

The Politics of a Script

Demand for Acceptance of Roman Script for Bodo Language

M S Prabhakar

The problem faced by the Bodo people is in essence the problem of all less developed communities when they are living with comparatively advanced groups of people under a common political system.

The lower levels of both the caste Hindu and Bodo societies have been wretchedly poor; but the elite among the caste Hindus had been larger, better equipped and better trained as an active partner of a feudal system of exploitation for centuries than the hitherto almost non-existent Bodo elite.

Of late, the Bodo elite has been growing in strength and numbers and the conflict for a slice of the pie has been essentially between these elites. The recent agitation over the choice of script for the Bodo language is a manifestation of this conflict.

The question of script has got enmeshed with many other issues — political, economic and cultural. This article is an attempt to sort out some of these issues.

I

WITH the suspension of the agitation launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha for the adoption of the Roman script for the Bodo Language, there has been a visible relaxation of tension in Assam.¹ But the relaxation of tension is more apparent than real, for the issues highlighted by the agitation are yet far from being resolved. Strong passions have been roused on all sides, and even if the 'script issue' might be decided, one way or the other, to everybody's satisfaction, one can never be sure that such a settlement would mean an end to the continuing assertion of sub-regional nationalisms in Assam.

On the face of it, no agitation could seem more pointless and unnecessary than an agitation launched by a group of people 'demanding' the use of a particular script for their language. The adoption of a script for a language which otherwise possesses no script of its own should ordinarily be entirely a matter for the people concerned. But unfortunately, things are not so simple; and the question of the script has got enmeshed with so many other questions, mostly of a political and cultural nature, that the issue has really ceased to be a 'purely academic matter' of concern only to the people concerned. The present article is an attempt to sort out these political and cultural questions.

The Bodos are a mongoloid people living in the whole of Northeast India and speaking one of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Ethnologists speak of many groups of people as Bodos; but our

concern here is with the group of people known as Bodo Kacharis who live mainly, but not exclusively, in the northern parts of the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Our concern is not with the Bodo as a speech area, which would include Tripura and the Garo Hills in Meghalaya, as well as small pockets in other parts of the Northeastern region. At the outset, it should be noted that the Bodos are only one of the many 'plains tribals' who still form territorially part of Assam. Some of these 'plains tribals' no doubt live in the hill areas now constituted into Meghalaya and other political units; but the majority of them live in Assam and have always lived here. Apart from the Bodo Kachari, the other segments of this 'plains tribal' population consist of the Rabha, the Hojai, the Hajjong, the Deuri, the Plains Miri, the Sonwal Kachari and the Lalung. Each group has a language or dialect of its own, though in some cases, the native tongue has almost completely been forgotten and the Assamese language has been adopted as the mother tongue. But the Bodo Kacharis, along with the Plains Miris, continue to speak their language, though substantial number of these peoples are fully bilingual, speaking both the mother tongue and Assamese.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is now necessary to venture upon a bit of historical and cultural background, a highly risky undertaking, but which has to be undertaken nonetheless. Who are these Bodo people?

The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history... in feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race... It is possible that there were at least two great migrations from the north and north-east into the rich valley of the Brahmaputra, i.e., one entering North-east Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh, etc., and founding there what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into Eastern Assam, where a branch of widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period... It is indeed not at all unlikely that the people known to us as Kacharis and to themselves as Bada (Bara) were in earlier days the dominant race in Assam.²

In whatever mysteries the origins of these people might lie, it is generally agreed that once, and not so long ago either, they occupied practically the whole of the Northeastern region.

The Bodo tribes are linguistically connected with the Nagas, but whereas the Nagas have always remained isolated and primitive, one may say that the Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid bloc in Northeastern India, were the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India, and they form one of the main bases of the present-day population of these tracts.

Reprinted from Economic and Political Weekly, Vol IX, No 51 December 21, 1974.

Pagination as in original, advertisements excluded.

Judging from the wide range of extension of their language, the Bodos appear first to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley, and extended west into North Bengal (in Koch Behar, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts); they may have pushed into North Bihar also, and the Indo-Mongoloids who penetrated into North Bihar might equally have been either Bodos or 'Himalayan' tribes allied to the Newars. They skirted the southern bend of the Brahmaputra and occupied the Garo Hills, where, as Garos, they form a bloc of Bodo speech. South of the Garo Hills they spread in northern Maimansing, where the semi-Bengalised Haijong tribe is of Bodo origin. From Nowgong district in Assam their area of occupation extended to Cachar district (particularly in the North Cachar Hills) and into Sylhet, and from Cachar and Sylhet they extend further to the south, to Tripura State, where there is still a Bodo-speaking bloc in the shape of the Tipra tribe which founded the State; and from Tripura they spread into Comilla and possibly also Noakhali districts; and thus they occupied the mouths of the Ganges by the eastern sea. With the exception of the isolated Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the whole of Assam (barring the eastern parts inhabited by the Nagas and the south-eastern parts inhabited by the Kuki-Chin) and North and East Bengal was the country of the great Bodo people. But at the present moment, except where some islands of Bodo speech remain, the Kirata Bodos have merged into the Bengali and Assamese speaking masses, Hindu as well as Mussalman, in the area.³

