

## **Bodofa U.N. Brahma and his contribution to Bodo Movement.**

**Miss Bibari Boro,**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science  
Bodoland University

**Dr. Jhanin Mushahary,**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar.

**Mr. Solomon Islary,**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science  
Bodoland University

### **Abstract**

Upendra Nath Brahma was a prominent Socialist leader in the Bodo community. He actively participated in and led the separate state movement for Bodoland from 1987 to 1990. He is also known as 'Bodofa,' meaning Father of Bodos, for his immense contribution to Bodo Society. He was elected president of the All Bodo Students' Union in 1986 at the 18<sup>th</sup> annual conference of ABSU that was held at Rawta, Darrang, Assam. He took a resolution to work for the socio-political rights of the Bodos and demanded separate statehood for Bodos. At that time, Bodo and other tribal peoples were deprived of their rights. The ruling government exploited them socially, economically, politically, educationally, etc.

On the other hand, they have their own identity, culture, traditions, history, etc. Still, their identities have been lost with time due to the domination, exploitation, oppression, and suppression by different advanced communities. U. N. Brahma wanted the "Bodo as a Great Nationality in the World." (ABSU, 2022) He knew that without political rights, it could not be easy to protect their identities and also not easy to live in the world as human beings. The separate state movement became a mass movement under the leadership of U.N. Brahma on the Indian political scene. U. N. Brahma first traveled throughout the country and tried to understand their people's status, habits, customs, and traditions. He brought consciousness to their people to keep the distance from some social evils and suggested protecting their identities. He knew the fundamental rights of the citizens of India. He gave a call for the people to fight against these injustices. On the banner of ABSU, he started the Movement on March 2, 1987, with the principles of Gandhiji's non-violence. On his call, many Bodo people living in different parts of the country participated in this Movement. As a student leader, he brought remarkable changes in the lives of the oppressed through the Bodoland movement in 1987 with the slogan of "Live and Let Live." He had a unique idea and philosophy, where people accepted his call and became more confident in their minds than earlier that they would achieve a separate state for Bodoland. Such was his charismatic leadership, and he united all sections of his people in the Bodo society living in different regions. People regard him as their leader who will win freedom and justice for them. Many people had lost their lives in this struggle. Upendra Nath Brahma was one of the great leaders in the Bodo society. His political demand for the

battle of separate state movement was not only for political freedom but also to protect the Bodo's and other tribals' identities, culture, language, literature, history and socio-economic, educational, etc., and equal welfare of all-round development. Whatever he achieved in his short life span, he taught their people how to get their rights and justice and how to get the way of creating a separate state for Bodoland. From then, Bodo's people have confidence and hope in their minds that they will gain a Separate state one day and another. Upendra Nath Brahma always spoke about means and ends against exploitation. In this context, this paper represents Upendra Nath Brahma's life and struggle for political contribution to Bodoland in this view.

**Keywords:** U.N. Brahma and His contribution, Political Rights and Bodo Movement,

## **1. Introduction.**

The Bodo's are the aboriginal indigenous people of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of North East India. Ethnically the Bodo's are Sino- Tibetan origin, and linguistically, they are of Tibeto- Burman group. They are their distinct Tribe in India with a different language, culture, and tradition. They have a history of independent living; since the pre-independence period, Bodo has ruled the Kingdom at Dimapur, Maibong, and Kashpure in the past. The reign of the Bodo kings ended with the annexation of the territories led by the last Bodo king Govinbdra Chandra and the Tularam Senapati by the British in 1832 and 1854 A.D respectively (Mondal, 2011) with the system of British politics "Doctrine of Laps." All the kingdoms and princely states of the Boro Kocharis' are still scattered in Dimapur, Maibong, Kashpur, etc., in the Kocharis – Bodo's history. But the Bodo Kocharis lost their land, Kingdom, palace, and everything over time. But after the Independence of India, the Government of Assam constituted the '*tribal belt and block*' to safeguard and protect tribal lands politically dispossessed after the British had scattered all the powers. On the other hand, relentless their identities, social, and cultural aggression for forcefully assimilated by the ruling Government of Assam (Brahma ed. 2001). Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bodo's people came down to their political, social, cultural, tradition, history, land, etc.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, political consciousness returned among the Bodo's. Some Bodo youths came to consciousness and started organizing themselves to reclaim their lost identity and socio-cultural and political heritage. In 1919, the formation of Bodo Chatra Sanmilani ignited a new awakening among the Bodo to march toward the present state of Bodo. In 1928 the Simon Commission visited Shillong, the capital of Assam at that time; the Kochari Youth Association and the Goalpara district Bodo Association met the commission at Shillong and submitted a memorandum demanding separate electorate status for the Bodo community information of a different Boro regiment. The following political consciousness came in 1933 when the All Assam Plains Tribal League was formed under Rupnath Brahma, Bhimbora Deuri, and a few other Bodo youths. But their objectives were never achieved as the two had hardly anything familiar in their views and aims in their political struggle (Roy1995).

