

Social Movement and Militancy: A Perspective from Within

Jacob Islary

Abstract. *Social and identity assertion movements aim at bringing about positive change in society, but some have come to be associated with militancy and activities of extremism, violence and loss of life. However, this involves a complex process often forced by neglect of the milder means of articulating and asserting their rights by groups who experience and feel marginalised, neglected and dominated by the state or the dominant section of society who also exercise authority and power. This paper presents a narrative and argument of social movements turning militant from within a community's perspective of their movement for rights – to be recognised and granted. The article also proposes a frame of understanding the process of social movements turning into militant and extremist mode in their approach.*

Key Terms: Identity | Social Movement | Militancy | Militanisation | Conflict | Violence

Jacob Islary PhD is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati and can be reached at jislary@gmail.com

Introduction. Social movements and community struggles are associated with involvement of masses who share common feeling of 'discontentment' and aspiration for better and liberated social, political, cultural and economic life. However, such movements are often associated with militancy, violence and conflict. Often there is an existence of 'a state of war' between those in movements on one hand and the state and the dominant section of the society on the other hand. Sometimes, such movements are either resolved through dialogue and in some cases 'contained' by force' in which those leading the movement understand as oppression and repression and may give rise to taking up of violent measures to be heard when other milder means fail (Islary 2005).

The Indian experience of social and political movements during the time of the colonial regime have been met with repression including imprisonment of leaders and the masses and in some cases execution of those leading the movements. While some adopted 'moderate' methods others took 'extremist' paths including armed revolution to make their voices heard and granted their demands. After India's

Independence there were many social movements related to environment, social, cultural, political and economy; and in some cases movements involved use of arms especially those associated with identity, statehood or felt threat of intrusion by 'outsiders' or assimilation by the dominant linguistic and cultural section of the communities.

The Indian state responded by use of various means and methods – dialogue, signing of Memorandum of Settlements and Accords and in cases of armed insurgent movement used the power of military. Some areas such as the Jammu & Kashmir and the entire of Northeast India were declared troubled and disturbed areas and the Disturbed Areas Act, 1955 and the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958 were invoked and implemented. They still continue to be implemented in some parts today.

In the case of the Northeastern part of India social-cultural and political movements were witnessed for more than half a century and the Indian state responded using various strategies

including military. Most of the movements in the Northeast started peacefully, but with passage of time turned into militant and armed revolution mode. The history of the Bodoland Movement is one of such experience. It began as a peaceful movement inspired by Gandhian principles but over the years turned 'militant' because of 'felt repression' which included mass violation of human rights against the common people.

The Bodos. The Bodos form the largest tribal community of Assam and are believed to be the earliest community that inhabited the plains of the Assam valley and belong to Indo-Mongoloid origin according to Choudhury (2007: 1). They are found to be spread across Assam including West Bengal, and Tripura. According to Census of India 2011, they numbered about 1.42 million, making 4.53 percentage of the total population of Assam. Bodos belong to the ethnic group called the Bodo-Kachari in the Brahmaputra valley and are recognised as a plains tribe under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Bodo language is derived from Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Although, Devanagiri, Roman and Assamese scripts were used in the past the Bodos have adopted the Devanagari script as its official script and Bodo language was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. There are claims that the Bodos had script of their own called Deodhai which is now extinct, and the first recorded writing was in Roman script in 1884 by Endles (Brahma 2006: 97).

The traditional religion of the Bodos is Bathou, and religions like Brahma, Hinduism and Christianity have been introduced them. Today the Bodos have been granted administrative rights within a Council called Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) which came into effect with the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between the Government of India, Government of Assam and a section of the Bodos on 10 February 2003. This has provided some sections of the Bodos a sense of achievement and accomplishments in demanding their rights.

The Bodos of Assam have distinct language, culture and way of life. And, though they lived in close proximity with the mainstream Assamese society (unlike their other hill tribe counterparts) for ages, the Bodos have existed as distinct ethnic group traceable in history as far as two thousand years back; though their assertion for recognition and articulation of identity is a recent phenomenon (Choudhury 2007: 5). Further, Choudhury (2007: 2 citing Gait 1967, Anderson n.d. and Barua 1966) reminds the need for considering the Bodos as the 'autochthons of the Brahmaputra Valley' while studying the process of identity formation and assertion of the Bodos and their rights.

The Bodoland Movement and Militancy. The community consciousness, identity formation and articulation of the Bodos as a distinct ethnic group lies in the political, socio-cultural and linguistic awakening dating back to the early part of the 20th Century of the felt-neglect and victimisation experience by the dominant sections of society and the state. The formation of Bodo Chhatra Sanmilini (1919), All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTTL) in 1933, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in 1967 to safe guard the Bodo cultural heritage and identity show this reality.

The Bodos adopted peaceful methods in their movement for socio-cultural recognition drawing inspiration from the Indian experience of gaining freedom under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. The principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) was the guiding principle of the Bodoland movement. However, over the years the experience of the 'militarised' approach of the state in 'managing' and 'dealing' with the Bodoland Movement caused much harassment and suffering to the masses.

