



Activism and Historiography: Bodo New History after 2003

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Introduction

"Bodo" refers to a group of approximately 1.5 million people in India's federal state of Assam. As a national autonym, the term emerged shortly before 1920 in the colonial district of Goalpara in Western Assam under the patronage of the religious reformer and businessman Kalicharan Brahma. In the course of the twentieth century, Bodo activists succeeded in moulding and defending a particularistic Bodo national and historical space.¹ The constitutional recognition of Bodo as an Indian nation and language in 2003 prompted Bodo intellectuals to (re-) write a national history for the Bodos.

In this paper, I approach Bodo historiography as both an initiative of nationalism and as a vital and valuable resource for members of the Bodo community. In doing so, I experiment with the hypothesis that Bodo history, complementing its position as a regional Indian history, can be framed as New History, a non-scholarly kind of translocal history-writing that uses scientific methodologies to make claims on the past (Jacquesson 2018). In relation to this hypothesis, I propose a theory of how to jointly conceptualise and historicise activism and historiography as part of an actors-oriented approach to history-writing. The source base for this



procedure are the works *The Saga for the Bodos* (2014a) by Hira Charan Narjinari and *Why a Bodoland* (2015) by Bakul Chandra Basumatary.

The paper is organised around the following questions: What are the contents, methods, and actors behind Bodo history-writing today? How can this history-writing be classified? To what extent is Bodo historiography related to activism? And how can Bodo historiography and its relationship with activism be grappled with both historically and conceptually? The first part clarifies the theoretical framework. The second part addresses the emergence and course of the Bodo national identity as well as its activisms and forms of history writing since the late colonial period in India. The third part goes into the analysis of the source base.

The theoretical framework

One of the first thinkers who argued that history is not merely a compilation of facts but based on production processes and interpretations that depend on concrete social actions was Wilhelm Dilthey (1957). Dilthey contended that humans are historical beings, and that history gets written as part of the realisation that the past is produced through what he called a double relationship of lived experience and self-awareness in the present (ibid.: 87). As a result of this relationship, he assumed that historiographies rest on interpretative frames which he referred to as "horizons" and which enable writers of history to look for and build links between social entities in the past from their point of view (ibid.:155). This basic idea was developed in myriad philosophical debates and reflections on the methodology of history as an academic discipline, and it continues to inform contemporary studies that focus on how history is shaped by actors and social contexts in different regions of the world (e.g. Heidegger 1977; Carr 1990; Kracauer and Kristeller 1995; Chatterjee and Ghosh 2002; Hirsch and Stewart 2005, Hartog 2015).

For the present study, I take Dilthey's classical notion of the double relationship as a departure point to think through Bodo history as a social practice embedded and constituted within dynamics between activism and historiography. The theoretical framework builds on three interrelated conceptual angles. The first angle recalls history as a politically negotiated construct by drawing on the idea that actors of history-writing try to devise and equip their audiences with authentic resources (Christophe et al. 2019). The second angle relies on the study field of New History as the conceptualisation for a strategy to gain historical authenticity practiced by people who, at first, have to make themselves heard (Jacquesson 2018).



Inspired by Dilthey's double relationship, I thirdly introduce the concept and historical methodology of "chronicling activism/activating histories" as a way to study ambiguities that emerge in fringe areas between existential political assertions and the simultaneous writing of history.

Historical authenticity and history as a resource

The notion of historical authenticity by Christophe et al. (2019) takes an actors-oriented perspective on the study of history as a resource. Based on the diverse meanings of the term authenticity that can relate to the behaviour of persons, the historical value of things, to legitimised traditions or the representation of events in the past, and productively drawing on the paradox behind a desire of authenticity in an increasingly mediated world, the authors introduce historical authenticity as a polysemous category of historical and political analysis. At that, they identify three observations and interrelated findings from case studies in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe that I take as a theoretical basis for the present case (ibid.: 11-12).

The authors observe, first, that questions of authenticity become important in phases of turmoil or social transformation. This highlights historical authenticity as a category for historical analysis, but also as a lens to study historiographic practices in the present and how they inform orientations towards the future (ibid.: 15-16). Historical authenticity, therefore, is a temporal notion that describes processes. At that, the forms of the contents, producers and aims behind processes of historical authenticity depend on respective social contexts (ibid.: 18-19). The third observation relates to the need to focus on both representations and receptions of historical authenticity. This enables a perspective that incorporates 'when and under which conditions it is possible to create political legitimacy through the assertion of hegemonic images of the past, and under which circumstances claims of authenticity fail' (ibid.: 24).

On these premises, Christophe et al. promote historical authenticity as a lens that helps to study practices of history-writing in different parts of the world. Concretised and contextualised, the perspective of historical authenticity brings to the fore the question of power behind the production of history as a resource. As a relational and temporal construct, historical authenticity also lays open how historical actors link and merge together selected images of the past. This linking and merging of pasts for the sake of historical authenticity takes place and evokes reactions on different levels of society such as the national, the local and or even the personal



(28-9). In the following, I consider the writing of Bodo history as an attempt to obtain historical authenticity.

The study field of New History

Proceeding from historical authenticity, the second conceptual angle that I use to frame Bodo history and its products is the study field of New History. This field was originally developed by Svetlana Jacquesson (2018) in relation to historiographic practices in the Kyrgyz context. The idea behind it is to take serious and value a kind of history-writing that is completely ignored in most national or academic histories and which forms part of a network of groups, institutions and actors whose historical agency gets practiced within translocal relations on the peripheries of globalisation.

When approached as a "translocal field", new history provides a telling example of the ways in which new connections between histories, concepts, and actors that were formally separated in time and space may yield unexpected and controversial results that go against widely assumed ideas about globalisation and its effects. As such, new history is an alternative to mainstream global or world history and demonstrates that the activity at the "periphery" of globalisation may bring about novel agencies and outcomes. (ibid.: 207)

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In relation to methods, Jacquesson observes that this new translocal activity of writing history between the margins of prevailing historiographic frames is based on scientific methods, albeit in unusual or controversial ways. It thus cannot be labelled mythology in the sense of the Greek opposition of myth and logos. A central method of new historians are language correspondences or etymologizations. While some of the deployed linguistic correlations are inconclusive, the specific ways in which they are used to support arguments are made transparent and, therefore, open to refusals or criticisms. The references used by new historians range from philology, genetics, literature or folklore and even include dissertations and other texts attested as "scholarship". There is a striking preference for outdated and colonial Western scholarship (ibid.: 215-7).

Second, while the claims of new historians are 'nourished by ethnic nationalism' (ibid.: 217), they yet exhibit a new quality of writing national histories. This quality can be identified as 'translocal imagination' (ibid.: 218). On the one side, translocal imagination relates to the activity of producing links to places and people around the globe and to subsume them under one's own national framework. On the other, it is designed to 'invit[e] readers to embrace [...] connections to ancient and faraway civilizations



and empires, world-renowned cultural monuments, or the past of contemporary powerful states [...] (ibid.). Examples for translocal imaginations by Kyrgyz new historians are the idea that China's ancient civilisation is based on the rule of Kyrgyz clans or the assertion that, based on lexical congruences between Kyrgyz and German, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin is talked about as a 'Kyrgyzized' gate (ibid.).

The networks and identities of New History-agents, third, confirm in Jacquesson's view the usefulness of the translocal perspective. The people behind New Histories are 'well-established academics [...]; they can be writers, poets or journalists [...]; they can also be newcomers to the intellectual field [...]. [However], none of them is a professional historian, or a historian holding a position in an official research institution' (ibid.: 219-20). According to Jacquesson, the multitude of authors and authorial backgrounds entails the possible emergence of unforeseeable networks whose branches and printed and digital products transgress various physical and social borders, thereby expressing 'different experiences of globalisation' (ibid.: 223).

Jacquesson concludes that New History is a 'non-scholarly body of writings based on scholarly methods and sources' (ibid.: 223). Rather than dubbing it fake history, she considers historical writings of this kind as 're-emplotments of the past'. These re-emplotments are important in so far as they cater to specific audiences for which they are meaningful and signify agencies of 'those who strive not to lag behind' (ibid.: 224). For the present paper, I follow the hypothesis that Bodo history relates to the translocal field of New History with its respective methods, actors and social networks. This complements its position as a regional history in the Indian context. Based on that, I start on the premise that New History constitutes a specific strategy to obtain historical authenticity by groups that, against the drastic disregard and misrepresentation of surrounding political powers, have no choice but to produce a history by themselves. I thus consider Bodo history-writing as the social production of a history for rather than about or on the Bodos.