The tribes living on Assam's plains, especially the Bodo's, formed a strong organization of their own. As a result, on February 15, 1967 formation of the All Bodo Student Union came into being under the leadership of Banerwar Basumatary, Konkeswar Narzary, etc., with the aim of "Unity, Struggle and Prosperity." This organization's central vision was to ensure "Identity, Justice, Dignity, and peace." (The Bodos, by ABSU, 2022) But the political consciousness of the Bodos is

found reflected in this crucial demand by them during that time. This consciousness gradually took a definite form and further developed the stage of statehood demand for safeguarding themselves by political means. On January 13, 1967, the Mizo Union stated that the Center had the policy to recognize the state of Assam based on the federal structure. At that time, the undivided Goalpara district of ABSU welcomed this Center's approach. Since then, ABSU has been demanding the bifurcation of Assam and creating a separate state for the plain tribes of Assam.

After that political awakening of the Bodos, a new turn in political aspiration took place on February 27, 1967, with the formation of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). This political party raised the demand for a separate state name, "Udayachal", to protect their political, socio-cultural, and economic interest and the overall development of their society. But the party could not do anything; people lost their confidence in this party. Around this time of tribal disintegration and chaos, the leadership of ABSU was handed over to Upendra Nath Brahma, a highly educated young, dynamic and visionary leader in the Bodo society. He left all his ambitions aside and redefined the tribal political Movement. He believed there was nothing political in the hardships faced by the plain tribes of Assam. He knew that tribal people could not progress and develop without political freedom. So, he said a separate state is much for the Bodo tribes. He felt all the injustice, exploitations, discrimination, backwardness, and underdevelopment faced by the tribes of Assam were only for political reasons {History in Glimpse ABSU(1967-2017). A journey of struggle. Published by ABSU}. So, he demanded political rights according to the provision of 2, 3, and 4 articles of the Indian constitution, where the establishment of new states should be applied in the case of the plains tribal of Assam. The present study has focused on how Upendra Nath Brahma contributed to the field of politics in Bodo society.

## **2. Objectives of the study**

- a) To look into the reasons behind the demand for Political rights.
- b) To analyze the Political contributions of Upendra Nath Brahma to Bodo Society.

## **3. Methodology**

The present study is undertaken under a descriptive methodology.

The data collection is both Primary and Secondary sources. Primary data has been collected through interviews and focused group discussions with social organizations like ABSU, ABWWF, movement leaders, etc. On the other hand, secondary data collection has been collected from published books, Journals, magazines, newspapers, etc.

## **4. Research Questions**

- a) What are the reasons for the political demand for a separate state?
- b) What are the political contributions of Upendra Nath Brahma to the Bodo Society?

