

Martyrdom in the consolidation of Bodo Identity Politics

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ABSTRACT

The article tries to focus, on how an emergent Bodo ethnic group. has been in the tradition of commemorating the inventive culture of 'martyrs'. It also tries to examine how the martyrs' arrival is not free from causing loss to ones' affiliating group. Ahead to how it has evolved, the article also afforded to analyse how martyrs can have the absolute source of symbolic power in consolidating the politically emerging community into the collective sense of unity. It is hypothetical for the article that the contemporary identity politics of the Bodos, which centres the question of demand for distinct political demarcation i.e. Bodoland to be a federal unit, the martyrdom have been the invisible force enlightening the generation for unity and collective voice for the end.

1. Introduction

Death is certain, and so perhaps the think of immortal living is out of public discourse. It is Lord Buddha, who with enlightened message could provide the sense of mortality as universal which none of the born with human lives can think of.ⁱ Death, which is certain therefore, becomes a part of suffering, and in different forms. Beyond the natural death, the concept has gone widening to include the death in ways like suicide, forced death, death out of genocide, ethnic cleansing and of deadly calamities. However, the death as a subject has gone matter of varied interpretation for categorisation about what sorts to be honoured and preserve by the public or the ethnic group/s. This is where understanding on the emerged and accepted concept 'martyr/om' becomes inevitable. Therefore, grounded in logic, alternative material recognition has become almost like the norms for arrangement in most cases of unlikely to natural death for the projection as 'martyr/s'. Such death should however be backed by the 'cause' meant for the group or the ethnicity that he or she has taken the cause for. No matter, what the cause is for or the contrary interest, but should be in the line what the group he or she belong or committed to do for. If the courageous challenge to enemy or say the sacrifice for the noble cause is enough to justify the structuring of martyrs, then why alone the death (?) or the atrocities led suffering to be counted, why those surviving are exclusively excluded by the recorded history of martyrdom, why not they be honour as 'living martyrs'. It is again the context of reality, which invite the need to revisit for redefining the traditionally given notion of defining *martyr* with cause as factor of sacrifice. Therefore, it would be more rational to take the peak of the situation that the people involved in devoting their sacrifices. The climax of the time and situation brings one to the fore of commemorative sign. However, projecting one as martyr has become like common parlance of use today. Therefore, it becomes difficult to justify using any parameter on what ground exactly one be categorised within the fold of celebrating martyrdom. At the same time, it involves contested understanding because celebration of martyrdom for one or ethnic group may not always be the sign of strengthening the inter ethnic unity. It is also because that martyr/s itself often stand as outcome of the counter ethnic resistance or enthused by opposing ideology (ies).

2. Methodology

The instant article is primarily on the secondary sources and on respondents for understanding martyrs in the context of Bodos.

3. Background on Concept Martyrdom

The concept of martyrdom, which today has become the matter of varied interpretation and grounds of articulation with fundamental hidden agendas of projection, has rooted in the philosophy of religion. The Encyclopaedia of World Religion defined 'martyr' for 'witness' having the root in Greek word *Martus*.ⁱⁱ The martyr's death will remain as witnesses to his or her religion. In fact, the very notion of martyrdom came to be recognised first in the known world of Catholic faith of history. It is therefore to say, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."ⁱⁱⁱ It was for the authority in the Roman Empire to advocate the religious atrocities, persecution and put to death for the fact of not renouncing the then emerged faith in Christian.^{iv} Martyrdom for the Christian has been the symbol of acceptance with great pride, noble and respect to imitate the death of Lord Jesus of faith who himself been crucified.^v Equally, the symbolic representation of faith by accepting the cross for worship has become another contribution to human society of the contemporary times. Martyrdom in Islamic tradition and religious philosophy of faith has importantly contributed to the understanding of what martyr is about. However, Islamic history for martyrdom, excepting the Arabic *Shahid* for martyr in the line of Christian to mean 'to witness' or 'to bear witness' has some other unique concept for martyrdom. It is not to mean to adorn death by not denouncing the religious faith rather martyrdom lies in the acceptance of death by actively involving in the battle fighting the opposition or the enemies.^{vi}