The concept and methodology of chronicling activism/activating histories

Having worked out the assumption that Bodo history-writing produces historical authenticity by drawing on New History methodologies, the third conceptual angle for the present case considers how the historical space behind the identity of the Bodos emerged and developed in dialogue with numerous Bodo activism throughout the twentieth century.² Both the



historical context of late- and postcolonial India and the source base reflecting this context induced me to develop this angle that I refer to as chronicling activism/activating histories.³

The idea of chronicling activism/activating histories takes account of a process that unfolds around entanglements between activism, the chronicling of these activism to produce histories and the subsequent deployment of these histories as resources in new activism which are oriented towards the future. In this way, the components "chronicling activism" and "activating histories" each signify two aspects. By chronicling activism, I relate to both doing history by way of taking account of activism or political events and to the chronicling character of repercussions provoked by activism at or after which activists historically recollect achievements and predict futures. This supposes a relation between activism and historiography that highlights activism as both providing the content of historiographies and constituting moments of historiographic reflections on the futures of specific nows. Activating histories, on the other hand, denotes both the making-deployable or useable of histories as prerequisite resources in political movements and a particular genre of political history-writing dedicated to "activate" readers to start social movements or create an awareness to bring about political change. This sheds light on relations between activism and historiography whereby historiographies are consciously written or compiled as means required in activism and designed to appreciate historical knowledge as well as to participate in movements on the ground of selectively merged pasts.

Through its respective double approaches, the concept of chronicling activism/activating histories thus describes the process of, and provides an analytical lens to study, the negotiating of pasts, presents and futures of the identities of political communities in the making. The four relations of activism and historiography highlighted by this framework are not strictly separable but conceptualised as fluid fields. As both a concept and methodology, I hold that chronicling activism/activating histories can grapple with relating activism and historiography in the Bodo context from a present-day and historical perspective.

The historical context and emergence of the Bodo national and historical identity

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, inspired by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, historical authenticity emerged as a critical resource in South Asian



national movements. By that time, buttressed by the academic infrastructure around the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, traditions of chronicling in the subcontinent from before the commencement of British rule in Bengal in 1757 had gradually become enveloped by the terms of Orientalist positivism and national thought. These developments provide the first significant context for contemporary practices of Bodo New History. Hira Charan Narjinari, the author of *The Saga of the Bodos*, indicated to me that he is a life-member in the Asiatic Society and, among other archives, made use of its library to work out facts and relationships on Bodo history. In the introduction of his monograph, moreover, Narjinari invokes the Bengali writer, essayist and Hindu nationalist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) as a role model historico-national activist. An important intellectual in post 1857-Bengal, Bankimchandra's quest for an authentic Indian history and nation which he sought to employ against the past politics of colonial rule signified the growing acceptance of Orientalist social categories and European national thought in South Asian forms of history-writing (Mann 2009; Kaviraj 1995; Narjinari 2014a and 2021).

Bankimchandra's works relate to the colonial knowledge system in at least three ways. First, based on a colonial picture of the Indian inferior other, Bankimchandra saw political power as a cultivatable quality and requirement for nationalism. Second, following nineteenth century positivism and utilitarianism in Europe, nationalism was in Bankimchandra's view embedded in an objective history of the people that must be unearthed through political assertion. And in distinction with European nationalism, third, Bankimchandra's Indian historical and national identity assumed the form of a spirit which transcends colonialism and the material world (Chatterjee 1986). Particularly the third argument became crucial for other regional actors of history-writing in colonial and post-colonial India. Agents of young historiographies like early Bodo New History, as will be shown below, began to use this notion of a spirit outweighing the ages in order to claim their distinct and immemorial national identity and to support activism against the domination of "foreign" political powers other than the colonisers.

In the decades after 1900, inspired by thinkers and reformers from the previous century like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay or Abdul Karim (1863-1909), anti-colonial movements in early twentieth century British India increasingly developed national assertions on the basis of ethnicised concepts of religiosity and the use of religious communities as historicisable imagined nations. On the national and supra-regional level, and in the course of the



formation and partition of Pakistan and India in 1947, this set the stage for different moderate and radical forms of religious and secular historical nationalisms like Choudhury Rahmat Ali's history of Indian Muslims, the racist concept of Hindutva or the laicistic history of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru that guided the self-understanding of the Indian nation state (Mann 2009). Simultaneously, on the regional and local level like in colonial Assam, this amalgamation of religion, nation and history facilitated the emergence of numerous novel nationalities whose actors helped themselves to the circulating social categories produced by imperial historiography, Christian missionaries as well as the colonial state and its legal system.

The creation of Assam in 1874 paved the way for a regional Assamese national historiography. Between 1900 and 1920, Bodo emerged as a national subjectivity in Goalpara on the Western periphery of Assam, a region hitherto characterised by mobility and fluid social categories (Misra 2005). The following discussion develops the historical context and emergence of the Bodo national and historical identity from the formation of the Assamese national historiography and against the background of practices of history-writing in the erstwhile colonial district of Goalpara.

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Like in other parts of South Asia, the emerging historiography in Assam took inspiration from the Orientalist notion of history as a rediscovery and the idea that Indian pasts are to be associated with a Sanskritic tradition within the borders of the colonial state (Misra 2007a: 2). On these premises, Assamese historians in the latter half of the nineteenth century like Gunabhiram Baruah sought to reconcile the demand for historical continuity with the disturbing factor of Assam's recent and arbitrary borders. One solution was found in the concept of Greater Assam perceived as 'a classical past located in essentially unchanging superior [Aryan] civilisational values' (ibid.: 7-8). This enabled the interpretation that other political arrangements were temporary and "since time immemorial" framed by an Assamese cultural core.

Another attempt to overcome the alleged contradiction was the selective blending of history and myth. An example for this is G. Baruah's attempt to portray divine interventions as dynastic changes and to present the kingdom of Kamarupa (350-1140 CE) as a timeless pillar of Assamese sovereignty that transcends the later rules of Ahom, Koch and colonialism. Both interpretations are similar to Bankimchandra's spiritual nationality, though they were not yet strictly nationalistic, however indicative of a future national historiographic project (ibid.: 7-9).



In the beginning of the twentieth century, fostered by a new bilingual Assamese-English historiographic practice after the publication of Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* in 1906, Assamese history developed into a national project. Gait produced an extensive colonial methodology with specific classificatory systems and schemes to research Assam's past. He proposed to divide primary sources into six types (coins, inscriptions, historical documents, quasi-historical writings, religious works and oral traditions) and promoted historical collections, translations and interpretations in regularly published "progress reports". The reports culminated in his book that became a 'political biography of Assam [which] created an atmosphere for modern historical research' (Saikia 2008a:151).

In contrast to other modes of British imperial historical thought, for instance the periodisation of Indian history through the European notions of ancient, medieval and modern in James Mill's *The History of British India* from 1817, Gait produced a linear historical time for Assam that emphasised the value of the Ahom culture and rescue of their chronicling system called "Buranjis" through the colonial state (147-8). *A History of Assam* was used as a handbook well into the twentieth century and remains to be a popular reference also in relation to the present case. For instance, during field research in Assam in 2016, I figured in various conversations that the claim of Gait about the 'wide extend and long duration of Bodo domination' in Assam based on his toponymic studies (Gait 2013: 6-7) circulates as a popular image of the past in contemporary Bodo society.⁴ On his historical blog, Hira Charan Narjinari avails himself to this image in order to prove the authenticity and historicity of the Bodo language (Narjinari 2014b).

Inspired by Edward Gait, as part of the conglomerations of religion, nation and history, a new generation of historical actors from the educated Assamese urban middle class thus came together in 1912 to form the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samitit (KAS). The aim of this historical circle under the patronage of the local colonial government in Guwahati was to collect artefacts on Assam's history based on the model of Gait (Kar 2008: 26). While Gait should provide the methodology, KAS historians criticised his focus on Ahom, Koch and Moghul cultures that, in their view, repressed the national story of Assam as an Indic historiography (Saikia 2008a, 160; Gait 2013: xi). The members of the KAS included Kanak Lal Barua and Suryya Kumar Bhuyan who later represented two conflicting narratives of Assamese history. In his work *Early History of Kamarupa* (1933), K.L. Barua traced Assamese society through state structures articulated in Sanskrit inscriptions and religious texts from the early state of Kamarupa. This



enabled him to present Kamarupa as a Hindu entity that expressed a national Assamese spirit and thus to pave the way for Assam's 'long awaited place in the larger narrative of Indian cultural and political history' (Saikia 2008a: 161).

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, on the other hand, parted with the KAS in 1926 to join the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) in Guwahati, at the time the only government institution in entire British India charged with the regional study of history (Kar 2008). Bhuyan saw the distinctive feature of Assam's national history in the Ahom culture and, therefore, focused on the production of historical evidence by classifying and editing the Buranjis (Purakayastha 2008; Saikia 2008b). Yet, as Kar (2008) points out, Bhuyan took the stand of historians who saw the Moghuls as a cultural threat and thus, like K.L. Barua, contributed to the provincialisation of Assam within the supra-regional story of Hindu India.