That the Bodo people in fact form the base of the present-day Assamese society is a fact hardly disputed by anybody, least of all by the Assamese people themselves. In fact, it is rather misleading to make the distinction between the 'Assamese people' and the 'Bodo people', for they are, if one could put it that way, the woof and warp of a composite Assamese society and culture. This concept of a composite Assamese society and culture is not entirely an instance of fantasy, of the Idea preceeding the Fact. Perhaps at some remote period, the Northeastern region did receive settlers belonging to the so-called upper castes from the Heartland; but the present population, even of the so-called upper-caste Hindus, is undoubtedly a product of widespread intermingling of people, both the 'Aryan' and the 'Mongoloid'. But it is not necessary to depend upon any speculative assessment of possible widespread miscegenation that should have taken place in earlier times, to see that the caste-Hindu Assamese so-

ciety has been fortified and enriched by 'non-Aryan' elements. Whatever rigidity might have existed in other areas of the country regarding the Hindu caste system, making it impossible for one born outside the caste to even enter into it, in Assam at any rate the Hindu caste system, as it operated in earlier times, was a remarkably open one. Upward caste mobility was very much a reality in Assam, and not merely was the non-Hindu permitted to enter the Hindu fold, but the convert (or his family) could, by stages, move higher and higher in the Hindu caste hierarchy, though of course the highest caste distinctions were barred to him (unless he managed to set out to an entirely new place and set himself up as a Brahman or a Kayastha). Conversion of the 'aborigines' to Hinduism was undertaken extensively by the Goseins in Assam, and the whole practice has been described in the Census Report of 1891, thus:

The Gosein or some of his subordinates usually select certain families of the aboriginal tribes, who reside in the vicinity of Hindu villages and at a distance from the main villages of the aboriginal tribes. These families are frequently lectured upon the purity of the Hindu religion and the easy way in which they can get salvation, and how they can acquire a position in the Hindu society if they give up their habits of eating pork and other forbidden food and drinking strong liquor, and conform to the Hindu methods of eating and drinking and worship. As these people frequently feel the inconvenience of their isolated position, they are easily tempted to become Hindus, and thereby be enabled to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours, by whom they are hated and looked down upon as a degraded class so long as they remain in an unconverted state. When these people after frequent lectures show some inclination towards giving up their religion and becoming Hindus, a certain propitious day is selected, and they are questioned as to whether they would like to give up their former habits and customs, and become perfect Hindus, or they would simply take *saran* (religious instruction) from the Hindu Gosein, and remain free as to their habits of eating and drinking. When they express a desire of entire conversion to the Hindu religion, they are made to fast for a day or two, and then to undergo a *prayachit* (atonement), for which they have to spend some 5 to 20 rupees according to their circumstances. They then receive their *saran bhajan* (religious instruction and mode of worship) from the Gosein, whom from that day they look upon as their spiritual guide. These people then change all former

utensils of cooking and eating and also their dwelling house and become quite Hinduised. The Gosein then makes them over to a certain *khel* (a body of Hindus who eat and drink and associate with each other) with whom the converted are to associate. The converted men are closely watched by their new comrades as to whether they take any of the forbidden food and strong liquor or not; and if they are found to have entirely given up these things, they are freely admitted into the Hindu society, and are called *Saru Koch*. For the first three generations from their conversion they are looked down upon a little by their Hindu comrades, and they are not allowed to take any leading part of their society. From the third generation they become quite as good as any Hindu of the Koch caste.⁴

It should be noted that the *khel* referred to in the passage cited was a peculiar feature of rural Assam under Ahom administration.

The adult population of Assam was divided into *khels* having to render specific service to the state, such as arrow-making, boat-building, boat-plying, house-building, provision-supplying, fighting, writing, revenue collecting, road-building, catching and training of elephants, superintendence of horse, training of hawks, and supervision of forests. Sometimes *khels* were composed on a territorial basis... Each *khel* was like a guild to which lands were allotted for cultivation by the constituent members, free of rent in return for the service they rendered to the state. The strength of a *khel* varied from 3,000 to 100.⁵

This constitution of the subjects into *khels* in Upper Assam made it possible for even the non-Hindu elements to live in a comparatively integrated state with the caste Hindus. Such a 'reorganisation' of rural Assam did not take place in areas which were outside the Ahom administration;⁶ and it is in these areas, like Goalpara and Kamrup, that the majority of the present-day Bodos live.

Every people need a myth. One of the myths that strongly persists in Assam, especially in the minds of the upper-caste Hindus, is that they — which by a process of ethnocentrism includes their caste and class and finally the whole of Assamese society — are peculiarly free from the bane of caste prejudices and caste feelings, which are so rampant in other parts of the country. Like all myths, this myth too has an element of truth; the very fact that a non-Hindu tribal could, of course, by doing the proper penances and paying the required fees, etc., become a Hindu of sorts and even

aspire for higher things, does indicate that the Hindu caste system was not after all such a closed and rigid system as it was in other parts of the country. But despite the comparative openness of the society, the caste Hindu Assamese society could never completely absorb all the 'aboriginal' elements into it. Many factors went into this partial Hinduisation of Assam, but at least part of the reason for the failure of total proselytisation should have been the 'demands' made on the convert. And not all the openness of the caste system in Assam made the convert forget that he was, even though a Hindu, still a very low-class Hindu.

II

Let us for a moment consider the class vaguely referred to in the above section as the Upper-caste Hindu elite. There is only one word that can adequately describe the psychological state of this class at present — panic. The sequence of events that has been unfolding for the past couple of years should seem as *deja vu*; they have been there before. What is being enacted before their eyes cannot but seem as yet another act in an unending drama of the dismemberment of Assam. Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram — each name speaks to the Assamese mind of yet another slice taken off the body politic of Assam. Inevitably, the present movement of the Bodo people for a rejection of the Assamese script for their language is seen as yet another rejection, by a minority group, of its Assamese identity. But the Bodo's 'rejection' is undoubtedly a far more serious matter, more hurting even, than the 'rejection' of the Khasis, the Nagas, the Garos, the Mizos, etc. They were all, culturally as well as geographically, peripheral to the Brahmaputra valley. Enjoying many privileges under special provisions of the Constitutions, they were, even while in Assam, never of Assam. But the Bodos are very much in Assam; they are, in fact, as both the Assamese and the Bodos insist on maintaining, the original inhabitants of the land. In a way, it is silly to make a distinction between the Assamese and the Bodos, for the Bodos are Assamese (though the eager apologist will never reverse the equation and claim that the Assamese are Bodos). And as pointed out earlier, it is from the Bodo stock that the present day Assamese society has been derived, a derivation which is nowadays being increasingly insisted upon. So, how can the Bodo people reject

their Assamese identity? "Who else is Assamese if the Bodos are not Assamese?" Rhetorical questions abound.