Now, the death for cause in-faith cannot be the sole justification for consideration as martyr. The increase in consciousness and the felt for resistance or revolution in the field of social, political and more importantly in making a distinct identity to ethnic unification, has thus, gained a revisited construction of martyr as nomenclature of celebration. More logically, the concept today is looked for symbolic representation of individual or the group, community force or

the services putting death to achieve or to construct path to reach. However, has gone shift in (re)defining the grounds of projection and celebration. The group, which believes in the extremist ideology of reform, always perceive to reach the end with uncompromising spirit of bravery to fight against the opposing or the retarding forces or the enemies. Fear of death therefore is beyond their thought and so rather, they are more ready to accept death in the name achieving the set goal. The concept martyrdom for them becomes the motivational force or to follow the ideal contribution in making represent their ideology. The ideology of fighting may differ based on the ground of logic or to meet the situational crisis for the group or on behalf of whom they are taking the issue. The academic or the political analysis on the activities of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) centres on the suicide bombing techniques they use, for the mass massacre they think. The one way logical look on human rights abuse grounds would equally therefore be focussed understanding what makes them readily accept death, often through locked suicide bombing. The suicide bomber are psychologically indoctrinated with the fact in believe that their fight is in the name of Jihad.^{vii} The unbelievers and many within that Islamic faith itself may hardly justify the acceptance on the theology advocated by the radical terrorist group like ISIS. Nevertheless, it has taken as a religious indoctrinated push factor and significantly contributed as a subject matter of intellectual and the political debate on the Islamic Vs Western policy represented by the US policy in the Islamic countries beginning in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Islamic idea on martyrdom and the uniquely advocated by the terrorist, therefore, may further strengthen and unite to find greater Islamic identity in the emergent situation of threat or Trump policy on Immigrants^{viii} from the Islamic countries. It is again significant that single individual who happens to represent any group when face any sort of mysterious injustice he or she gets the elevation as hero or in the list of martyrology. **Walthall** (1986) has thus, examined how the notion of peasant martyrs in the Japanese local history went into symbolic force of representation to diverse interest. The practice of the notion of using peasant martyrdom as symbol has repeatedly gone changing in time and situation. The peasants preserved the traditionally believed religious dimension of the death (sacrifice) as martyr. Forgetting the real spirit of fight for the cause has shifted remembering as deities or local god for good harvest. Secondly, the rulers and the political runners always took to position the peasant martyrs as the political symbol, symbolising the dominant political position and power and to legitimise the political hegemony over the public. Thirdly, for the political reformer, peasant martyrs became the symbolic point to make the peasant community acquaint with principles of rights and equality and freedom from being exploitation. Again, the protest leaders used the peasant martyrs as model of practising the protest thereby to justify their stand against the tyranny of the ruling authority. Thus, this article has provided the understanding about how the traditional believe in the worshiping the death as local god has gone under social and political (re)shaping and influential determining the power relations. Peasant's martyr took the symbolic representation of peasant class's awareness against the oppressive rule. This in fact legitimises the understanding about how even a local issue/s often are being seized by the

dominant group/s to elevate purposively to strengthen the ideology and to sustain the social and political hegemony.

4. Martyrdom: Emergence in the Ethnic Space

Monumental erection of martyrs after the immediate death for the cause believed amongst and for the people or the group or class in society has gone more of a cult. Much of the change occurred where martyrdom today is almost gone unlike in the past of religious connotation of symbolising the purity of sacrifice in not compromising to bow down ones' faith against the tyranny call of the enemy. The erection of martyrdom has much been localised on ethnic line. When the 'repression begets revolt'^{ix} theory is particularly put to practice in resolving the ethnic crisis or to repel the victimhood syndrome imposed by the advanced or the external forces or out of the rare case of extreme intra ethnic factional clash the death into martyrdom becomes ordained. It is therefore the martyrdom, which emerges as the consequence of social or the ethnic group or of class construction.