While the Assamese intelligentsia in Guwahati began to imagine a regional national history, the people in Goalpara found themselves on the Western fringe of this political reality. Initially, before forming a part of Assam since 1874, the colonial district of Goalpara had been carved out from the erstwhile Rungpore-district in 1822 (Barman 1994) with the alleged intention of 'reclaiming [...] rude tribes on the frontier [...] and to adopt measures for freeing them from any dependence on the Zemindars' (Mills 1854). From the perspective of the colonial administration in Calcutta, Goalpara featured as a 'historically transitional region' (Misra 2011: 1). In 1826, together with the Ahom territory annexed through the Treaty of Yangadoo, Goalpara became a part of the British Bengal Presidency. In 1865, the district of Goalpara was enlarged by the Eastern Duars (South Bhutanese lands conquered by the British in the course of the Bhutan Wars) and, until 1874, shifted to the Cooch-Bihar-Commissionership (Misra 2005; Barman 1994). Due to its unclear political belonging and 'fractured administrative history' (Misra 2011: 1), the Goalpara region was treated in the new national history of Assam at best as a staffage or, like in Bhuyan's monograph *Lachit Barphukan*, as a battleground area for wars between the Ahoms and the Moghul Empire (Bhuyan 1947: 153).

However, Goalpara also saw the emergence of idiosyncratic pasts. These reflected political and economic change, repercussions of colonial notions of space and mosaics of contested sovereignties tangled with the collective memories of the people and existing traditions of chronicling. As Misra (2005: 211) points out, power relations especially in the alluvial floodplains of the Eastern Duars, since 1865 the northern part of extended Goalpara



outside the permanently settled land revenue system, were characterised by a 'shared use of resources and an overlapping of political authority and territory'. This confused and annoyed colonial officials and commercial actors in their quest to subject the people to political control through unambiguous social categories or to connect the region to the global market. Moreover, the colonial formation of Goalpara as a bordered entity ignored the role of local trade fairs and routes as erstwhile deliberately ambiguous arenas of negotiation between proxies of the Moghul Empire, the kingdoms of Bhutan, Koch and Ahom as well as the local Zamindari estates of Bijni, Gauripur, Mechpara, Chapar, Karaibari among others (ibid.: 231-2; Barman 1994: 5-6). As a result, while the colonial topography in Goalpara increasingly denied rooms for different lifestyles outside the perceived standards of governed "civilisation", new identities began to emerge based on changing economic hierarchies (Misra 2005: 244).

In this connection, Misra (2006) identifies two further developments that precede the emergence of novel historical practices in Goalpara like Bodo historiography after the turn of the twentieth century. The first relates to language and print culture. Colonial and missionary education classified Goalpara as belonging to the imagined Assamese vernacular community. This implied the need to write the linguistic history of the region around artificial frontiers and allowed social groups to historically re-invent themselves through colonial language policies.

The other development took place at the nexus of law, migration and land cultivation. To systematically increase productivity and revenue, the colonial state had introduced the category of "wasteland", a suggestive term for regions whose inhabitants putatively lack the skill of tilling. A remedy for the perceived problem of fallow land was found in the Colonisation of Wasteland-scheme. Since 1880, this brought thousands of farmers from East Bengal to settle in hitherto sporadically or temporally cultivated lands in Goalpara. In this relation, 'colonial legality ensured that [...] conflicts over property, political authority and culture translated into relatively fixed boundaries between different social groups' (Misra 2007b: 449). As part of this mutually constitutive process, the inhabitants of Goalpara, confronted with colonial social categories and the newly circumscribed physical mobility of their former partly nomadic lifestyles, used shared memories, reinvented customary laws, and the strategic formation of cultural associations to 'wide[n] the arena of colonial law' and to defend 'spaces of self-representation' which often gained shape in the very course of articulating them (ibid.: 458).



The use of Bodo as a political and historical category originated within this environment on the Western fringes of Assam. The idea of Bodo had already existed as an etic term in missionary and colonial textbooks since the middle of the nineteenth century. The missionary Sidney Endle, for instance, popularised since the 1880s the notion of a so-called "Bara-Race" as an umbrella term for various groups in Assam referred to as Kacharis or Mech (Endle 1884: i; Sharma 2011: 6). This concept, in turn, had been deduced from the name of a speech variety as mentioned in the publication *Essay the first: on the Kocch, Bodo, and Dhimal Tribes* (1847) by the colonial ethnographer B.H. Hodgson. Hodgson had promoted the study of overarching language-race relations, and Endle reinterpreted this idea from the perspective of his Tezpur mission (Endle 1884; Vantard 2017: 17). In contemporary Bodo historiography, Hodgson is usually cited as the coiner of Bodo as a generic term while Endle and the legacy of his mission work are assumed to have facilitated the early Bodo identity (Boro 2010; Brahma 2013).

However, while the notions of Bodo or Bara Race became available categories of national assertion, actual practices of blending religion, nation and history in the late colonial case of Bodo relate to a different process. One way to illustrate this are the activities of the religious reformer and businessman Kalicharan Mech who later changed his surname to "Brahma" and is also known as Gurudev in Bodo society today. The disrupted identities of the people in Goalpara attracted Christian, Hindu and Muslim missionaries for the generation of new followers. In competition with these missionaries, Kalicharan Brahma sought to uplift the living conditions of his people, tackle a perceived identity vacuum, promote local businesses and reform religious practices based on Brahma Dharma, a monotheistic Hindu belief system inspired by European enlightenment thought. Originally developed by a person called Swami Shibnarayan Paramhansa, Gurudev had taken note of Brahma Dharma in 1905 in Calcutta and, as he became a follower, began to preach a customised variant in his hometown in Goalpara (Vantard 2017: 17).

As part of that, Gurudev promoted educational, commercial and literary functions that invoked and disseminated the ethnic category of Bodo. Among the initiatives were, for instance, the setting up of primary schools or the inauguration of a boarding house in Dhubri that became a popular meeting spot and 'the first centre of think-tank of the Boros [sic]' that granted scholarships to individual Bodos (Brahma 2013, 97). In view of the formation of a Bodo nation, however, perhaps the most significant



initiatives of Kalicharan Brahma were the establishment of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (Bodo Student Organisation) (BCS) in 1919 with its mouthpiece *Bibar* and the convening of three Bodo Maha Sanmilans (Grand Bodo Conferences) (BMS) in 1921, 1925 and 1929 (ibid.: 69-71).

The BMS should sharpen the domains of Bodo society. Their role was to constitute a discussion forum for 'problems plaguing the Bodo society' and the 'positive measures taken for [its] uplifting' (Boro 2010: 21). Among the matters discussed at the BMS were actions plans for Bodo women, the 'setting up of primary and middle schools' (ibid.: 22) and the modernisation of wedding ceremonies. At the same time, the *Bibar* magazine was the 'first magazine in Bodo language' and, as a poetic platform, set the beginning for a novel publication infrastructure 'where young poets and authors could show their creative talents in writing for the first time in the history of the community' (ibid.: 22, 24). With *Bibar* as a role model, the 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of numerous other journals and periodicals like the *Alongbar* magazine in the 1930s whose contributors 'envisioned to have a spiritual and enlightened Boro society' and thus backed the Bodo national identity (Brahma 2013: 108).

"No Bodoland, no rest": Bodo activism and historiography

During this phase of religious and literary reflection, activism under the national banner of Bodo began to appear in the political arena of the colonial state. Contrary to the Indian independence movement, Kalicharan Brahma and other Bodo representatives, for instance the student leader and writer Rupnath Brahma (Boro 2010: 23), welcomed the coming of the Simon Commission (SC) to Assam in 1928. In their view, political reforms announced by the SC were a chance to petition for Bodo causes (Narzary 2011: 21). An important petition in this connection was brought up by the organisation Bodo Jubak Sanmilan (BJS) on 30 December 1928. The demands articulated by BJS included the installing of a legislative council with Bodo representatives and the issuing of scholarships for Bodo individuals (ibid.: 24). Another memorandum submitted on 12 August 1928 by the initiative Kachari Jubak Sanmilan (KJS), a coalition of different groups including Bodos, is paraphrased by Charan Narzary (2011) as already having contained a historical assertion:

The [Kachari Jubak] Sanmilan pointed out in its memorandum that the Kacharis were one of the principal races of Assam and held an exalted position in history. They were a ruling race and their kingdom extended far and wide from Upper Assam to East Bengal. [...] The



memorandum stated that the Ahom kings invaded the Kachari kingdom repeatedly [...]. The Bodo-Kacharis rendered a great service to the British government [...]. Their descendants are now spread all over Assam, and known by different names [...] (ibid.: 23-4).⁵

While the form of this historical argument retold here by C. Narzary is evocative of the kind of authenticity claims which Bankimchandra had already made in the nineteenth century, it is also, as will be shown below, reminiscent of the way in which contemporary Bodo historical activists make use of Bodo as a historical social category that transcends historical times and dynastic changes. With the KJS petition as a concrete instance of historical activism, I suggest that the beginning of the production of an "authentic" Bodo history and the process that I hypothesised as chronicling activism/activating histories falls into the late 1920s.

