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Book Review

Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of Identity and the Bodo Movement in Assam*. New Delhi: Scholar World, 2014

Reviewed by Anup Das

The Northeast region of India has witnessed political movements in the form of either demands for cessation or separate autonomy among different ethnic groups. Each ethnic group express and asserts one's cultural identity in order to claim a territory and political control over natural resources. The present book attempts to provide a holistic understanding of the Bodo movement in Assam which is demanding for a separate state within the democratic framework of India. The author focuses on different issues that have fuelled or motivated the identity movement among the Bodos since the colonial period. She systematically traced the different phases of Bodo identity assertion beginning from the colonial period to the post independence era. The Bodo identity assertion movement is divided into four different phases. Altogether the book has six chapters.

In the first chapter, the author Hira Moni Deka starts with the theoretical debate and conception of identity politics in India. She argues that the rise of ethnic nationalism and ethnic identity movements in large part of India can be attributed to the legacy of colonization and de-colonization. The second chapter deals with the historical background of the Bodo movement. In this part she focuses on the early history of the Bodos and their migration to the present territory of Assam. She pointed out that one of the main factor of the movement is the socio-economic grievances of the Bodos. The author also indicates that the Christian Missionaries played a significant role to the construction of the Bodo ethnic identity in Assam. She argued that the Assam movement and its aftermath consequences had an adverse effect on the Bodo psyche. The third chapter talks about the role of the interpretation of Bodo history to accommodate Bodo identity and politics. She wrote how the movement interpreted history while constructing, legitimizing and asserting a distinct Bodo identity to gain political power. The interpretation of the history of Bodo community in Assam by the Bodos played an important role to construct boundaries between the Bodos and the

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Assamese. She has tried to explain the importance of interpretation of the Bodo history in Assam in order to understand the demand for separate state. In the fourth chapter the author focuses on the nature of the Bodo movement. She has divided the Bodo identity movement in different phases. During the period between 1929-2003, the Bodo movement have witnessed various developments – such as the establishment of the distinct Bodo identity, political consciousness to the vibrant demand for autonomy and the demand for so-called separate Bodoland state. The Bodo activists engaged in violent as well as non-violent activities throughout the various phases of the movement. According to the author, the Bodo movement was directed particularly against Assamese hegemonies and anti-tribal attitude of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) Government. The movement for demand of separate state culminated after the Assam movement that is from the year 1987. The movement during this period was spearheaded by the leaders of All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) in the Brahmaputra valley. After a violent and non-violent protest by the Bodo leaders, they came to the discussion table involving the State Government of Assam and Central Government. This led to the signing of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993. However, they were not satisfied with the Accord owing to limited power being entrusted to the Bodos. Therefore, another vehement protest was launched on the north bank of river Brahmaputra. A Bodo insurgent group called Bodoland Tiger Force (BLT) signed another Accord with the State Government and Central Government in the year 2003 leading to the creation of Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District in Assam (BTAD).

The impact of Bodo movement has been explained in the fifth chapter. She expresses that the most glaring impact of Bodo movement has been the redefining of the Assamese identity. The Bodo movement united the Bodos among themselves and the significant aspect of the movement is that it has helped the Bodos to assert and establish distinct identity that led to the realisation of their political demand. The Bodoland movement brought about a new height of identity consciousness among the Bodos and also gave a new definition to the Assamese identity. The last chapter deals with the concluding part of the book which talks about the desire of the Bodos to established separate identity than the common Assamese identity. The Bodos undertook the process of cultural revivalist movement to salvage many aspects of their pristine culture and ways of living – for example, Bodo language, religious practices, food habits, dress etc. These were used widely with the aim to exhibit Bodo distinctiveness from that of the Assamese people.

The book gazes the Bodo movement from a historical perspective and argues that the Bodo movement is the product of a long historical process of identity formation that began in the colonial period and became prominent in the post-independence period. The author highlighted that education, feeling of relative deprivation from the Assamese mainstream society in terms of socio-economic development and the rising political aspiration among the Bodos are some of the main motivating factors of the movement. Though there is repetition of the same sentences in few chapters, the book is written in a lucid language and unbiased manner.