But notwithstanding all the pious declarations about the Bodos being the mainspring of presentday Assamese society, it is very doubtful if the Bodo people were ever really considered as part of the Assamese society while they remained Bodos. Their acceptance into Assamese society was very much linked with their acceptance of Hinduism, which also meant, in course of a few generations, the loss of the native speech and the adoption of the Assamese language.⁷ Those who remained outside the Hindu caste system continued to remain Kacharis, a term which, at least in private conversation among caste Hindu Assamese, continues to have its traditional pejorative connotation. The acceptance of the Assamese language as the mother tongue was the *sine qua non* of entry into Assamese society, an attitude of mind not especially different from that exhibited by language groups in other parts of the country. At certain points in the past, the Bodo people found some marginal benefits accruing to them by seeking entry into the Hindu caste system, even on the terms imposed by the latter. The illusion was created that the new entrants were equal partners, while the reality was that they were admitted on sufferance. And while they undoubtedly derived all the 'spiritual' advantages offered by the entry into the lower ranks of the Hindu caste system, the more 'material' advantages being offered by the new system of government — the jobs, the educational facilities, the contracts, etc — while being theoretically available to the Bodos as well as to the non-Bodos, were in fact being almost exclusively cornered by the non-Bodo people.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

The problem faced by the Bodo people has been in essence the problem faced by all less-developed communities, when they are living with comparatively advanced groups of people under a common political system. Despite all the efforts at conversion and assimilation, there still existed a substantial community of Bodos who, on the one hand, were extremely poor, backward, inward-looking; but who, on the other hand, had to live with a people who were, comparatively speaking, slightly better off than the Bodos in every way. The lower levels of both the societies were wretchedly poor; in fact, it would be misleading to speak of the 'economic

exploitation' of the Bodos by the Assamese people, a kind of battle-cry of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), for the plain fact is that both are being exploited equally impartially by Delhi. But undoubtedly, the 'elite' among the Caste Hindus was larger, better equipped, better-trained as an active partner of a feudal system of exploitation for centuries, than the almost non-existent Bodo elite. Of late, the Bodo elite has been growing in strength and numbers, and the conflict for a slice of the pie has essentially been between these elites; and a 'cultural' manifestation of this conflict has been the recent one over the choice of the script for the Bodo language.

But to say that the present conflict is between the Caste Hindu elite and the Bodo elite is in a sense to beg the question by saying the obvious. It still does not answer the question — why? The Bodos, to adopt a sentence from Eldridge Cleaver, feel that they have been rather late in waking up on the caste Hindus' doings, and now that they have been tricked all these years, are very bitter. Other tribal groups in the composite state of Assam have not merely retained their cultural identities, but have even won their rights to a distinct political identity, vindicated most triumphantly in the sprawling bureaucracies of Shillong, Kohima and other places. The Plains Tribals (among whom are the Bodos), on the other hand, were denied the elaborate constitutional protections contained in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution; instead, they were fobbed off with the 'protection' contained in the provisions of the Tribal Belts and Blocks,⁸ and everyone agrees that even these nominal rules governing the possession and transfer of land in the tribal areas have not been observed. The result has been large-scale alienation of land in the tribal areas, whose scale and extensiveness is yet to be properly assessed. The results of a survey conducted in a couple of plains tribal villages suggest that land-pauperisation and debt are rampant in these villages.⁹

But why should feelings of economic exploitation result in opposition to the Assamese script? If anything, the objective conditions for sustained struggle against landlordism are ripe in the rural areas of Assam. And yet, we find the Bodos, one of the largest homogeneous peasant communities of Assam, acutely suffering from the evils of landlordism, hounded by debts repaid many times over in interest alone, and having a tradition of agrarian revolt and

armed struggle under Communist leadership, now being massively mobilised for an agitation against the Assamese script.

The explanation, of course, is that the leadership of the Bodos finds it more profitable, at the present juncture, to mobilise the Bodo masses on the issue of script. Often, the landlord and the village mahajan are caste Hindu Assamese, and the feelings of economic exploitation are easily turned into 'cultural' channels. The agitation against the Assamese script is also sure to pay rich dividends, quickly, which can be reaped by the leadership. Not that the grounds for the demand of Roman Script for the Bodo Language are entirely non-existent. The present writer is totally ignorant of the Bodo language; his ignorance of the Assamese language too is near-total; but if representative literary/cultural organisations of the Bodo people like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha agree that the Roman script is more suited to their language, then that should have been the end of the matter. In fact, many Assamese intellectuals feel that even the Assamese script, as it is constituted at the present, is unnecessarily cumbersome even for the Assamese language, and a lively debate is going on about the need to modify the present Assamese script, which is practically indistinguishable from the Devnagari in its composition, to suit the sound requirements of the Assamese language. The activists of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha muster an impressive set of arguments to support their demand;¹⁰ but the agitation has been not so much on the demand itself, as on the measures the government has taken concerning the demand.¹¹ Undoubtedly, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha precipitated the issue (they had waited long enough) early this year, by introducing, in the Bodo Medium Schools, the Bodo English Primer *Bithorai*, printed in the Roman Script. The result was that the government stopped grants to the schools which had introduced the new, 'unrecognised' textbook, and stopped the payment of salaries of teachers in the recalcitrant schools. Followed protests, token strike for a day (September 12), mass satyagraha in the 'Bodo Medium Implemented Areas Of Assam' (September 18-21), mass picketing of schools in the same areas September 24 to October 4) and mass indefinite picketing in government offices in the same areas (October 5). There was a let-up in the movement following discussions between the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the government in the middle of