Another available category for Bodo activism in the transition time between late- and post-colonial India was the notion of tribalism. As part of the SC reforms, an Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) was formed in 1935 with reserved seats for "plains tribals", a colonial bureaucratic imagination to 'lump together a diverse set of people [in the Brahmaputra Valley] defined in semi-geographical and semi-sociological terms' (Pathak 2010: 61). To enable a nomination of "tribal" candidates, a coalition of BJS, KJS and other (non-Bodo) organisations started the All Assam Tribal League (AATL) (1933-47). The themes of AATL-activism included questions of land rights and thefts, unequal access to education, the recognition of differences between the social structures of "plains tribals" and caste-Hindu Assamese and criticisms of derogatory practices like the denial of access to temples for 'tribal people' (ibid.: 61-2)

In postcolonial Assam, Bodo activism built on the categories and themes of plains tribal-activism in the form of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA). Founded on the brink of the ALA general elections on 27 February 1967 by the three Bodo notables Samar Brahma Chaudhury, Prasenjit Brahma and Charan Narzary, the PTCA was formed to tackle the ineffectiveness of the AATL successor organisation All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS) and the inadequate political recognition of Scheduled Tribes under which Bodos had been categorised. Invoking the times of the 1930s, PTCA's initial aspiration was 'full autonomy in the plains tribal areas' including the protection of lands and customs of the people living in and around Kokrajhar and the prevention of their economic exploitation (Narzary 2011: 43, 55). In 1972, this changed into the demand for the separate state of Udayachal. The latter demand triggered political agitations and mass rallies until



the early 1990s some of which were violently stopped by the government. In his memoirs, Narzary distances himself from and condemns the more famous Bodoland Movement (BM) between 1986 to 1993 (see below) and the violent methods of its organisers, the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) (ibid.: 146-7). The Udayachal Movement became disrupted by the assassination of the PTCA-president Samar Brahma Choudhury and his son on 27 August 1991 by a military fraction of the ABSU. In 2011, Narzary concludes about the PTCA movement that it 'woke up the tribal society and created its own history during the period from 1967 to the creation of the BTCA [Bodoland Territorial Council Accord, see below] on 20 February 1993' (ibid.: 192).

A simultaneous practice of chronicling activism/activating histories which invoked the national category of Bodo more explicitly and that was linked to the implication of Nehru's policy to create federal states along linguistic lines (Sarangi and Pai 2020) took place in relation to literature, language and education since the early 1950s. On 28 September 1950, a group of Bodo civil servants from Dhubri founded the Bodo Literary Club (BLC) to take account of the literary and cultural movements of the 1920s and make its products accessible to the public. On 16 November 1952, following a 400 delegates-conference on 26 September 1952, the BLC merged with the Boroni Anchai A-fat-organisation to form the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) (Vantard 2017: 25).

The objective of the BSS was to 'promote the language, literature and culture of the Bodos' and, in this connection, to produce a Bodo literary and linguistic standard as medium of instruction in distinguished Bodo schools to be claimed from the government (History Compilation Sub-Committee of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha [CSCBSS] 2016: 56). Kindled by the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 which made Assamese a compulsory language in entire Assam, BSS activism turned into the most influential cultural network of the Bodos until today. Through various agitations, it achieved the implementation of Bodo primary (1963), medium (1968) and high schools (1972) and in 1996 the use of the Bodo language on university level (Brahma 2013: 124-5; CSCBSS 2016: 153-4).

Simultaneously, as Bodo cultural activists petitioned for literature, language and education, numerous other cultural associations and initially non-political student unions (Narzary 2011: 146) emerged in the 1960s of which the most prominent was the 1967-formed All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). While the activism under PTCA was navigated by the educated elite and



operated along formal political structures, the student organisations became meeting spots for politicised local youths who were inspired by the BSS-protest culture and opposed the violent responses from the state government. A tipping point in this regard was the Roman Script Movement of 1974. At the suggestion of ABSU to—for symbolic and practical reasons—replace the Bodo's written standard (hitherto based on Assamese script) with Roman characters, the BSS convoked a Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee between 1971-74 to discuss the alphabet substitution. In a meeting then on 17 March 1974, the BSS decided to print and circulate Roman Script textbooks without prior consultation with the government (CSCBSS 2016: 190). The BSS-led protests which followed the subsequent suspension of teacher wages and school grants in June 1974 are known as the Roman Script Movement. It lasted until 28 November 1974 and involved the deaths of at least 14 people, twelve Bodos and two police officers (Prabhakar 1974: 2101). These events marked the beginning of a violent protest culture (Das 1994: 419) and, according to the journalist Raju Kumar Narzary, 'planted the seeds of Bodo militancy' (Narzary 2020).

The Bodoland Movement officially began on 2 March 1987 with the public demand for a separate Bodoland by ABSU or, in Bodo chronology, already on 31 May 1986 when Upendra Nath Brahma became president of ABSU and chased out its "non-political members" (Das 1994; Brahma et al. 2001; Narzary 2011: 149-50). The emergence of this movement was inextricably linked to the Assam Movement (AM) between 1979-85 with which it had similarities in terms of 'nature, protest styles and ideology' (Das 1994, 420). The AM, indirectly a result of the aforementioned Colonialisation of Wasteland-scheme, was started by the All Assam Student Union (AASU) to protest against illegal immigration from Bangladesh and to demand the identification and deportation of illegal migrants. During the AM, the Nellie Massacre took place whereby more than 2000 Muslim Bengalis have been killed.

The AM resulted in the Assam Accord of 1985 whose regulation included that Assam's borders should be guarded, the vote-lists be freed from foreigners who entered Assam after 1966 and illegal foreigners deported. It also brought about the first government under the Asom Gana Parishad (Assam People's Council) (AGP) between 1985-89 (Baruah 1999). Initially, Bodo organisations supported the AM. But the AGP government turned out to be an existential threat to minorities in Assam. Bodos experienced forceful evictions and land alienation, the aggravation of unequal distribution of jobs and capital as well as language politics that privileged the Assamese



vernacular. These developments provoked Bodo agents and organisations to start a movement of their own, in distinction with the AM (Das 1994: 18-9).

The central demand of the Bodoland Movement, led by Upendra Nath Brahma's ABSU and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) formed on 8 November 1988, was the creation of Bodoland as a separate federal state. This implied the inclusion of Bodo areas into the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution and the creation of an autonomous Bodo development council. Between 1987 and 1992, the protest forms of the Bodoland Movement ranged from demonstrations and mass rallies, public prayer meetings, hunger strikes, general strikes referred to as "bandhs", obstructions of public infrastructures like railways and roads called "rokhos", mass crying events, submission of memoranda to governing bodies and the organising of roundtable talks with representatives of the state and the central government (Brahma et al. 2001). In this time, slogans like "Divide Assam 50/50" or "No Bodoland, No Rest" emerged. Like the Assam Movement, the BM was accompanied by ethnic clashes whereby thousands of people were killed or jailed. After there was 'no response [...] received from either State or Central government' until 21 November 1992, ABSU/BPAC exclaimed a '1001 hours total Assam Bandh' that triggered 'large scale violence' (ibid.: xi-ii). The subsequent negotiations resulted in the creation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) as part of the first Bodo Accord-memorandum of settlement in 1993 (Das 1994).

The objective of the Bodo Accord of 1993 was 'to provide maximum autonomy within the framework of the constitution to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement' (Government of India et al. 1993). It comprised 40 members in the Assam Legislative Assembly of which 35 were up for election and five should be nominated by the state government. The exact territorial demarcation under the BAC was left open, but the land records authority of the state was to examine a list of villages to be proposed by ABSU/BPAC for the creation of a "contiguous area". The BAC's authority was in turn to be exercised by a Bodo Executive Council (BEC) while this BEC was to be controlled by the party in the BAC which obtained a simple majority. The BAC had the power to collect taxes and was eligible to get financial aid from the Central government. Following the signing of the 1993-Bodo Accord, a new political party was formed, the Bodo People's Party (BPP) (Das 1994: 422).

The BAC, however, failed 'because of insufficient financial powers and overwhelming domination of the state government in the parliament' and



'rampant corruption' (Nath 2003: 538, 542). The powers granted through the BAC were also limited compared to the rights of actual autonomous councils of other Scheduled Tribes. The proposed territory under the BAC declared by the land records authority, moreover, was rejected by ABSU/BPAC. This led to large-scale outbreaks of violence whereby Bengali Muslim farmers were targeted in Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar and, a few weeks later, in the Barpeta Massacre in July 1994 at which Bodo militias killed more than 1000 people, injured several thousand and burned down about 60 villages (Hussain 1995). In the same month, ABSU/BPAC took up their agitations again and officially continued the BM in 1996. The years 1994-2003 were characterised by communal violence, failed diplomacy and an increased activity of Bodo extremist groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the successor organisation of the Bodo Security Force (BSF), or the 1996- formed Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) (Nath 2003).

To bring this situation to an end, new tripartite talks were organised between BLT leaders as well as state and central government representatives. The result was a new Bodo Accord in 2003 as part of which the union government agreed to upgrade the BAC to a full autonomous council. The objective of the new accord thus amplified the legislative, executive, administrative, financial and linguistic powers for the Bodos considerably. Its objective was

to create an autonomous self-governing body to be known as the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the state of Assam and to provide constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule to the said Autonomous Body: to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area (Government of India et al. 2003).