## **5. Political Contributions of Upendra Nath Brahma.**

Upendra Nath Brahma was an Indian Socialist leader and 8<sup>th</sup> All Bodo Students' Union president. He is well known as '*Bodofa*,' which means the father of Bodo's. He was a visionary and

dynamic leader after the post-Independence era among the Bodo's. U.N. Brahma was born on March 31, 1956, in a village called Boragari, under the Dotma block of the Kokrajhar district. His father's name was Manglaram Brahma, and his Mother's name was Lepsri Brahma. They were penniless. His childhood name was 'Thoben.' He received his primary school from Dotma, secondary education from Sakti Ashram, and his B. Sc from Guwahati Cotton College with honours in Physics and an M. Sc in Physics from Guwahati University; Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Kokrajhar Government College. He also enrolled in Law College for L.L.B. (Basumatary2017), which he could not complete because of his active participation in the Bodo Movement and deteriorating health condition.

The Rowta Annual conference of ABSU was held from 29th to 31<sup>st</sup> May 1986, where he was elected as the All Bodo Student's Union president. Upendra Nath Brahma took the resolution for political demand for a separate state 'BODOLAND' within the Indian Union, especially for the cause of the formation of a separate state within the Indian Union, survival of their own identity, language, literature, culture, etc. From then onwards, the Movement witnessed different phases, but still, the political demand for a separate state of Bodoland remains the prime objective of ABSU (Brahma et al., 2001). Since then, he has never looked back. The Bodo's had been a dominant race since time immemorial having their own political space in the pre-historic past in areas of Assam and Bengal. Still, a feeling of subjugation slowly crept in after the independence of India as the Assamese language was imposed. The Roman script movement (1974) and the failure of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA 1967), Movement for a Union Territorial, gave rise to frustration in the Bodo community. Again, during the anti-foreigner AASU agitation, the ABSU and several tribal organization leaders extended full support to the AASU leaders. A classmate of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Upendra Nath Brahma, was an active member of the organization. When the Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985, a problem arose in the state. U. N. Brahma demanded his pride of the flesh, implementing clause 10: 'The existing law would be strictly enforced by preventing illegal occupation of Tribal Belt and Block and those occupying tribals lands would be evicted.' But it could have been tactfully handled by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and U. N. Brahma into his confidence and meeting other demands of the tribals. The rigid stand that the leadership took on this and other issues left no alternative for U. N. Brahma but to sever connection with the A.G.P. government. An allegation had been made that the Center's Congress (I) government used the Boro leadership to embarrass the A.G.P. government at Dispur. At that time, Rajiv Gandhi is said to have warned the Chief Minister that unless the Assam Government solved the Boro problem, there would be no alternative for the union government but to dismiss A.G.P. and impose President's Rule in Assam. After that, no specific provision was made in the accord to protect the Boro interest. The reasons are that ABSU was already opposed to curtailed clauses of the Assam Accord, which are against the interest of the Bodo people and other tribal people in Assam (Barpujari, 1998).

At such a juncture, the mantle of leading the ABSU fell upon Upendra Nath Brahma. Upendra Nath Brahma felt it was his responsibility to fight for Bodo's rights. To uplift the spirit of the Bodo's, he called upon the Bodo masses to establish "The Bodo as a great nationality in the world." Since unity is the hallmark for achieving greatness, he gave the clarion call and addressed the Bodo's thus, "United we stand, divide we fall." (Mwshahary 2017). He was dedicated, fearless, and a workaholic. To have the Bodo's regain their glorious past, he visited every nook and corner of

the Bodo inhabited areas of Assam. He awakened them by making them conscious of their rights and duties, pointing out the provisions in the country's constitution, and motivating them to come out to the street and demand their rights. To attain his vision of a separate state, he followed the path of 'Non-Violence.' He highlighted that the tribal people of Assam were empathetically desirous of enjoying the right to political self-determination to bring complete and concrete political and all-around security to the plain tribal people of Assam. Alternative to this, nowhere could tribal people feel safe, and a separate state of Bodoland could only address the woes of the Bodo's, including the other tribals. Bodo people only would be able to make the tribal people prosperous nationalists. So, under the leadership of U. N. Brahma, ABSU decided to include political issues as part of its plan during the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of ABSU. According to the provision, he wanted Bodo to enjoy the fruits of equality of status, justice, democracy, constitutional rights, and political and civil liberties.