It is therefore the general idea that when a group or an ethnic or a class felt out of the consciousness that they are relatively being deprived or pushed to the margin of the societal place in no time may lead to a situation of crisis exposition. The diagrammatical analysis would therefore point that when an ethnic group felt is in crisis concerning identity formation or the preservation, they obviously would try to mobilise the issue and the people in an organised form more in a way to resolve the issue. How to reach that objective would in turn, guide for an approach of democratic and often armed rebellion against the ruling regime. Getting politically accommodated becomes the challenge and so strives to acquire the 'capacity' to be heard.^x The unresponsive nature of the state may prompt the demanding group to involve themselves into collectively repressive action against the state itself. Out of such confrontation often, extremely aggravated situation may arise wherein the sacrifice of the member/s in death becomes the martyr symbolising the uncompromising oriented goal. However, the other side of rationalization would justify that martyrdom also is out of intra ethnic factional clash.

5. Bodo Martyrdom: Emergence and practice

The concept of martyrdom had the earliest existing, emerged in the Judaism and the Christian world of subordination under the Roman in paganism. However, the concept 'martyrdom' to the Bodos, distinctly an ethnic tribe has experienced much lately in the after years of independence. But what necessitates the socially emerging tribe to get involved in the discourse of contributing and shaping the martyrdom. This needs a contextual analysis. It is the nature of human society, be it individual or a group/s that always tries to exercise the freedom from being trap into the inferiority syndrome. However, there is the universal existence of contradictions, out of which a sort of antagonistic space may emerge that may eventually lead to inter conflict. To the fact of said theoretical knowledge, Assam after 1950s evidently witnessed the event of psychological and intellectual fight concerning the issues of Language and cultural hegemonic policy of the Assam Sahitya Sabha.^{xii} The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS),^{xiii} which emerged out of the few enthusiastic educated Boros itself, legitimised consciously the need to advocate the

political approval of boro language as the medium of instruction atleast in the primary schools of Bodo inhabited areas. As the fact of the flexibility in the social process of change, the interactions between the existences of different ethnic groups in Assam were over one-sidedness i.e. by elite Assamese caste Hindus.^{xiv} This is to be termed 'Assamese chauvinistic hegemony' in different sphere of public live. Agenda of homogenising and structuring the multi lingual into unilingual Assam had generated a sort of distrust with fear of losing distinct languages in existence. In fact, the subjective authorization to the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 had eventually led the politics of polarization of demarcating the distinctiveness on the ethnic line. Fear syndrome of Assamese domination arose in the thoughts of the other inhabited ethnic groups. In the context, the Bodo nationality formation evidently emerged cantering the issues of search for linguistic identity.

The Roman Script issue of the 70s of the 20th century could significantly mobilise the Bodos. However, the hasty and uninformed decision by the representative members of the BSS to the central government had paved the acceptance for the Devnagiri script.^{xv} This Script movement for the Bodo language recorded the death of as many as 15 under the butchery of the Assam police forces. To tribute the sacrifice, the BSS declared them as "the Roman Script Martyrs". With this began a new chapter of martyrdom in the Bodo society and in the domain of knowledge. Since then remained symbolising the spirit of struggle for sustaining the distinct Bodo identity which although initially restrained to linguistic recognition. The altered realisation in any way, cannot be considered the end of strong zeal emanated amongst the emerged Bodo elites and the people. This however, has advantageously strengthened the succeeding Bodo politics of movement in asserting the identity recognise and preserve. The issue of linguistic background of analysis significantly shows the emergence of the very concept of using *symbol* in representing language based identity consciousness.^{xvi} This is how the Bodo tribe first encountered the novel phenomena of using the issues symbolically. However, since the present scholarship is to point to analyse and understand the Bodo martyrdom in practice, it therefore requires serious intra ethnic developmental inquiries. The martyrdom in the domain of Bodo society is in fact, complex and so invites multifaceted queries of analysis.

In the context of Bodo martyrdom, it is therefore exclusively pertinent to explore in addition to contextual analysis to certain dimensional points. These are about who are those Bodo Martyrs? What are the approaches of remembering Bodo Martyrs (?); what practice does the Bodo Martyrs have in the present political movement for identity assertion. How the political and the revolutionary leaders themselves being mobilised by the ideological spirit left by the martyrs. How do the situations of intra Bodo clash justify the celebration of martyrdom eventually?