The new BTC provided for 46 seats in the Legislative Assembly. 30 of these seats were reserved for Schedule Tribes, five for "non-tribals", five for all and six to be nominated by the government. The territory for the BTC's authority was now—in large parts—clearly defined and divided into the four districts Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri which, together, formed the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). A very crucial clause in the Bodo Accord of 2003, moreover, was the inclusion of Bodo language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. In this way, Bodo was upgraded to a national Indian language which involved an increased recognition and



financial aid for language planning. Even if the BTC continued to be politically opposed, for instance by a federation of non-Bodo groups referred to as Sanmilitia Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) (Nath 2003: 534), the 2003-Bodo Accord was probably the most significant achievement of the Bodo political project in India.⁶

During and after the BM, the BSS network continued the organisation of literary and cultural events, petitions in relation to the script question and yearly meetings to discuss and chronicle the Bodo's cultural output. In this way, through both its activities and the history of its activities, the BSS network helped create a basis for a historical self-conception before and after 2003. For instance, in a seminar paper published in 1991 in the *Onjima*-magazine in Kokrajhar, the noted Bodo poet and writer Brajendra Kumar Brahma proposed the periodisation of Bodo literature into four periods: Missionary Period (1884-1918), Bihar Period (1919-37), Alongbar Period (1938-51) and Modern Period from 1952 (cit. in Brahma 2013: 108). This periodisation became widely accepted and continues to be picked up and discussed, for instance by the literary scholar Pranab Jyoti Narzary in the 43rd issue of the BSS mouthpiece "The Bodo" (Narzary 2018: 57).

On field research in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon in March 2016 and upon my attendance at the 57th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and a bookfair in Mushalpur on 4-6 February 2018, I encountered numerous books in languages like Bodo, Hindi, English and Assamese—most of them published after 2003—that discussed the prospects of or made assertions about Bodo history. At the 2005-established Bodoland University in Kokrajhar, some of these histories begin to be cited as references in academic papers, thereby blurring the boundary between academic and activist histories (see e.g. Basumatary 2017 or Singh and Basumatary 2017). Apart from popular historical blogs and debates on newspaper and social media platform, the post-2003 period also saw the founding of the World Bodo Historical Society (WBHS) in 2008 by Hira Charan Narjinari and the activist as well as former ABSU-president and MP Sansuma Kunggur Bwiswmuthiary ("New chapter", 15 March 2008). I thus assume that the Bodo Accord of 2003, due to the creation of the BTC and the constitutional upgrading of the Bodo language, constitutes a paradigm change in the Bodo perception of historical time.



Two examples of writing Bodo New History today: authors and assertions

In the next step, to make my point about Bodo history and its production, I am going to discuss the monographs *The Saga of the Bodos* (2014a) by Hira Charan Narjinari and *Why a Bodoland* (2015) by Bakul Chandra Basumatary. I acquired both books in March 2016 in the Kokrajhar book-stall and publishing house Words n Words. Due to language barriers, I was confined to English publications. The books attracted my attention because they were recommended to me in different bookshops in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon after inquiring about publications on Bodo history. I chose particularly these two books for the present study because they can well be compared due to their similar length, the almost same year of publication, the similarly abundant addressing of pre-colonial Bodo history and because their covers, prefaces, and structures indicate entanglements with Bodo activism. At the same time, these references bring in different dimensions. *Why a Bodoland* is considered a memorandum while *The Saga of the Bodos* is conceived by its author as a scientific history book.

The Authors

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The authors of the books are well-known Bodo intellectuals and public persons. Hira Charan Narjinari is a retired civil servant from Kumargram in the Jalpaiguri-district in the Indian state of West Bengal near the Assam-Bengal border. In his public profile on blogger.com, Narjinari describes himself as '[k]eely devoted to unearth the Mech-Bodo national history' (Narjinari 2014b). He obtained a BA-degree (Honours) in history in 1968, a Bachelor of Divinity 1973 in Theology from Guwahati University and is a life member in the Asiatic Society in Calcutta.

Since the 1980ies, Narjinari visited several Indian archives like the Central Archive in Delhi or the Asiatic Society-archive in Calcutta and continues to participate in the Bodo public historical discourse by way of publishing his findings in articles and commentaries, local magazines, historical blogs and on online platforms. Prior to 2014, he had written two monographs: *In Search of Identity: The Mech* (1985) and *Reassertiveness of the Great Bodos* (2000). Along with doing private research on Bodo history, Narjinari is engaged in Indian politics. In the 2011-election of the ALA, he competed for the Kumargram constituency that is adjacent to the BTR district of Kokrajhar in Assam. Together with Bakul Chandra Basumatary and the erstwhile president of the ABSU Sansuma Kunggur



Bwiswmuthiary, Narjinari founded the World Bodo Historical Society (WBHS) in 2008. The WBHS is inactive since several years (Narjinari 2021).

Bakul Chandra Basumatary, the author of *Why a Bodoland*, was born in Gossaigaon in the present-day BTR-area and was originally a lawyer. He studied law in the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong and worked in the Assam judicial service between 1980-84 after which he became a legal advisor for the Mumbai High Court and, in 1990, a regional manager in the National Housing Bank. Basumatary was the president of ABSU in the early 1980s and participated in the Bodoland Movement. He wrote several articles in Bodo magazines like *Bodoland Monthly*, *Bodoland Guardian* or *Bodosa Daily* and, after his retirement in 2008, translated the Bhagavad Geeta into Bodo language and wrote books like *A Treatise on the Bodos* (2012) or *A Concise History of the Bodos* (2014). As co-founders of the WBHS, Narjinari and Basumatary knew one another and exchanged political or historical views on a regular basis (Narjinari 2021). Basumatary passed away in 2018 (Brahma 2020; Pritam 2018).

Assertions on Bodo history (1): The Saga of the Bodos (2014)

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Narjinari's monograph *The Saga of the Bodos* is a printing press publication that promises to provide a 'very short account of our [Bodo] history' (ibid.: viii). The cover depicts the photograph of an unknown demonstration where body-painted people hold colourful banners showing demands that became popular during the BM like "Divide Assam 50/50" or "No Bodoland no Rest". Other slogans such as "If Telangana, why not Bodoland?" refer to the more recent Telangana movement. Narjinari's impetus behind writing the book connects to the observation that 'so far, we [the Bodos] do not have any Bodo national history' as well as to the ignorance of a certain BLT politician who, as Narjinari laments, 'reject[s] the importance of history' (ibid.: ii).

The Saga of the Bodos has two intentions. On one side, Narjinari seeks to spread historical consciousness and 'make people known about the Bodo people and their struggle for existence' (ibid.: vii). On the other side, he wants to equip the Bodos with a national history. Citing Bankimchandra that 'a nation without a history suffers from unhappiness', Narjinari hopes that his monograph becomes a 'guiding force' (ibid.: ix). 'If history was not a factor in the life and work of a nation', he asks in this connection, 'why one should trace the history of the Bodo people [...]?' (ibid.: vii-viii). The book formally fulfils the criteria of a scientific publication with footnotes in individual chapters and a references list at the end of the book. It has 104 pages (excluding annexure, appendix and bibliography) and eleven



chapters: 1. Early Bodo Kings of Ancient India, 2. Historical Period of Bodo Dynasties, 3. Bodo Language, 4. Immigration and Marginalisation of Bodos, 5. Land Alienation, Protective Measures and its Efficacy, 6. Political Aspiration of the Bodos, 7. State-Sponsored Barbarism, 8. Bodoland Territorial Council Development, 9. Constitutional Provisions for Creation of States, 10. Opposition from Assamese Community, and 11. Conclusion.

The first chapter is introduced by a quotation of the Indian linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1890-1977) who stated that the Bodos are 'the offspring of the son of Vishnu and Mother Earth' (ibid.: 1). This is followed by an account of the early Bodo kings named Mahiranga Danava, Ghatak Asur, Bishmak, Banasur, Narak Asur and Bhagadatta. Disparate ethnic and etymological information is presented on these kings. Mahiranga Danava, for instance, is identified as the first king of Assam without further available details (ibid.: 2). Yet, the people under him connect to the Kiratas, the Bodos' ancestors, while the etymological origin of Mahiranga relates for Narjinari to the Bodo word *mairong* (husked rice). Other information is sourced from Indian epics and linked to the Bodos based on practices of customs. For example, in Narjinari's view, the wedding between Banasur's daughter Usha and Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna, took place in accordance with an 'ago-old custom among the Bodo people' (ibid.: 4).

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Further arguments used to substantiate the Bodo nature of these kings are based on the distinction between written and oral language, cultural hegemony from mainland India and questions of toponymy. For example, despite Sanskrit inscriptions from the related time, Narjinari mitigates the possibility that Narak Asur and his people were Sanskrit-speaking. 'Can we just surmise on the basis of the language of the inscription of a king that he was a Sanskrit speaking person?' (ibid.: 5). The last ancient Bodo king was Bhagadatta. He is for Narjinari 'symbolical of a Kirat or Mongoloid chief who came within the fold of the Brahminical world' (ibid.: 8). Rangpur, the place of his residence, is referred to as the 'home of the Bodos' (ibid.: 9) and presented as a Bodo toponym that means "city of heaven" (ibid.: 8-9).