Through his Movement, he transformed the Bodo's into a strong and united community. To gain knowledge about the problems faced by other communities residing in North Eastern India, Upendra Nath Brahma toured the area. His extraordinary leadership and clarity of vision drew people's attention. Everyone admired his strategy of mobilizing the masses and all the stakeholders. He headed as the president of the ABSU U. N. Brahma with its motto "Live and let Live," a democratic mass movement to create a separate statehood movement launched on the northern bank of Brahmaputra on March 2, 1987. Since then, Bodo Movement has spread over the world. Under the banner of ABSU, U.N. Brahma initially submitted a 92 points charter of demands to the Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, on January 1, 1987. Later ABSU focused only on three significant political needs of the 92 points charters. They were-

- i. To create a separate state on the northern Bank of the Brahmaputra River for the plain tribals of Assam.
- ii. To create an Autonomous Council on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra.
- iii. To create Karbi Ang-long Regional Council for the non-Karbi tribals under the district council.

The other 89 demands were related to education, socio-economic development, and other problems (Brahma et al. 2001).

Again, on January 22 1987, the same demand was also placed before then PM of India, Rajiv Gandhi, in New Delhi entitled "Why Separate State," which detailed the territory and population of the proposed Bodoland. The charter of demands was also submitted to the Home Minister of India, Mr H.M. Butta Singh 24 January 1987, and the President of India, Mr Giani Jai Singh, at Rashtrapati Bhawan on January 30 1987, respectively, to solve the Bodo's issues immediately (Why Separate State, ABSU 1987). And on November 10, 1987, ABSU held a demonstration in Delhi and presented a memorandum to Rajiv Gandhi entitled "Why Separate State," which gave details on the territory and population of the proposed nor state, claiming that 70% of the population in the region were Bodos based on what they called a 'self-census' Conducted by ABSU. (Gohain 2019). On the part of the ABSU under the banner of U. N. Brahma,

the first demand for a separate state was raised in the capital for the plain tribals of Assam. Later, the Bodo People's Action Committee was formed under the leadership of U. N. Brahma. The Bodo movement for separate statehood was launched on March 2, 1987. The Movement was then formally established and had since taken its course to attain the determined goal by 1990.

After several programs, such as on June 12, 1987, a mass rally was held at Judges Field, Guwahati, where ABSU demanded the division of Assam, slogan on 'divide Assam 50-50', 'No Bodoland No Rest', 'We Want Separate State' (Moshahary 2011). Upendra Nath Brahma told the people, "The land in which we live is our land, and this land we have inherited from our ancestors. On July 21, 1987, mass religious prayers were organized, and the ABSU activities took a view – 'Do or Die for a separate state. U.N. Brahma said that the demand for a separate state was "Legitimized by constitutional sanction through the provision of Articles 2, 3, and 4 of the Indian constitution with the provision formation of the separate state and backed by historical basis. Such other activities like hunger strikes, dharna, alternative bandh, etc. Although the Movement launched by the ABSU-BPAC was initially democratic, it experienced non-democratic and bloodshed unprecedentedly. Subsequently, under his leadership, the first tripartite talk with the Government of India and the state of Assam was held on August 28 1989. After that, several tripartite talks were held between the ABSU – BPAC, state, and central Govt to achieve the separate state demand. But the 4<sup>th</sup> tripartite talk was held on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1990 .....; due to the severe illness of the chief architect of the Bodoland Movement, Upendra Nath Brahma, who could not attend the meeting. However, Upendra Nath Brahma led the ABSU and BPAC delegations in the fifth tripartite talk conference on April 18, 1990; this was the last meeting that U.N. Brahma attended before his death. The Movement's charismatic leader, U.N. Brahma, had single-handedly brought the Movement to this level. The father of Bodo, Upendra Nath Brahma, inspired by noble ideals and tirelessly strove to protect the Bodo identity and other oppressed communities in India, died on May 1, 1990 (Mondal 2011).