6. Organisational Representation to Bodo Martyrdom

The organisational contribution to the emergence of Bodo martyr/s in concept and in influencing the present identity politics is of much significant. Not just a single organisation could claim to have contributed in shaping the martyrdom, rather both by the still existing armed and unarmed organisation. It is therefore involves the contestational understating. For the fact, the Bodo ethnic group when represented by different organisation, they took up distinct approaches for asserting the identity politics concerning the multifaceted issues. The Roman Script movement of the 1970s under the banner of BSS has become the historic to make the Bodo generation introduce with the concept 'martyr'. However, the All Bodo Students Union recognised the 12th June as the Bodoland martyrs day. It is the death day of Sujit Narzary,^{xvii} who in his tender age had to give his life on attacked by the unidentified miscreants while on the way back to kokrajhar from the Bodoland demand gatherings in Gauhati. It was 12th June 1987 and since, the day is marked as the day of 'Bodoland Martyrs.' He then was placed as the symbol of ideological strength and spirit to continue the Bodoland movement. The armed group NDFB on the other hand has preserved since 1988 as day of observing as the 'national martyrs' day on the death day of B Bangburgwra, then area commander of the militant outfit, was killed by security forces on today's day in 1988. This, however, is just the 'in historical' context of understanding martyrdom in Bodo history. But, who are those generators (?) to those deaths that are considered now as memorial part of memorialisation in the history of Bodo martyrdom. This advocates the need for contested analysis and in time there is the need of understanding compromisingly the diversified ground of 'Bodo martyrdom in emergence'. Firstly, it is the state when involves in dealing the public voice or the resistance in an unruly way the death seems to be certain. This is not a distant point in supporting the death of many Bodo people in different phases of organised Bodo movement with its starting genesis of roman script in martyrdom. The politics of state in deploy of machinery in conflict to resist the public resistance is of no sign of good governance or to say to claim democratic in true sense of the term. This is what the politics of Assam that has succeeded in giving the legacy of guiding the every succeeding politician to follow the model of displaying anti people policy to action. In the context, out of the brutality of the state, Bodos in script demand has to face the consequences. Secondly, the ethnic group in discussion had the experience of intra-community group crisis.^{xviii} Thirdly, it is the armed Bodo groups with ideology to represent the ethno centric crisis have their own discourse of celebrating martyrs. However, it would be erroneous to argue that *death* for the *cause* is the sole factor justifying the legitimacy in the acceptance of using it as martyrs. However, it is the situation and the crisis that help mobilise the collective sentiments and emotions to identify the loss in the movement as heroic role and thereby their sacrifice as martyr/s for inspiring the public, revolutionaries, and the generation to continue for the end. The organisational contribution to Bodo martyrs is as in **Diagram 1**

