their own affairs. In fact,

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

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42 all nationalities in the contemporary world have been demanding homelands of their own where they can protect  
43 their cultural, political and economic interests and this reflects the political dimension of nationality. Nationalities  
44 in the Northeast are no exception to this worldwide trend. However, political aspirations of nationalities in this  
45 part of India have assumed different forms, ranging from the demand for sovereign independent homeland to the  
46 demand for separate statehood within India, in their quest for self-fulfillment and self-determination.

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

56 Another key concept to be used in the paper is 'middle class'. It may be noted that the term 'middle class/es'  
57 was in common use in some parts of the world by the 1840s when it came to be viewed as basically consisting  
58 of various social groups which occupy an intermediary position between the proletariat and theT Volume XIV  
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60 bourgeoisie [7]. The term 'petty bourgeoisie' was more familiar than 'middle class' in Marxist literature. Non-  
61 Marxist scholars have been using the term in the Weberian sense. Marxists have been arguing that the term  
62 'middle class' as used by bourgeoisie social scientists was unscientific because it was based on an unscientific  
63 concept of class in the sense that it was not defined in terms of the position occupied in the system of production.  
64 Rather it looks at class as an economic position in a society, based on individual achievement and birth. Though  
65 these two different approaches to the use of the term middle class has important distinguishable consequences for  
66 social and political analyses, yet the term is commonly used in social science literature to refer to social forces  
67 [8].

### 68 4 III.

### 69 5 Emergence of Bodo Middle Class and its Interests

70 Keen observers of the Bodo movement for socio-political assertion tend to believe that this phenomenon is not a  
71 new development and seek to trace its origin historically from the first quarter of the twentieth century. Sharma  
72 for example, observes that this period was marked by the emergence of a nascent middle class among the Bodos  
73 of Western Assam. He accounts for this phenomenon in terms of two important factors, viz., the advent of cash  
74 economy in the Bodo society and its proliferation during the colonial period which transformed the tribal social  
75 and economic structure and the emergence of a religious reform movement among the Bodos led by Kalicharan  
76 Brahma which transcended the domain of religion and extended itself into the realms of society, polity and  
77 economy. The impact of this 'renaissance' on the sphere of education facilitated the entry of many Bodo youths  
78 into the colonial job market, thereby triggering the advent of a middle class among the Bodos. [9] Sharma ??2000)  
79 argues that this essentially jobcentric Bodo middle class had a vested interest in land as their forefathers belonged  
80 to the landed gentry. [10] An interesting point that emerges from this formulation is that on the one hand, the  
81 world view of the emerging middle class was different from its predecessors because securing government jobs  
82 and availing new socio-political opportunities took precedence over landed interest, but on the other, its role as a  
83 liberating force was restricted because of its sustained interest in land. Such contradictions in its class character  
84 led to the exclusion of issues like land reform from the agenda of the movements launched by the emerging Bodo  
85 middle class [11].

### 86 6 IV. Middle Class Organisations and Different Stages of Bodo 87 Identity Assertion

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

98 During 1952-1967, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the most important literary organization of the Bodos, played  
99 a significant role in the assertion of Bodo identity and the issues of language and script were integral to such  
100 assertion. This period was marked by the articulation of demands like introduction of Bodo language in the

101 Bodo-dominated areas and the replacement of the Assamese script by the Roman script. This phase of identity  
102 assertion was marked by the active involvement of the masses unlike in the previous phase. However, a major  
103 limitation of the politics of identity assertion during this phase was that the middle class leadership hardly made  
104 any radical demands for the improvement of the lot of the common man.

105 On January 13, 1967, Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi made an important declaration regarding the  
106 reorganization of Assam on a federal basis. This enhanced the prospects for the fulfillment of the political  
107 aspirations of the Bodo middle class which was reflected in the demand for a union territory to be called  
108 "Udayachal" for the plains tribes of Assam. A new political organization, viz., Plains Tribal Council of Assam  
109 (PTCA) was formed to spearhead this territorial demand. The PTCA was, in essence, a Bodo political party  
110 although its name suggested a common political platform for all plains tribes of Assam. In this context, it has  
111 been argued by some scholars that the initiative to construct a pan-tribal identity of the plains-tribes of Assam  
112 always came from the Bodo middle class leadership which was not only more organized, but was also likely to  
113 play a key role in any future power Volume XIV Issue II Version I 12 ( G )

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

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

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

139 V.

## 140 7 Transformation of Bodo Identity and the Role of the Middle 141 Class

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

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

## 157 8 Concluding Observations

158 For a deeper understanding of the Bodo identity assertion, it is necessary to relate this assertion with the  
159 nationality question in India. The Indian State has always viewed this issue as a problem of all-India national  
160 integration and has considered nationality aspirations as anti-national. This has further alienated smaller

## 8 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

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161 nationalities like the Bodos of Assam. Ironically, the Assam movement against foreign nationals had initially  
162 drawn the Bodos and other plains tribes under its banner, but it failed to accommodate the aspirations of these  
163 nationalities. Moreover, the Assamese middle class hegemony generated a sense of insecurity among the Bodo  
164 middle class and pushed it towards a path of self-determination for consolidation of the Bodo national identity.  
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