October. The movement was resumed on November 16, the anniversary of the founding of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, (incidentally, one of the demands of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha is that November 16 should be declared as a government Holiday) and before it was suspended on November 28, by the government's own admission, ten people had been killed, including two CRP men. During the early phase, four people had been killed: two in Barpeta Road on September 28, and two more in Mangaldoi sub-division on October 3.¹²

It is clear that the government has been quite ruthless in its reaction to the agitation of the Bodo people. But while one can understand the ruthlessness of the government, it is difficult to understand the extreme anxiety and near-panic displayed by the non-Bodo people, on the Bodo demand for the Roman script. Some months ago, when the police invaded the Gauhati University campus and severely beat up many students and employees, there was widespread protest all over the state against the brutalities perpetrated by the police. But a far more severe repression let loose upon the Bodo people has elicited but little public indignation, a fact whose significance has not been lost upon the Bodo people. Undoubtedly, the demand for the Roman script is seen as only seemingly academic and cultural; in the minds of the Assamese, the demand is the thin end of the wedge, the thick end being Udayachal. Since Udayachal, an autonomous region for the 'plains tribals' of Assam, is after all not a practicable idea — the Bodo people are spread all along the Brahmaputra valley, mainly but not exclusively on the northern side, and there are no significantly large contiguous areas where they are in a majority — the concept of Udayachal has to be seen as a pure and simple pressure device, employed by a minority group, to wrest concessions for the ruling elite. But with the bitter memories of earlier acts of dismemberment, one cannot be absolutely certain that future 'reorganisations' are not going to be carried out in the north-eastern region, and we might be in for yet another redrawing of boundaries. It is this prospect that is most disturbing to the average Assamese. A group of people who were all these centuries part of the Assamese society (on terms dictated by the latter) has suddenly started asserting that they are in fact different; and though the Bodos are stating what is merely a fact, the ges-

ture of rejecting the Assamese script which accompanies this assertion has been especially difficult for the Assamese people to stomach. Viewed rationally, a script should hardly rouse such passions. A common script anyway has never automatically meant any greater understanding between the people who share the common script, a point hardly necessary to make when writing about Assam. That the Bodos wrote their language in the Assamese script all these years did not make communication between the Bodos and the non-Bodos any easier, except when the Bodos spoke Assamese. The number of Assamese speakers able to speak and write Bodo must be insignificant, compared to the number of Bodos fully fluent in Assamese. And yet, a major agitation had to be launched by the Bodos to secure something which anyway nobody could deny them; and on this issue, over a dozen people have died in the last few weeks. But the issue itself is yet to be settled, and a further round of talks between the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the government is scheduled for the latter part of January 1975.

III

The alienation of the Bodos from a composite Assamese society is one of the most disturbing developments for Assam in recent times; one can only hope that this alienation is not total. For long, the Bodos (and other Plains Tribals) considered the entry into the lower ranks of the Hindu caste system as an essentially forward step. But what was once a phenomenon of mass conversion has now altogether stopped. Not merely that; there is even a movement back into the Bodo fold of those converts who, (or whose forefathers) had taken *saran* or had become *kochs*. While this self-respecting acceptance of an original non-Hindu tribal identity should be heartily welcomed, the prospects are that the Bodos too are on the way to preaching their own form of exclusivism and a closed-society-system. The Constitution of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha lays down that only Bodos can become members of that body; there is no provision for a non-Bodo to become a member, a bar which does not exist in the Assam Sahitya Sabha or other similar organisations.

But can the Bodos really exist quite outside Assam? Unlike the Hill Tribals, the Plains Tribals have lived too long, in close proximity, to the rural poor of Assam. Perhaps it was the very exclusiveness of the caste Hindu society that bred the new exclusivism of the Bodos.

But even more important than tribal exclusiveness have been the factors of economic rivalry, the anxiety to have a bigger share of the loot, jobs and contracts and the like. This conflict cannot of course be solved under the present system, and it would be comfortable to end the article with a combination of radical denunciation of the landlord-comprador axis that rules the country, and expressions of pious exhortations to the Bodo people and the non-Bodo people of Assam to stand united and fight. But there are the intentions of the Government of India to be taken into consideration in any account of events in Northeast India.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S INTENTIONS

Outside its political opponents whose doings are of course most closely watched by the Government of India, no other group, and certainly no people of a whole region are kept under such close and constant scrutiny as the people of the northeastern region. It is unlikely that the events of the past few weeks have taken place without New Delhi having a fair idea of what is going on here. There have been attempts here to explain away the agitation of the Bodos as being CIA-inspired, Missionary-inspired, Bengali-inspired (the last, because frustrated as the Bengalis were in their attempts to get Assam officially classed a bilingual state, they are now seen as egging on the 'innocent tribal people' into anti-Assamese activities); but what is likely is that the movement might be receiving tacit approval and support, not so much from any external intelligence agencies, but from the Government of India itself. While no one can say that the problem has been created by the GOI, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the GOI would not be particularly averse to further dismemberment of this region. After all, the weakening and the fragmentation of the northeastern region has been the consistent policy of GOI, for such weakening has resulted in individual units, depending heavily on New Delhi subsidies, and these units can always be expected to be loyal. It was in pursuance of this strategy that the initial 'reorganisation' of Assam was undertaken. No doubt the task of New Delhi was made easier by the Assamese

elite who were unwilling to share power with the less developed nationalities of the region. A generous concession to tribal sentiments, and a frank acceptance of an 'un-Aryan' cultural identity would by themselves not have probably removed all the suspicions and antagonisms, but the effort was well worth making, if it would have at least had the merit of retaining the territorial integrity of Assam. A strong, united Assam could well have 'challenged the Centre', not merely in the sense of a Centre-State confrontation, but even in more radical ways.