In the second chapter, Narjinari differentiates seven Bodo ruling houses and periodises their times of reign. Based on the scholars Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Rehati Mohan Lahiri as well as K.L. Barua's *Early history of Kamarupa* (1933), Narjinari repeats his ethnic claims in relation to several dynasties, for example the first Bodo Varman dynasty (400 to 650 CE) that 'belonged to the Mongoloid stock and racially affined to Bodo' (ibid.: 14). The chronicles of the Chinese pilgrim Tsang reveal for Narjinari about the last king of this dynasty (Bhaskarvarman) and his people that they had like



the Bodos a "small stature" and a yellow dark "complexion". Moreover, Tripura gets referred to as the 'oldest Bodo kingdom in the East' for the members of this dynasty spoke the Bodo language. For Narjinari, the Bodo kingdom of Tripura saw the emergence of Bodo musicians like Sachin Deb Barman and was later 'annexed by the Indian dominion' (ibid.: 16).

Narjinari then asserts that "Mongoloid Ahoms" entered the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 and founded the Kamatapur kingdom. This existed for him until 1498 before defeated by the Moghul Nawab Hussain Shah. Based inter alia on ethnic evidence from the German monograph *Völkerstämme am Brahmaputra* (1883) by Adolf Bastian which had been paraphrased in the Assam Census of 1881 by the colonial civil servant W.C. Plowden (1883), Narjinari claims that 'Kamatpur kingdom was ruled by the ancestors of the modern Bodos' (ibid.: 16-17). The Mech-Bodo Dynasty of Cooch Behar since 1515 goes back for him to the Bodo ruler Haori Mech. This dynasty is in Narjinari's view wrongly portrayed as a Koch-Rajbongsi dynasty as the people under this dynasty lost their 'Mongoloid physiognomy' due to 'inter-caste matrimonial relations' (ibid.: 18). Narjinari concludes that the last Bodo dynasty in Cachar ended in 1832 with the annexation by the British.

The third chapter, introduced by a quotation of the American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) who suggested that '[l]anguage is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow', Narjinari discusses the evolution and classification of the Bodo language. In his view, Bodo is 'one of the oldest languages in India' which precedes Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali, Assamese or Hindi (ibid.: 21). All languages of the Sino-Tibetan family are according to Narjinari derivatives of the "Bodo group". Toponymy as analysed, for instance, by Edward Gait (see above) shows in Narjinari's eyes that the names for landscapes, rivers or towns in the Brahmaputra Valley are sanskritised Bodo words.

On these premises, Narjinari shares the estimation of the missionary James D. Anderson from 1909 that 'some 2000 years ago or more, Bodo peoples must have covered the whole of the Assam Valley' (ibid.: 24). This explains for Narjinari why 'many Assamese verbal roots, compound verbs, formative affixes are of Bodo origin' (ibid.: 25), and he thus urges not to forget 'the hands of Bodo rulers behind the development of Assamese language' (ibid.: 26). Following the "Aryan invasion" (ibid.: 27), the Bodo language almost died out and, until the beginning of the 20th century, was transmitted only orally. However, due to the preserving efforts of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Bodo language could for Narjinari receive the status as a



literary language that is now used as a medium of instruction in schools and enjoys official recognition as an Indian national language.

In chapter four and five, Narjinari states his views on migration flows to Assam and the land alienation Bodos faced since the late colonial period. The coming of farmers from East Bengal is portrayed as a "Muslim invasion" (ibid.: 33) that keeps transpiring due to the permeable India-East Pakistan borders. Relative to the total population in Assam, the number of Bodos decreased during the twentieth century. Narjinari thus rejects criticism against BTC as an inordinate empowerment of a minority group and considers the enhanced political representation it created for the Bodos as justified. 'In their own homeland the Bodos are today marginalised and uprooted' (ibid.: 40). This brings Narjinari to address land alienation. Based on *Our Land and Land Policy* (1871) by the American economist Henry George, land is conceptualised as a 'sacred element in their [the Bodos'] public life [...] [and] the primary source of their sustenance [...]' (ibid.: 42). For Narjinari, the reasons for the land alienation of Bodos are insufficient policies and laws as well as their lax enforcement by the colonial and Indian government. Narjinari concludes that '[t]he Bodos lost control over their ancestral land [...] at the hands of the swarms of foreigners who proclaimed themselves as Assamese', and he links the need to rehabilitate control over land and identity to the present political movement (ibid.: 55).

In chapter six, Narjinari addresses the timeline of Bodo activism in the twentieth century. He assumes that the political consciousness of the Bodos began in the 1920s while the struggle for a Bodo homeland must continue in spite of the creation of BTC in 2003. Chapter seven addresses experiences of oppression and traumatic atrocities with special reference to police raids, murders and gang rapes committed by police officers against Bodo families and individuals since the 1980s. Chapter eight considers the achievements of BTC and concludes that 'socio-economic developmental works have been speedily progressing' (ibid.: 81). Chapter nine examines the constitutional regulations to create a new federal state in India and argues in favour of a separate federal state of Bodoland. Chapter ten discusses the resistance to the Bodo political project from the Assamese Community and groups in the BTAD-area such as the SJSS. Narjinari emphasizes that 'the more they [opponents of the Bodo project] will become aggressive against the Bodos the more the Bodos will become stronger [...] in their assertion' (ibid.: 98).

Narjinari concludes that the Bodo Accord of 2003 started an era of development for the Bodo society. But now the Bodos 'want a full-fledged state in lieu of Territorial Council' (ibid.: 103). Narjinari thus mentions his



support for a new coalition between ABSU, NDFB and a new forum referred to as Bodo National Conference or BNC that already 're-started the demand for a separate state of Bodoland' (ibid.: 102). He is optimistic that this gets achieved. Cases in the history of state formations in India like Uttarkhand or Meghalaya prove to Narjinari that regions carved-out from larger states have a better economic stand. While the "chauvinist Assamese" and several organisations already 'mushroomed to oppose the democratic rights of the Bodos', people in the BTAD-area 'anticipate that goodwill and empathy will prevail upon the Government of India as well as all concerned in fulfilling the long-standing aspirations of the Bodo people' (ibid).

Assertions on Bodo history (2): Why a Bodoland (2015)

Basumatary's work *Why a Bodoland* promises to contain a collection of 'the factors relevant to [...] the demand of the Bodos for a separate state' (ibid.: i). The book cover displays the fictitious political map of an Assam divided into two equally sized portions the northern part of which gets labelled "Bodoland". Above the map, a photograph is depicted of Upendra Nath Brahma, the ABSU-leader during the BM. Basumatary makes clear that his book is an 'extended memorandum to the one submitted by the ABSU under the leadership of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma' (ibid.: i). It partly fulfils the criteria of an academic publication. There is no bibliography, but individual references are cited in the text. The 181 pages of the book are divided into twelve chapters: 1. A Brief History of the Bodos, 2. Bodos Have a Flourishing Language, 3. Bodos Do Have a Strong Society, 4. Rights of the Bodos to Land and Territory, 5. Right of Indigenous Bodos as Declared by UNO, 6. The SC and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, 7. Assam Accord of 1985 Caused Irreparable Losses to the Bodos, 8. Perspectives of the Bodos, 9. India is a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic, 10. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 11. Grounds for Creation of a Separate State for Bodos, and 12. Proposal for Creation of Bodoland.

The first and by far longest chapter (74 pages) addresses the general history of the Bodos. In contrast to Narjinari, Basumatary does not organise his account around clear entities but associatively relates in 22 subchapters to kings, dynastic changes, peoples and social developments.

Basumatary first stresses the importance of ethnic against etymological evidence based on the history of the "Bodo-Bhaumas". The populations under the Bodo-Bhauma dynasties can for him be called Kiratas or Cinas. Both terms denote the 'ancestors of the present Bodos' who are since the Middle Ages known as Meches or Koches and were 'identified with different



nomenclatures' in ancient Indian literatures (ibid.: 6). In his eyes, they became dispersed by the invasion of the Ahom people in the thirteenth century and exist today in the form of "branches" like Dimasas, Kacharis, Garos or Chutiyas (ibid.: 5-6). What these groups have in common is their original link to the "Mongoloids of Central Asia" (ibid.: 8). The basis for this claim is the colonial monograph *Bengal and Assam, Behar and Orissa - Their History, People, Commerce, and Industrial Resources* (1917) by S. Playne. For Basumatary, the ancient kingdoms in present-day Bangladesh also relate to these Mongoloids (ibid.: 11). He thus suggests that the people in Bangladesh owe their origin to the Bodos. Based on the chronicle of the Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang, the ancient Bodo-Bhaumas have according to Basumatary been in power since 22,350 BCE.