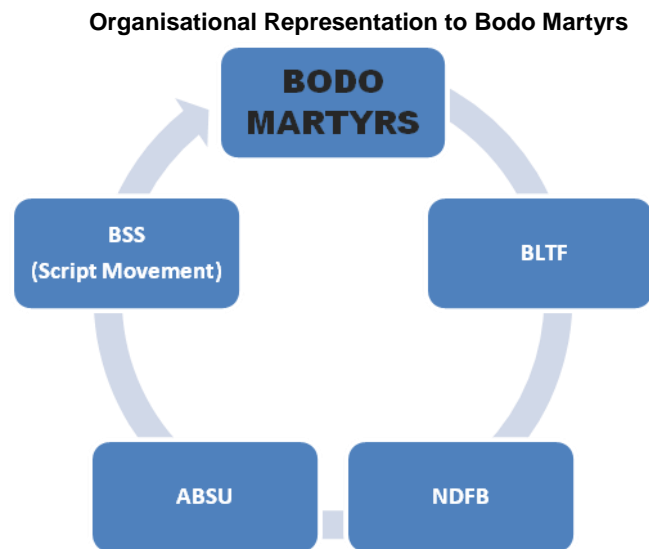


Diagram 1 Author's Diagrammatical Analysis

7. Bodo martyrs: Politics of Symbolic representations

The question of Bodo identity formation is outclassed to be represented by different ethno-organisational heads that are always in efforts, attempting to display the capacity of bargaining. It is not only the organisations' role in the physical exposition in existence with distinct ideological strategies to resolve the politics of imagining the identity reshaping and socio-political recognition. It is therefore, the politics of symbol, which remained almost, unearthen part in the Bodo history of death and sacrifice. Despite having the significant contribution in uniting the Bodos for ethno centric objective, it remained by design or unknowingly from intellectual or the academic discourse. In fact, the revolutionary zeal of the Bodo leaders representing different groups of organisation is much to be influenced and guided by the ideology and spirit of those deaths recognised as 'sacrifice' and the 'martyrs'. The practice of remembering the lost heroes has become the tradition of worship in the Bodo society. None of the single public gatherings could go without paying homage to those who took the hardship of torture, atrocities in carrying forward the gaol-oriented movement. The physical existence of 'martyrs' cemetery' at Debargaon, Kokrajhar with cellar numberings 1607, also with 11 bronze figurines of the great Bodo Heroes could easily be on focus of representing the historical preservation of Bodo movement. The structural erection of honouring the great sacrifices reflects the symbol of inspiring, power to influence the minds of the Bodo leaders and public.

8. Conclusion

Thus, understanding on martyrdom needs to be implicit beyond the religious dimensional framework. It has today become therefore subject of social construction to suit the

political needs and aspirations of a group/s. The issues of (re)structuring, (re)glorifying, revisiting the forgotten history although many times seem like recalling in the form of myth of the origin of the community, traits of identifying has began with new way of manipulating within the existing political system. The ethnic identity formation for many ethnic groups have much today been identified to be equalised as having no option without placing the space for movement, protest, resistance and counter resist. The moment the suffering, atrocities occurs it becomes for part of organising the notion of great heroes, and martyrs. It is however not the one or those that become automatically the martyrs rather the community interest, the set gaol thrives to legitimise and strengthen to achieve in the end. In the diversified ethno-cultural space of oppression and suppression, institutionalising the sacrifice for the cause in the material structure becomes essential to guide, be guided or to symbolise the collective sentiments. It is essentially therefore the ethnic group like Bodos having the history of memorialising the martyrdom might have the logic to display symbolically the uncompromising revolutionary activities to construct the distinct social and political identity. In fact, the cemetery located at Kokrajhar is distinctly enough to justify the symbolic representation of unity that needs to be entrenched amongst and within the Bodos. It is because the commemorative plaques in the cemetery of those Bodos who once held different platforms, often bitterly ingrained contrary tussle, and as of fratricidal deaths are bought within the identical fold of worship. Thus, the martyrdom in Bodo society has rooted in strengthening the collective voice of political bargaining and negotiation. Moreover, significantly could serve as 'symbol of inspiration' of keeping the ideological fight for identity recognition within Indian political and constitutional setup.

End Notes

ⁱ The suffering inclusive of death was equally complex for him to understand, which only after enlightenment could provide the noble message that death is certain for everyone. To cite his noble message would be in dealing with bereaved women named Kisa Gotami who, when approached his blessing to get back her only infant in dead. On being asked to find mustard seed but under condition from the house where dead is never known to be encountered in life ever she walked out but with only the message in return saying, "there is death in every family. Everyone dies. Now I understand your teaching." See *The Buddha and His Teachings*, Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc. P-529.