The Bodoland movement led to the signing of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bodo Accord in 1993; they achieved the Bodoland Autonomous Council (B.A.C.) on February 23, 1993, between the ABSU-BPAC and Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta represented, and Mrs Rajendra Kumari Vajpayee represented the Central Government. The ABSU- BPAC team led by U.N. Brahma was in 40 numbers. An Accord to resolve Bodo issues involving political, economic, linguistic, and cultural problems. But the Movement for a separate state continued; after the First Bodo Agreement, two subsequent political agreements or the Bodo Agreement were signed; Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 and Bodoland Territory (B.T.R.) in 2020. These arrangements are significant administrative measures taken by the government in response to Bodo's request for a separate state under the Union of India and other matters related to the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. But still, the Bodo people and their organizations hope that they will gain 'Bodoland' one day. But, Of course, U.N. Brahma did not live to see the accord being signed, as he passed away on May 1, 1990. But by then, the ideals of a separate state and empowerment had already been sown by him.

Upendra Nath Brahma did not establish himself as a political leader, but he brought political consciousness to the Bodo and fought for their rights.

It is one of the most remarkable things in the history of Bodo's that Upendra Nath Brahma led the phase of the Bodo movement. During the Movement, for the first time, the ABSU - BPAC

came across the General election in 1991. The election for Assam Legislative Assembly was held along with the 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election. At the same time, a joint central Executive meeting of ABSU and BPAC was held in Deborgaon on April 22, 1991, under Kokrajhar District, where the decision to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election was made. They discussed the need to send representatives to Legislative Assembly and U.N. Brahma stated that without the representatives in the constituent Assembly, their interests would not be safeguarded. So, they decided that some representatives from the Boro's of Assam should be sent to the constituent Assembly, who could speak in the Assembly and in the Parliament to be the best person capable of protecting the interest of the Bodo's from their community. The leaders aspire to ensure their place in the country's decision-making process. As a result, under the leadership of U.N. Brahma, the ABSU – BPAC stood firm in the matter of election. Three experts Committee were constituted to look into participating in Assembly Election, ultimately leading to the decision to participate in the election. Participation in the election was declared a phase of Movement by the ABSU. In the Assembly election, the ABSU-BPAC-backed candidates contested 21 Assembly seats and won 9 out of 21. The 9 MLA's were Mr. Parameswar Brahma, Tajen Narzary, Pramila Rani Brahma, Khiren Borgayary, Kamal Brahma, Milan Boro, Derhagra Mushahary, Khorendra Basumatary and Jeoram Boro. They were directed to neither act with the ruling party nor the opposition party, but they recognized themselves as an independent group for the cause of Bodoland. Political observers maintained that the victory of ABSU and BPAC candidates in the elections had demonstrated their strength and support in their proposed land and proved the support for their demand by sending democratically elected representatives to the state Assembly and the Parliament (Daimary 2002). Some political leaders stated that the reason for winning was due to the leadership of ABSU-BPAC leaders, who could lead the Movement autonomously. Several round tripartite talks were carried out involving the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and ABSU -BPAC leaders who were already underway to solve the problem. The ordinary Bodo people saw a ray of hope in the leadership of the ABSU-BPAC; this marked the beginning of Bodo politics (Sonowal 2013).

U.N. Brahma became a great source of inspiration for the Bodo's, not only to continue fighting for the cause of a separate statehood but also an inspiration for the oppressed communities in India. Among the tribal people, for the first time in North-east India, ABSU created a record of demanding a separate state through student organizations under the dynamic leadership of U.N. Brahma. ABSU, under the leadership of U.N. Brahma, established close relationships with different student organizations in the North-Eastern region and received tremendous support. He participated in the first North-Eastern Indigenous Students Federations conference held in Shillong in September 1986. The ABSU included various students Union of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, West- Bengal, Nepal, Tripura, North Cachar Hill, etc. (Narzary 2007). Some tribal communities also registered their demands which were evident during the visit of the expert committee on plains Tribes of the state in Assam.

Further, after signing the Bodo accord, these groups became more vocal about their demands and participated actively in their organizations, such as Rabhas, Lalungs, Missings attained their autonomous councils. The Koch Rajbangshis, and Saraniya Kacharis also became more involved with their demands for inclusion in the Scheduled tribe. It can be mentioned that in the Post-Bodoland Movement, Assam's oppressed or tribal people became increasingly conscious of political rights. Consequently, the state's political scenario was changed (Daimary2002).