The twelfth century saw a new succession under the name "Kamatapur" (ibid.: 8-9). In Basumatary's estimation, this dynasty was in part ruled by the Deva family. Based inter alia on the Mahabharata and the works *India: A Short Cultural History* (1937) by H.G. Rawlinson, *A History of Assam* by E. Gait and *Cultural Creation and Pro-Creation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Practice* (2001) by Monika Böck and Aparna Rao, Basumatary suggests 'the facts put together would irresistibly suggest that the great Bodo race [...] constituted the Deva family as well' (ibid.: 20).

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After 1257, the Deva rule was followed by the dynasty of the "Bodo-Rais" of Kamatapur (ibid.: 28). This is based on observations of the historian and folklorist Imam Xin Chemjong (1904-75), the Nepalese anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista (born in 1928) and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. This dynasty was eventually defeated by the Moghul troops who themselves 'originated from the admixture of Kiratas [...]' (ibid.: 50). The source base for this claim includes W.W. Hunter's *Statistical Account of Cooch Behar* (1876) and skull measurements mentioned in Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*.

The final Bodo rule materialised for Basumatary in the form of the Koch-Bihar Kingdom. This dynasty and its people were "semi-Hinduised Bodos" (ibid.: 52). This claim gets based on B.H. Hodgson's *On the Aborigines of India: Essay the first, on the Kocch, Bódo, and Dhimál Tribes* (1847). Basumatary concludes his extensive historical chapter by invoking that the "Bodo-Kacharis" originally emerged in Tibet and China. He stresses that archaeology in Assam reveals early Bodo rules that until the twelfth century had been beyond the influence of Brahmanic Hindu cultures.

In chapter two, Basumatary classifies and historicises the language of the Bodos. In his view, Bodo belongs to the Tibeto-Burman languages. The Tibeto-Burman "Mongoloids" are 'thousands of years before [...] believed to



have spoken a single language' (ibid.: 76) from which then developed new languages such as Pali. In this regard, Basumatary claims that as 'Sanskrit owes its origin to Pali' and 'the Bodo language has a close affinity to Pali', it can be ascertained that the 'Bodo language also has an affinity to Sanskrit' (ibid.: 84). He illustrates this by juxtaposing vocabularies in a table. Basumatary stresses that under the "Kirata" or "Bodo Gupta" kings the principles of Buddhism have been spread in Pali. The Bodos thus laid the 'foundation stone of Indian literature' and their contribution to Indian civilisation 'is the most remarkable' (ibid.: 76-7). Basumatary also asserts that 'beyond any shadow of doubt that the Bodo kings were the architects of Axomia [Assamese], Bengali, and Oriya language [...] (ibid.: 89).

In the following chapters, Basumatary reflects presented historical and linguistic results, assembles legal material in support of the creation of a Bodoland state in India and highlights violations against the Bodos' right to self-determination. Chapter four, for instance, states the territorial rights within the Chapter X-amendment from 1947 in the ALRRA of 1886. Chapter five cites the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Chapter six recalls the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 and accuses the government of not enforcing it. Chapter seven criticises the Assam Accord of 1985 as ineffective. In chapter eight, Basumatary invokes the example of Uttarakhand and other states to prove that small federal states carved-out from bigger states can be economically successful and, thus, that a separate state of Bodoland constitutes a perspective for peace and development (ibid.: 145).

Chapter nine criticises that the Bodo society is 'left to exist with the label of scheduled tribe' (ibid.: 147) and, therefore, cannot take part in India's economic development. Chapter ten recalls the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In chapter eleven, Basumatary reflects the justification of a separate federal state of Bodoland and concludes that the 'BTAD needs to be reinforced' (ibid.: 175). In the last chapter, the author makes a concrete proposal for its creation in terms of areal size and points to both economic and cultural advantages and the legal viability within India.

Bodo history and its production: a case of New History activism

The methods

Looking at the methodologies in the history chapters of *Why a Bodoland* and *The Saga of the Bodos*, it gets apparent that the methods and sources used and the way in which they are assembled are typical modi operandi of New Historians. First, Bodo ancestries are overwhelmingly supported by



etymology and lexical similarities. That these linguistic methods relate to practices of New Historians and not to historical fantasies gets clear from the fact that though the applications of linguistic tools and conclusions drawn therefrom are problematic, the tools themselves are scholarly. Moreover, the ways in which arguments are developed are text-immanently systematic and deductions are made transparent to the readers. This suggests that we are dealing with a type of history that is neither scholarly, nor mythological or fake but "new".

Second, apart from extensive references to the Mahabharata, the source base of *The Saga of the Bodos* and *Why a Bodoland* overwhelmingly consists of outdated Indian and Western colonial scholarship, missionary publications and colonial censuses. Salient exceptions are Basumatary's reference *Cultural Creation and Pro-Creation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Practice* (2001) by Monika Böck and Aparna Rao and the travelogue of the pilgrim Hieun Tsang from China that is central in both monographs. This is not surprising in view of the outdated colonial and missionary history books that circulate(d) in the region. In the Bodo context, a referencing to studies like that is also contingent on the gratitude felt towards Sidney Endle and B.H. Hodgson as recognisers and way pavers of the Bodo national identity (see e.g. Narzary 2011, Boro 2010, Brahma 2013).

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However, practices of utilising such a source base do not only take place in the South Asian context but may point to a global phenomenon. Also, in the case of New History in Kyrgyzstan, as mentioned above, the 'predilection' for outdated Western sources is identified as a major characteristic (Jacquesson 2018: 217). The rather surprising (however indirect) reference *Völkerstämme am Bramaputra* (1883) by the German orientalist Adolf Bastian, moreover, alludes to a selective consideration of outdated sources from varying cultural and linguistic contexts. Narjinari indicated to me his interest in the German thought world (Narjinari 2021). Like New Historians in the Kyrgyz context, Narjinari operates blogs and takes part in online discussion forums on Bodo history. It is not far to seek that the ideas exchanged on these platforms could be nourished by a transtemporal, transcultural and multilingual source base that forms part of a peripheral but global digital network to produce "new" historical knowledges.

Third, as suggested by its sources, Bodo historiography is deeply embedded in Orientalist race-language fallacies, colonial race research and British colonial derogatory terminology. As a result, the flexible use of ethnic and linguistic evidence and categories enables Bodo historians to produce and indirectly suggest impressive pedigrees. For instance, both authors deem



it valid to use etymology and lexical congruences or ethnic attributions or both to support the existence of historical lineages. If one contradicts the other, the positive evidence gets considered valid. Simultaneously, other groups are given ethnic attributions like "Mongoloids" or "Kiratas" in order to suggest an even more copious Bodo-descendancy like in the case of Narjinari who speaks of the "Mongoloid Ahoms". The referencing to colonial race research like Basumatary's citing of 'skull measurements' from Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* is seen as unproblematic. Colonial terms such as "waste land" are used uncritically. However, the development of arguments through these anachronistic methodologies and the origin of the used information are transparent. In *The Saga of the Bodos*, assertions are even substantiated in footnotes and in a bibliography. This further substantiates the novelty of the historical knowledge produced in Bodo society.

The Contents

Like Jacquesson's Kyrgyzstani samples of New History, the monographs *The Saga of the Bodos* and *Why a Bodoland* suggest the entanglement of Bodo New History with ethnic nationalism. Bodo historians are through their methodologies and Orientalist justificatory structures, and with the help of adding Bodo-prefixes to places and peoples, able to invoke sophisticated genealogies of kings, languages, peoples and dynasties as supposedly age-old Bodo precursors. This gets done in the style of Bankimchandra's ethnic nationalism embedded in an objective history of a people that must be unearthed through political activism. By way of these practices, Narjinari and Basumatary manage to connect an outstanding number of rules and civilisations to the modern political and linguistic category of Bodo. Perhaps the most reckless claims in this regard are Basumatary's ideas that the Bodos are the ancestors of Bangladeshis, that Sanskrit originated in the Bodo language and that Indian civilisation and literature go back to an ancient Bodo nation.

While ethnic nationalism or the nation as a pronounced lens in history-writing is not a new phenomenon in suggestive histories and equally appears in a mitigated form in established, professional or academic historiographies, the newness of this kind of ethnic nationalism lies, as Jacquesson outlines, in the extensive and translocal ways in which their agents imagine links to distant people, places and times. These may relate to 'faraway civilisations and empires, world-renowned cultural monuments, or the past of contemporary powerful states' (Jacquesson 2018: 218). Examples of translocal imaginations by Bodo historians are: the idea of the Chinese-



Mongoloid or Turko-Mongoloid origin of the Bodos; Bodo language as the perceived origin of Sanskrit; the subsuming of Indian civilisations, languages and Mahabharata dynasties under the Bodo national framework; the denotation of other groups in present-day India like Tripuris or Dimasas as "branches" of the "Bodo group"; and the ambitious claim that there had been a "Bodo-Bhauma-Dynasty" in Assam since 22,350 BCE.