It was imperative for the ruling elite that the composite state of Assam be destroyed; and in co-operation with the Congress leaders of Assam and an emerging tribal elite, the job was accomplished a few years ago. It is not at all certain that the present agitation (if it ever goes beyond the demand for a script of one's choice), the incipient demand for Udayachal and an Ujani Assam State and other equally frivolous demands are not all part of an elaborate strategy of the Centre, to make a real patchwork quilt of the whole northeastern region, weakening the constituent units into heavily subsidised little bureaucratic empires, with an army of officers and policemen and contractors bloated on the good things of life, keeping things in shape, maintaining Law and Order.

But, to divide is also to multiply.

Notes

[I am indebted to Annada Bhagabati, Thanessor Boro, M C Goswami and Bhaben Narji for conversations and discussions with them; and to Anil Roychoudhury, not merely for discussing the problem with me, but for reading an early draft of the article and for suggesting various improvements. However, I alone am responsible for the views expressed.]

1 Following the talks between the Minister of Education, Assam, and representatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the agitation was suspended from November 28, 1974. While some sort of a settlement was worked out regarding the payment of salaries to the teachers in Bodo Medium Schools and the release of the arrested volunteers of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, "regarding the recognition of the Roman Script and the approval of Bithorai ... it was

agreed upon that the matter will be discussed after suspension of the movement sometime in the 3rd week of January 1975". (Minutes of the Meeting of Bodo Sahitya Sabha with Government, Government of Assam, Dispur, December 1974.)

- 2 "The Kacharis", by Sidney Endle, London, 1911, pp 3-4.
- 3 "Kirata-Jana-Kirti", by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, pp 27-8.
- 4 *Census of India 1891: Assam*, by E A Gait, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1892 p 225, footnote. The passage cited, which is a note by C G M Kennedy, Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong, describes the method of conversion in Nowgong. For other methods of conversion, see pp 83-5 of the 1891 Census Report.
- 5 "Anglo-Assamese Relations", by S K Bhuyan, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati, 1949, p 10.
- 6 "It [the *khel* system] was still in vogue at the time of the British occupation, except in Kamrup where a system of collecting revenue according to local divisions, called *parganas*, had been introduced by the Muhammadans." ("A History of Assam", by E A Gait, Third Edition, Calcutta, 1963, p 250.)
- 7 This reading is not applicable to the position of a non-Hindu, non-tribal Assamese community as that of the Assamese Muslims. Linguistically at any rate, the Assamese Muslims seem at present to be an indistinguishable part of the larger Assamese identity.
- 8 "Assam Land Revenue Manual", Eight Edition, 1970, pp 75-9; 169-72.
- 9 *Natun Prithivi* (Quarterly magazine in Assamese), May 1973, pp 586-9.
- 10 "How Roman Script Helps the Bodos?" Prepared by the Bodo Text-Book Committee, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Kokrajhar, Assam November 27, 1974 (typed copy).
- 11 For a brief summary of the Bodo grievances, see "On Bodo Medium Education, Bodo Script, University Medium and Hindi Language", (Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister on August 12, 1974), Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Kokrajhar, Assam.
- 12 "Documents Regarding the Movement Launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, etc", Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Kokrajhar, Assam (typed copy).

How Not to Study a Revolution

M S Prabhakar

Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture by Richard H Solomon; University of California Press, (Oxford University Press, Bombay) 1971; pp xi + 604; Rs 70.

"How do you do it? Eh, I mean, what is your methodological approach?" DURING the years that immediately followed the Communist Revolution in China, and almost till quite recently, the traditional attitudes of the 'objective' American scholar towards (or as Solomon would have it, 'toward') China was either to pretend that there had been no real change whatsoever following the Communist Revolution, or to write with a combination of nostalgia for the good old days and indignation over the doings of the Communist regime. Even the most 'value-free' analysis of developments in China by American academics showed either of these two biases. This was because most of the American academics writing on China brought to bear upon their writing an attitude which was strongly influenced by their (or their families') personal contacts with pre-revolutionary China, in many cases going back to more than one generation. It was not that they hated the country or its people; on the contrary, many of them cherished fond memories of the 'old days', and this was especially true of those academics who were born or brought up in China by their American parents, doing the good Christian work there. The brief eclipse these American academics — Sinologists in official — suffered during the heyday of McCarthyism, their quietly nursing their scholarship and interest in China studies during the Fifties, their gradual rehabilitation in the eyes of the US policy-makers in the Sixties, and their recent return in force to positions of authority and influence — these have been described in a *Ramparts* article published early this year (David Horowitz: "The China Scholar and the US Intelligence", *Ramparts*, February 1972). Their work, almost always scrupulously factual, and rarely venturing into any 'interpretation' of the events recorded, was a valuable supplement to the works of such 'non-academic' reporters on China as Edgar Snow and Felix Greene, who provided vivid, first-hand accounts of events in China. These accounts, though not always sympathetic, at least viewed the events in China as part of a deliberate policy pursued by the lead-

ers of the CCP, in active consultation with the masses of Chinese people. Dealing with a country of over 700 million people which had suffered for centuries from domestic and foreign oppression, and which was making desperate efforts to restructure its whole society, it was easy enough to highlight the mistakes and the failures; and many of the accounts, 'popular' as well as 'academic' did precisely that. Yet, in their totality, most of these writers did succeed in conveying the flavour of change and revolution that was taking place in China; even the most antiseptic outpouring of the various 'Centres for Chinese Studies' situated in leading American Universities contributed something towards an understanding of China.

Such a thing, alas, cannot be said of Solomon's tome. And it is with a great deal of misgiving that this review is being written, for I have not been able, despite very honest efforts, to shake off entirely my prejudice against the book, what I understand to be its basic thesis, its method, its style. The Introductory chapter itself held me in a grip of morbid fascination; and it required a great deal of effort to plod through all the 600-odd pages of the book, through all the dreary, constipated prose that seems to be an inescapable feature of 'political sociology'. I read the book some months ago, and tried to forget that I had read it; tried not to think of the review to be written. It only meant that the book has had to be read again.