U.N. Brahma's Bodoland movement instilled consciousness about their rights. It inspired the new generation to work for the rights of their community and created an atmosphere of nationalism among the Bodos and other tribal societies. The new light of political awakening by U.N. Brahma's Movement encompasses a spirit of nationalism among the Bodos. By that time, the political consciousness of the Bodos was reflected in a long-term movement among the Bodos. He taught them how to fight to redress some of their genuine grievances. Although he could not finish his Movement, he led the Downtrodden Community to fight for their rights through the Movement to protect and preserve our identity, culture, language, rights, etc. Through his strong leadership, U.N. Brahma united the Bodo society, awakening the masses and bringing politics within reach of the ordinary people. During his Bodoland statehood movement, he was supported by every section of the community, organizations, and other tribal students unions. U.N. Brahma is a leading light among the depressed, oppressed, neglected, dominated, and exploited nationalities worldwide. He gave the note to peacefully co-existence – "Live and Let Live." Brahma

World civil rights leaders and his friends observed that he was a dedicated leader. Some socialist leaders cited that he was the first leader to give social recognition to the issue of Lalong, Rabha, Mishng, and other tribes of Assam; also, he was a good organizer during the Movement. He was called the Messiah of the oppressed communities, who wanted the tribal and non-tribal people to be given constitutional rights. U.N. Brahma said, "Besides the Tribals, the non-tribals such as Assamese, Bengalis, Muslims Adivasis, Nepalese, Rajbangshis and the like will be allowed and continue to enjoy the rights and facilities enjoyed by the Tribals as per quanta by the constitution of India in the separate Union Territory. Non-Tribal will not be discriminated against to their race, caste, sex, or religion".

U.N. Brahma was a dedicated leader. His feeling for the oppressed was not confined to his community alone. No community living together with the Bodos suffered during his leadership. He worked with the Kok Bodo of Tripura and had cordial relations with the Adivasis of Bihar etc. He was the first leader to give social recognition to the issue of Lalong, Rabha, Mishng, and other tribes of Assam (Bodofa Upendra NarhBrahma: A profile by U.N.B. Trust, n.d).

## **6. Conclusion**

U.N. Brahma succeeded to a great extent in restoring the identity of the Bodo people. The present generation of Bodos would not have been possible if U.N. Brahma was not there to lead the Bodoland movement. Due to the contributions of U. N. Brahma, the Bodos and other oppressed communities are more politically conscious in the present times than ever. Today, many such people can be seen participating in political activities by casting votes, contesting an election, or working for political parties under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. Therefore, it can be said that the iconic Bodofa U. N. Brahma philosophies significantly impact the present-day Bodo society. Thus, from the above discussion, it is clear that after the entry of Upendra Nath Brahma, ABSU has worked tirelessly to create political consciousness and strive for the goal of a separate state within the Indian Union. He enormously contributes to the Bodo society and the oppressed communities in India. Until his last breath, U.N. Brahma zealously led the Movement for the emancipation of Bodos, and he still inspires them to have their urge for a separate state fulfilled. His relentless efforts resurrected not only a vibrant movement for reclaiming the



glorious past of the tribes but also helped build a confident, disciplined, informative, articulate and sophisticated new young generation. He always shouted the slogan "Live and Let Live" and left behind a great message for the younger generation to follow. Through his leadership, Bodos of the world was united for a single, unique cause of political self-determination under the constitution of India. For this, he sacrificed his life. He was aware of his ill health but continued with the vigorous Movement. His stubborn engagement with Bodoland Movement finally succumbed to the irrecoverable disease on May 1, 1990, at Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital, Mumbai. His untimely demise was a significant jolt during the Bodoland Movement, which was then at its peak. At the death of U.N. Brahma, who was called Messiah of the oppressed, the Bodos were caught unprepared and were in a fix to sustain the unfinished Bodoland Movement. (The Bodoland by ABSU 2022).

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