- ⁱⁱ Ellwood, R.S. & Alles, G.D. (1998). *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Facts on File, Inc. Publishing, p.279
- ⁱⁱⁱ As said by Tertullian, who is the 3rd century Apologist of Christian in faith. The Blood referred to here implies the sacrificial blood which to Tertullian, the death of martyrs will stimulate many more to have conversion in faith in Christianity, and the people in remembering the martyrs will get strengthen in their faith..See Salisbury, J.Y. (2004). *The Blood of Martyrs*, New York & London, Routledge, pp.1 & 90
- ^{iv} The Christians in the empire therefore were charged as 'atheists' with no faith of worship in the Roman deities of pagan faith. See also Eerdmans (1987). Christian History: Persecution in the Early Church, *Christian History Magazine* Issue 27.
- ^v Ibid, Ferguson, E.
- ^{vi} The concept is mainly evolved in the Sunni branch of Islamic Religion. To the contrast, however, martyrdom in Shi'i is what in other faith like Christianity is. The concept for the later was around the issue of religious persecution, or accepting the death rather renouncing the faith. See, Hatina, M. & Litvak, M. (2017). *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam*, London & New York, I.B. Trauris, Ltd.
- ^{vii} The common English translation for *Jihad* is 'Holy War' and is much associated and understood concept in North America. This conventional meaning would therefore provide liberal space to adopt warfare against the enemies, which, it may in defence of one's faith. However, author like Abul A'La Maududi, has provided own scholastic but contrary to conventional understanding of Islam as religion and so the call for Jihad. He does not see any logic in identifying Islam as religion rather Islam, in reality is a revolutionary ideology and programme with objective to alter and rebuild the very social order of the whole world in conformity with own tenets of ideals and principles. See, Maududi, A.A., (2006). *Jihad in Islam*, Lebanon, Holy Koran Publishing House, p.5. Also for *Jihad* see Ellwood, R.S. & Alles, G.D. (1998). *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Facts on File, Inc. Publishing, p.223. But for the present part of discussion Jihad is used as understood by the Islamic fundamentalist terrorist group who will never compromise to interpret Jihad other than fighting for the Islam as religion.
- ^{viii} To implement the Policy, President Donald Trump has issued the **Executive Order** 13769 (Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States) on 27th January 2017. Section 1 (b) (i) of the Executive Order reads "Among other actions, Executive Order 13769 suspended for 90 days the entry of certain aliens from seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somali, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. These are countries that had already been identified as presenting heightened concerns about Terrorism and travel to the United States." Section 1(a) reads, the purpose of the policy is to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, including those committed by foreign nationals. However, it says of temporary suspension of entry. Accessed from the Executive Order (2017), *Office of the Press Secretary*, The White House. Retrived from <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/national/read-the-full-text-of-the-revised-executive-order/2361/>
- ^{ix} For details we can glimpse *People's March* (March, 2000). Red Salutes to Martyr Comrade Ravindran Vol.1, No.1
- ^x The capacity to aspire has become essential for the voice to be heard in a democracy. See Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to Aspire: Culture and the terms of Recognition. In *Culture and Public Action*, ed. Rao, V., & Walto, M., Stanford: Stanford University Press. p 195
- ^{xii} This literary organisation was initially found to be in the hands of Assamese middle class. Despite the existence of multi lingual society, the Sabha was found with policy of propogating solely the Assamese language and culture. Out of it the tribal groups in the plain and hills retaliated to identify themselves with what they are.
- ^{xiii} The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) founded in 1952 is essentially the rearranged form of Boro Literary Club of 1950.
- ^{xiv} Referred to Prabhakar, M.S. (1974). The Politics of a Script: Acceptance of Roman Script for Bodo Language, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 9, No.51
- ^{xv} The 16th Annual Conference of the BSS (Dhing Conference of April 1975) formally declared the official acceptance of the Devnagiri script for the Boros. It was therefore a compromise with earlier stand for the Roman script and so a section remained unsatisfied and so often found (re)claiming the former.
- ^{xvi} Here the *symbol* represents the use of Boro language as an abstract symbol by the emerged Bodo elites or say by the literary organisation BSS. Language in an abstract form gets translated into symbolic representation in the conscious mind to represent the need of the hour of mobilising the concerned public to assert distinct cultural identity to resolve.
- ^{xvii} First 'Bodoland martyr' declared under the voice of All Bodo Students Union.
- ^{xviii} The crisis to be noted here is the reality of bitter clash that the Bodo society had experienced under the armed outfits BLTF and NDFB.

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