THE APPROACH

There are two aspects to this book; the 'content' and the 'method', or as one should say, 'methodology'. There is also another aspect, the 'style', but that perhaps is not very important. I have not yet been able to make up my mind which repelled me more. Let me deal with the 'content' first. Despite the length of the work, and the obvious hard work that has gone into putting it together, Solomon's thesis is fairly simple. He sets out "to come to some understanding of the Chinese revolution on Chinese terms". The work is a study of Mao, "in his personal struggle to adapt the weighty cultural inheritance

of a quarter of mankind to the political and economic challenges of a new era" (p 1). It is "an attempt to define the shared cultural dynamic of China's political life, and to examine Mao Tse-tung's efforts to reshape this ancient social tradition" (p 23). The aim of the work is defined at many more points in the course of the book, more or less in the same manner; a very impressive way of saying that in this study, the Communist revolution is seen in entirely behaviouristic terms. In case readers are like me (who did not know what this term meant), I cite, for their benefit, the following definition from the Penguin Dictionary of Psychology: "Behaviourism: Usually applied to a theoretical approach to psychology, which emphasises the importance of an objective study of actual responses. The extreme behaviourist 'has no use for consciousness or conscious process'". In Solomon's account of Chinese political attitudes, there does not seem to be any place for conscious choice between available alternatives. Nor are the 'attitudes' analysed seen as the results of actual experience, growth and development, scientific analysis of one's past and present, historical sense, etc. In fact, Solomon himself is quite frank about his approach, for he says at the very outset (on page 1) that the basic assumption underlying his work is that "China's difficulties in responding to the changing world of the past century have been largely cultural and psychological in quality rather than institutional and economic". And much of the book is concerned with analysing these "cultural and psychological" aspects of the Chinese character.

Even though one most firmly believes that such an approach is quite the wrong kind to adopt towards the study of revolutions, one could still have found this study worthwhile if, even behaviouristically, any fresh insight were offered into the dynamics of the Chinese revolution. Unfortunately, such is not the case. "Mighty things from small beginnings grow." In Solomon's account, the mighty revolutionary upheaval in China has been traced to so unlikely an origin as breast-feeding, Chinese babies being carried on the backs of their mothers or nurses well beyond their years of dependence, and the tales of the Confucian educational text called "The Classic of Filial Piety". The proposition that the Chinese are traditionally authoritarian and drilled in obedience is sought to be further established by the 'general interviews' and 'two aptitude

tests' (about which, more later). Thus, on the basis of interview recollections of childhood, and on the basis of descriptions of child-rearing practices, all collected from "a sample of ninety-one mainland-born Chinese" (now emigres in Taiwan or Hong Kong), and on the basis of the Confucian educational text, a 'thesis' — that the Chinese people are very much devoted to their parents — is established. Even if one feels that one's parent is a bit of a tyrant, one does not (like the unfilial Oedipus), kill one's parent; rather, in the manner of the Patient Oriental, one consoles oneself with the thought that in God's Good Time, even the most maltreated child will grow up and become a parent himself, and will be able to tiltreat his children. "The filial son in this sense remains a 'son' as long as he lives; he never breaks out of his original social matrix to establish an independent life. But he bears the pain and injustice which tradition tells him is an unavoidable part of childhood because he knows that in time he will become a father while remaining a son; and he can thus look forward to a time when his own son will enable him to enjoy fully the pleasures of dependent old age" (p. 37). Despite, or perhaps, because of this, all the 91 people interviewed (and by implication, all the millions and millions of Chinese people) considered their childhood as having been the happiest period of their lives, "Life's Golden Age". But this 'Golden Age' was not entirely free from 'anxieties' either. 'Repressions' are there; so are 'aggressive impulses'. But these anxieties and aggressive impulses are softened by "the considerable indulgence" accorded in infancy and early childhood, an affection expressed above all through the giving of food. We are now introduced to a notable theoretical formulation characterised as an "Oral calculus" (p. 42) which is seen to be operating at all levels, including, as a footnote informs us, at the sexual level. '69' is recognised, though I wonder why, apart from the 'joys' of 69, the 'anxieties' too, which one imagines would be inherent in such a jolly situation (the possibility of literal dismemberment by *vagina dentata*) are not even suggested. This is just a helpful suggestion which might be incorporated in the Second Edition.

After establishing that the Chinese people, even before they are born, are drilled in obedience to authority — parental, tutorial, feudal, etc. — Solomon goes on, in the second part of the book to an "elaboration of the theme of childhood socialisation into adult social and political attitudes". In this part too, the author relies upon 'interview data' to explain these adult social and

political attitudes. What emerges out of this investigation is further 'oral calculus', evident in phrases like 'people eat people' (to characterise exploitation). In this Second Part, we also meet for the first time the Thematic Aperception Tests (TAT), something which I confess I had never suspected to exist. These consist of a set of nine pictures (helpfully printed as Appendix IV) which themselves could be matter for a review article, for they cry out to be demolished. These pictures are used to determine adult Chinese attitudes and behaviour towards authority. Very revealing discoveries are made by the use of these TAT pictures. TAT card III, for instance, reveals that "the overall pattern one sees in the data from Chinese respondents, is of a level of conflict in family and peer relations approximately twice as large as that in dealings between non-family superiors and subordinates" (p. 118). More TAT cards reveal further profundities. The Chinese people, one is gratified to know, place high value on friendship. But difficulties lie in the way of achieving the ideal state of friendship. Why? Because social contacts and transactions between people of equal or near-equal social status were relatively underdeveloped in the Chinese tradition, so that without intermediaries, "relations with unknown individuals become problematical" (p. 128). An extension of this ambiguity is seen in the respondents' attitudes towards politics. Government was both *ma-baap*, as well as "a rapacious tiger". This 'gap' in the relation between the leader and the led was based on the fear of authority (already established in Part I). The inescapable conclusion is that the "Chinese hold a paradoxical orientation to social authority which draws its inspiration from this tension between unity and conflict. On the one hand, they look to authority for security against conflict and material deprivation, and willingly accept as 'natural' a unitary, dominant, and personalised political leadership. On the other hand, however, they express concern with the manipulative and harsh qualities of that same authority, and seek to avoid contact with what is seen as the 'tiger' of governmental power" (p. 104).