This led to a feeling among some section of the Bodos that they might have to adopt more 'extreme methods' to be heard. For examples there are instances in the history of Bodoland movement when the state police (sometimes accompanied by non-Bodo people) raided Bodo villages in the name of nabbing the Bodoland Movements leaders in the process actually

nabbing and implicating the innocent youth causing much atrocity and suffering among the people and in some cases engaging in looting, damaging homes and properties and harassing children and women. A repeated experience of atrocities towards its people led a section of the Bodo youth found an armed revolutionary and militant group named BdSF (Bodo Security Force) later renamed as Nationalist Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) on 3 October 1986 and a few months later the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) during its 20th Annual conference (21-23 January 1987) decided to launch its Volunteer Force (VF) as a measure to counter the state militarised repression of the peaceful Bodoland Movement. And on 10 February 1987 the Volunteer Force was formally launched. Thus the peaceful Bodoland Movement began to take a militant and extremist approach with an aim to protect their community especially children and women but ended in confrontation and conflict with the state and sometimes violence with other communities that resulted in loss of life and property which created and fostered feeling of antagonism among different communities in society.

A Perspective. A construction and assertion of identity is said to be ‘fundamental’ to ‘social change’ (Castells 2010: xviii), and may include claims over land, resources and power. It is a process of articulation of ‘claims of who one is’ and associated rights along with it. Often this process begins with realisation that one is different from the other. Empirically such assertions of identity have been seen as threats to the dominant power/group and strategies formulated to repress them - sometimes with oppressive laws and assimilative strategies. And those articulating and asking for structural changes that involves *power relations* have been often been seen as those posing law and order threats in the society thus upsetting the stability and the homeostasis of the ‘perceived’ and ‘claimed’ peaceful co-existence of the people.

The dominant groups are often unwilling to change because the existing social, political, cultural and economic structure gives them advantages over others. Therefore it is a

question of managing individuals and groups, and when realities begin to be uncomfortable and threaten the advantageous order enjoyed by *the dominant few*; the simplest way of resolving has often been to brand the individuals or the groups as ‘anti-social’ or the movements as against the greater interest of society causing law and order problem thus needing to be repressed.

Such repression often leads to suffering and involves violation of rights on mass scale – men, women, youth and children. When such repression become repeated experience it leaves no scope but to fight back and to a degree if not to defeat the perpetrators but at least to defend oneself and one’s community. This is the how social movements take up militant and extremist forms which further leads communities to be associated with conflict, violence and sometimes termed as ‘terrorist’ and there begins to exist a ‘state of war’ between the State and other communities one hand and those on ‘movement’ on the other hand the thus furthering, fostering, promoting and perpetuating conflicts.

The leaders of the movements and those taking part in it (and in cases of mass movement the whole society) get sanctioned by the state and the legal system and are sometimes declared ‘wanted.’ Thus criminalisation of leaders and the community members by the state and the legal system begins and in turn the communities begin to support the ‘militant’ and ‘extremist’ oriented movements as they are able to garner the sentiments and emotions of the general public against the state and the legal system which seem to be against the whole community.

The Bodoland Movement adopting militant and extremist method and approach in its movement could be put in the following sequential order –

1. *Existence of Socio-Cultural and Political Inequality*
 - Cultural imposition, assimilation, denial of socio-cultural, political and economic rights.
2. *Mass Awareness*
 - Among the masses through education leading to community

- consciousness and generation of mass discontentment.
3. *Articulation and Assertion of Rights and call of Action for Change*
 - Through dialogue and discussions at community level with masses on resolving the discontentment led by common vision and interests.
 4. *Organisation and Mobilization*
 - Organisation and mobilisation of the masses to achieve the vision and community interests and included strategies of mass rallies, hunger strikes and boycotts.
 5. *Militarised Response of the State to the Movement*
 - The state responded to the movement through military force – including domination marches, operations and raids to nab the leaders of the movements in the process causing much harm and suffering to the common people.
 6. *Bodoland Movement adopting Militant mode of Movement*
 - Founding of BdSF renamed as NDFB (1986) and Volunteer Force (1987) to make their

voices heard and to defend the community.

7. *Confrontational and Conflicting state of Existence*
 - There exist a state of conflict and war between the armed militants and the state.

Conclusion. Social movements often begin as peaceful methods but some take up militant and extremist form and approach with aim to be counter the militarised response of the state or sometimes to defend themselves when other dominant sections of society use force to repress the movement. The Bodoland movement experience has been one of such experience. What began as a peaceful movement with road rallies, hunger strikes and boycotts, turned militant and extremist oriented in the latter 1980s due to militarised response of the state and repressive approach of dominant sections of society to the demands of the people. If those in power in the state and society were to have adopted had dialogue and persuasion as methods with the people perhaps the cost to life, property, social and political relations with ‘other communities’ might have been avoided.

References

- Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
- Brahma, S. 2006. *Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition*. Guwahati: DVS Publishers.
- Castells, Manuel. 2010. *The Power of Identity – Volume II of The information Age: Economy, society, and Culture*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Choudhury, S. 2007. *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Islary, J. 2005. Why Terrorism?, *The Indian Currents*, Dec. 11, 2005 Issue.