Part III presents "an interpretation of Mao Tse-tung's political style on the basis of his formally published political writings in the years of struggle for power, and from historical studies of the Chinese Communist movement". I found this section of the book the most perverse of all, for what is attained seems to me to be a hideous parody of Mao's life and achievement. "Why does a society have a revolution?"

Solomon asks, and proceeds to answer the question almost immediately. Of course he goes on only to suggest the different approaches possible in any attempt to answer the question, but the very choice of the approach implies the kind of answer one would be driving at. Why does a society have a revolution? "This broad question might be approached from an historical perspective, in terms of the sociological or economic dimensions of social change, or at the attitudinal level" (p. 160). The survey and analysis of general Chinese attitudes presented in the earlier sections is now to be fortified by an 'attitudinal' analysis of Mao's character, personality, writings. What is sought to be established is a "complex interplay between the traditional attitudes towards politics and social relations explored in the first two parts of this study, and the institutions of leadership developed by Mao and the Chinese Communists over three decades of struggle for power" (p. 160). The Chinese people traditionally respect and fear authority and are averse to *luan* ('Confusion, chaos, implying conflict and unrestrained release of aggression'); Mao too was born to such a tradition, but as a result of the ill-treatment he received at the hands of his father, and as a result of his rejection by intellectual leaders while he was a library worker at Peking University, Mao became a rebel. His conception of political motivation changed, and he began to see virtues in emotional storm, "in which hatreds, resentment, and a sense of helpless desperation burst through social restraints in an overwhelming surge". Why did Mao learn to swim? A wonderful explanation is offered by Solomon, on pages 177-8. When Mao was young, and when his father chastised him before guests, Mao threatened to make his father 'lose face' by threatening to drown himself. Later, while "Mao the child had to 'dare' authority through the threat of self-destruction because of his inability to swim, as a young man he expressed his determination to turn aggression outwards by learning how to swim". One cannot imagine a greater vulgarisation — behaviouristic determinism or whatever ugly phrase one may coin to describe it — of Mao's political development than this. If only Mao's father had been less of a tyrant, Mao would never have run away from home and would never have ended up in the Peking University Library; and if only Hu Shih had not snubbed Mao, the young library assistant would have probably retired honourably as the Chief Librarian. Surely, the extreme behaviourist has no use for

consciousness or conscious process'. He has no use for facts which are far more 'objective' than TAT cards and questionnaires, facts like rampant injustice all around; facts such as these: "The rickshaw races. Fat foreigners from many countries, straw-hatted and sweating, choosing their pullers. Poking them in the ribs to size them up. Lining them up for the start. All fair and square. Nothing crooked about this type of race, good fun. Once the length of the Bund. Barely a mile. A dollar for the winner and fifty cents for the runner-up. Pretty generous when you come to think of it. The pullers. Straining every muscle, gasping for breath, half-naked bodies dripping with sweat." Solomon has no use for such facts which had a far more powerful impact on the thinking of the masses, than the 'behaviouristic patterns' suggested by 'orality' or 'anality' in Chinese character. So, it is but natural that Solomon sees the ideology and organisation of the CCP too in behaviouristic terms; the power to mobilise the masses, to discipline their anger, and finally to rouse them to actively oppose tyranny — all these achieved under the leadership of the CCP — are not seen as the result of conscious choice made by the masses, but as only variations of patterns of behaviour already (and ever) present in the Chinese people. Mao (who, in this version of Solomon resembles a psychologist rather than a revolutionary statesman) came to see that "private and apolitical emotions of aggression could be projected into public issues to serve as the driving force of revolution." Further, Mao perceived that "the anxiety before authority which underlay the millennial political passivity of China's peasants could be overcome if it were transformed into anger and directed outward through the forces of ideology expressed in a political slogan" (pp 194-5). The italics, I am happy to inform, are not mine.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? But no, one can't yet say, enough is enough: for the book is not even half-done with, and at the end of Part III, we are still left with nearly four hundred more pages, most of it devoted to an account of "The Maoist Political Reconstruction". While Part III dealt with Mao's role in the years before the final triumph of the revolution, Part IV is concerned with the years between 1949 and 1965-66. This itself is dealt with in two stages; one, the first five or six years when the strategy for China's national development was evolved, largely under the general organisational leadership; two, the decade between 1955 and 1965, which presents a detailed analysis of the three major 'events'

of these years, each causing greater and greater *luan*: The 'Flowers and Schools' campaign; 'The Great Leap Forward'; and 'The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. In these accounts, there is not much scope for Solomon to indulge in a lot of behaviouristic theorising; but even so, I feel that one would be on safer ground reading avowedly 'sinological' documentary collections and analysis put out by, say, the EARC of Harvard University, than in reading this 'interpretative' account. The last chapter (and the longest in the book) entitled 'A Cultural Revolution?' seems so distorted, so totally lacking in any kind of empathetic understanding of the events of the Cultural Revolution, and (strangely enough) so completely committed to the cult of Mao's personality, that one begins to wonder whether all the immense labour that has evidently gone into the writing of this book has really resulted in any real understanding of China. What we have in this chapter is a great psychologist and puppet-master, Mao, the manipulator of a country of over 700 million people. "Mao, feeling his political influence slipping away, asserted himself by initiating a 'cultural revolution' designed to remove from power those long-term comrades whom he now saw as bringing about 'a restoration of capitalism'". (p 250). Then follows an even more astounding revelation: many of Mao's comrades, we are informed, assumed that now that the Communists were in power, the basic question of political control had been solved. These colleagues of Mao saw China's problems of modernisation largely in technical and economic terms, while Mao felt that the 'cultural and political' (note the title of the book) problems were even more crucial. One feels obliged to inform the author that a true Marxist would never see revolution in such a compartmentalised way. Revolution, it is scarcely necessary to mention, implies change, total change; change in every aspect, economic, cultural, political, technological, and whatever, other terms one can think of. But precisely because Solomon is totally lacking in any dialectical sense, he can perpetrate such an observation as the following: "In one sense Mao came to reject the Marxist stress on class conflict as the basis of social development in favour of a stress on cultural conflict. He increasingly emphasised the need to transform peoples' thinking and not just their social organisation" (p 251). Even though Solomon does not specifically cite 'The German Ideology' by an old-fashioned writer named Karl Marx in his bibliography, one presumes he is familiar with that work. How one can transform

"peoples' thinking" without transforming their 'social organisation' is of course a secret shared by Mao the psychologist, and Solomon, his behaviourist-historian.

Motivation is all. Antagonism against father, or rather, father-figure; transferred hatred; controlled aggression; incompatible peers; orality and anality in the most unlikely places; jealousy in the zenana; search for personal immortality. One can go on making new discoveries, each more astounding than the other. The TAT cards and questionnaires hold all the answers. What should never even be acknowledged is that the masses are intelligent, conscious, that it is *they* who make history. It is certainly easier to indulge in such blatant untruths that "in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966, 'the Thought of Chairman Mao' was to replace Marxism-Leninism as the major source of ideological guidance in China's political life" (p 251). With 1,119 footnotes for the 511 pages of text, one can't accuse the author of being shy of citing 'authorities'; and it is interesting to note that in support of this astounding assertion — that 'the Thought of Mao Tse-tung' had replaced Marxism-Leninism — no source, no document, is cited.

*

It is perhaps fruitless to discuss the method, or rather, the methodology of this book. Such a reactionary thesis — that social change is not the result of conscious exercise of choice, but rather it is a result of ingrained attitudes and behaviour patterns in the people which are manipulated by an unscrupulous oligarchy, in this case, a one-man oligarchy — could not have been formulated without recourse to the extraordinary paraphernalia that forms the methodology of this work. This, part of 'the technique of social science analysis', consists of interviews, carried out with the help of five 'standard procedures': (1) a set of open-ended questions about social attitudes and life experiences; (2) a biographical schedule; (3) an attitude survey; (4) the Standard Rorschach Test (I didn't have a clue as to what this was, and was further mystified by the cryptic references to *ink-dots*; and accidentally stumbled upon a detailed account of it in a chessbook by the younger Lasker); and (5) a Thematic Aperception Test (TAT), especially designed for this study. Apart from the reliability and objectivity of the answers provided by a small emigre group — for aught I know, correctives, or rather, 'error-rectifiers' might have been built into these questionnaires — one wonders if social change *has* to be studied in such a horribly mechanical way. Even

when one's worst passions were roused, one couldn't tear oneself away from the introductory chapter on the methodology; one read and re-read in morbid fascination. So, *this* is how all those theses are written, masters' and doctoral dissertations concocted, the 'sociologist' menacingly loose among the 'people' (the two seem to belong to two quite different categories), waving his TAT cards and shooting questions: "What do you do when you get angry?" (Question No. 35, c); (Answer: Chase

a political scientist up a tree.)

Finally, the style. I feel that even this highly reactionary thesis, derived naturally by adopting a highly subjectivist and behaviourist methodology (even the reviewer is permitted a bit of jargon), could still have been written more concisely, readably. The intolerable verbosity of the author imposes severe strains even on a reader who (unlike the present reviewer) might be sympathetic to the thesis. I certainly do not subscribe to the theory of 'common usage' and

every discipline has a right to its special vocabulary; but Solomon's style seems to be a class apart. In the experience of one who has a marginal, non-professional interest in sociological writing, by and large, the more reactionary a sociologist is, the more readable is his writing. (It is also true to a large extent of literature as well.) But Solomon has the dubious distinction of writing a very long book, which is very difficult to read, and which can only make sense as a parody of a study of revolutionary events.

A selection of articles published in Frontline since middle of 2002

1. Looking back into the Future [14-27 September 2002]
2. Assam's angst [12-25 October 2002]
3. The Search for 'Permanent Solutions' [4-17 January 2003]
4. The Fallacy of Internally Coherent Homelands [1-14 February 2003]
5. The BTC: Promises and Problems [1-14 March 2003]
6. Chasing a Mirage: Expulsion of Illegal Migrants from Assam [21 June-4 July 2003]
7. Who owns History? [*Objects of history*] [13-26 September 2003]
8. BTC: Territories of Fear [22 November-5 December 2003]
9. Reinventing Identities [22 May-4 June 2004]
10. The Furies come to Life [*The Hindu*, 30 July 2004]
11. Looking back into the Future [31 July-13 August 2004]
12. Burdens of the Past [28 August-10 September 2004]
13. Is North-East India Land locked? [EPW, 16 October 2004]
14. Tribes, New and Old [1-14 January 2005]
15. Who is an Assamese? Identity and Grievances [30 July-12 August 2005]
16. Manufacturing Identities? [24 September-7 October 2005]
17. In the Name of Tribal Identities [19 November-2 December 2005]
18. Fruits of Unrest [22 April-5 May 2006]
19. In the Name of Changing Names [3-16 June 2006]
20. Degrees of Separatism [9-22 September 2006]
21. Tell No Lies, Claim No Easy Victories [*The Hindu*, 17 May 2004]
22. Necessity, Choice and Behaviour [EPW, 22 May 2004]
23. The New Political Vocabulary [EPW, 18 February 2006]
24. A Defining Document: Review Article [30 August-12 September 2003]
[This may please be used with an earlier Review Article on
Volumes 1- 3 of the TRC Report, Frontline, 4 December 1998]
25. Burning the Memory [20 November-3 December 2004]