Actors and networks

The third peculiarity of New History practices is the multitude of the social backgrounds of the involved authors and, thus, the unexpectedness of the networks producing as well as professions or expertise nurturing New History products. Based on the present cases that only relate to two historical agents, I cannot make substantiated claims about the actors and networks behind contemporary Bodo historiography. But the following observations reinforce the assumption that the actors and networks of Bodo history relate to the terms of New History. Hira Charan Narjinari and Bakul Chandra Basumatary were both involved in the Bodoland Movement. While Basumatary worked as a legal advisor for a bank, Narjinari has a university degree in History and Theology and, since then, worked as a civil servant until retirement. Hence both authors are not established historiographers, though their professional backgrounds indicate a belonging to the Bodo intelligentsia. The monographs of *Why a Bodoland* and *The Saga of the Bodos* are clearly influenced by the authors' backgrounds. While Basumatary provides a constitutional and legal outlook for the Bodoland project, Narjinari is a skilled writer and presents his history for the Bodos in an academic or scientific form. Together with other agents of history, both authors did take part in the organisation of new networks and platforms like the World Bodo Historical Society.

Thinking together activism and New History in the Bodo context

The analysis of the assertions of two Bodo historians has demonstrated the how, the what and the who behind practices of Bodo historiography. Based on that, the following discussion focuses on how Bodo activism and New History can jointly be conceptualised through the concept and the methodology of chronicling activism/activating histories.

The Saga of the Bodos is presented as a scholarly book on Bodo history. *Why a Bodoland*, in contrast, is marked as a political book. Structures and contents of the two monographs, however, are strikingly similar. Both books begin with an elaborate illumination of pre-colonial Bodo history and



a treatise on the Bodo language through the ages. This is followed by a rather abrupt addressing of contemporary Bodo politics either traced since its emergence in 1920 (Narjinari) or directly connected to the demand for a separate of Bodoland (Basumatary). This similarity, as I suggest, is explained by the fact that both authors relate to the same Bodo ethnic-national narrative which is the story of the Bodo's struggle and quest for political and historical recognition.

In this view, the tags "memorandum" and "history book" in relation to the nearly indistinctive contents generate an ambiguous tension between past and present, history and politics. This tension suggests that activism and historiography are linked through the similar way in which they inform a Bodo national framework in the making. The covers of the books suggest a further twist of this tension. While the history book *The Saga of the Bodos* is connected to political struggles by showing a recent protest, the cover of the memorandum *Why a Bodoland* links the book to a legacy of struggles by depicting the historical figure and martyr of Upendra Nath Brahma who passed away during the Bodoland Movement.

In the chapters four to eight of *The Saga of the Bodos*, Narjinari addresses the contemporary history of the Bodos since 1920. These chapters, as I argue, can be invoked as a case of chronicling activism in the first sense (doing history by way of taking account of activism or political events). In the chapters four and five, Narjinari takes the migration of farmers from East Bengal to Assam and amendments of the ALRRA since the late colonial era as the history of the Bodos' loss of control over the "ancestral land". In the chapters six to eight, the social history of the Bodos since 1920 then figures in the form of a timeline of political movements and party-politics on one side and the atrocities experienced in the twentieth century on the other with the achievement of BTC as constituting the conclusion of the historical trajectory. In these ways, Narjinari manages to generate a chronicle structured around activism and political events which becomes "the" history of the Bodo people. In this relation, activism provides the content of historiography.

Second, the preface, conclusion and chapters eight to ten in *The Saga of the Bodos* as well as the preface and chapters three, eight, eleven and twelve in *Why a Bodoland* exemplify chronicling activism in the second sense (repercussions provoked by activism during or after which activists historically recollect achievements and predict futures). In these parts, the authors reflect their historicity in the present and the prospects of the political project of Bodoland in the future. This creates the impression that



the authors themselves are presently—by way of writing history—in situations of activism. While Narjinari praises the achievements of the Bodo project and is optimistic that the realisation of a 'full-fledged state in lieu of Territorial Council' (Narjinari 2014a: 103) is only a matter of time, Basumatary is more reserved about the prospect of Bodoland but highlights that the Bodos deserve a federal state on the basis of history. This demonstrates a relation between activism and historiography whereby moments of activism constitute reflections on history in order to make assessments about the future.

Furthermore, text passages in *The Saga of the Bodos* and *Why a Bodoland* suggest that Bodo history is consciously deployed by the authors as a resource and considered as a prerequisite in movements. This indicates a case of activating history in the first sense (the making-deployable or useable of histories as resources for the support of activism). By asserting that history is 'a factor in the life and work of a nation', Narjinari makes clear that he is aware of both the value of the past as a national resource and his practice of creating the same (2014a: vii-viii). Similarly, by way of stressing that the Bodos 'possess a strong historical and linguistic background' needed to obtain a separate state, Basumatary conveys that he connects the writing of his book to the preparation of a national resource and a coherent past as a key asset in political struggles (2015: 96). In this relation of activism and historiography, *The Saga of the Bodos* and *Why a Bodoland* constitute histories that are consciously written and compiled as means required for the conducting of activism.

Finally, both monographs exhibit features of a genre of history-writing behind which is not only a practice of deploying history as an authentic resource but whose authors actively invite readers to become aware of their history and to take part in activism. This speaks to the second semantical level of activating history (political history-writing dedicated to "activate" readers and create awareness to start movements or bring about political change). Relating to the effigy-burning incident, Narjinari makes no bone about his perceived ignorance of Bodo politicians. The assertion of a BLT-official who 'rejects the importance of history' has encouraged Narjinari to put on paper the Bodo's history in order to create an awareness about the national past as a moral compass (2014a: ii). This gets considered as a contribution to and invitation to join the demand for a separate Bodoland by ABSU, NDFB and BNC-coalition (ibid.: 102). Basumatary, on the other hand, makes the concrete demand that 'BTAD needs to be reinforced' (2015: 175) based on the history of the Bodos. This alludes to a relation



between activism and historiography whereby the historians themselves become activists and design their works to encourage participation in movements and/or create an awareness about the past.

On these bases, I argue that Bodo activism and New History are linked through the prism of the national. Within this existential and dynamic framework of an emerging national identity, doing history and doing activism coalesce whereby past and present, history and politics become almost interchangeable. The ways in which the authors conceptualise their positions and practices as activists and historians may exemplify how actors in the Bodo society negotiate historical time and the prospects of political struggle within present day India.

Conclusion

I historically situated and analysed Bodo history and its activist production through the lens of three mutually intertwined conceptual angles: historical authenticity (Christophe et al. 2019), New History (Jacquesson 2018) and the concept and methodology of chronicling activism/activating histories. The source base to exemplify the present-day practice of Bodo history and its entanglement with activism were the history book *The Saga of the Bodos* (2014a) by Hira Charan Narjinari and the political memorandum *Why a Bodoland* (2015) by Bakul Chandra Basumatary.

The findings suggest that through the orientalist and nationalist premises of history-writing within the conditions of late colonialism in India, Bodo history emerged as an existential communal resource that had the function to provide the disenfranchised members of the Bodo national identity with an authentic history. Early Bodo agents like the spiritual leader and businessman Kalicharan Brahma or the writer and social activist Rupnath Brahma fabricated the political idea of Bodo before 1920 in Goalpara, the Western fringe of colonial Assam, and consolidated its use as a national term during the 1920ies through public functions and literary movements. Among the available categories for these agents to create the Bodo nationality within a region hitherto characterised by mobility and fluid social categories were the idea of Bara Race that had been promoted by the Christian missionary Sidney Endle and the linguistic term Bodo drawn from the colonial ethnographer B.H. Hodgson.

Within the borders of the province of Assam that was formed in 1874, the philological, national and historical assertions of the Bodo people had similarities with the body of Assamese national historiography and the



politics of reinvention in the Goalpara region whose 'fractured administrative history' (Misra 2011: 1) had been completely ignored by the historians of the Assamese intelligentsia. I demonstrated these overlaps by the use of the borrowed authenticity claim about the allegedly age-old ethnicised nation that transcends historical times and dynastic changes. This kind of claim made appearances in Assamese historiography but was also deployed by the Kachari Jubak Sanmilan (KJS) in a petition to the Simon Commission from 1928 to highlight the Bodos' 'exalted position in history' (Narzary 2011: 23). Another claim of historical authenticity like that from the late colonial era is Edward Gait's panoramic idea about the 'wide extent and long duration of Bodo domination' that continues to circulate as an image of the past in contemporary Bodo society and was also deployed by the Bodo New Historian Hira Charan Narjinari (Gait 2013: 6-7).

For the continued analysis of the historical trajectory of Bodo history, I hypothesised the petition of the KJS from 1928, perhaps one of the earliest instances of Bodo historical activism, as the beginning of the consecutive dynamics between Bodo activism and historiography which permeate the underlying premises of my study. Owing to the lack of accessible primary sources from the related times, my analysis illustrated rather than demonstrated that, in the course of the twentieth century, agents of Bodo history were able to defend the historical space behind the Bodo national identity and develop the growing body of that knowledge into a regional Indian history. The mutually constitutive cases of chronicling activism/activating histories which I discussed were "plains tribal"-activisms and the activities of the PTCA in postcolonial Assam, the cultural production and protest culture of the networks behind the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the emergence and role of politicised student unions in the 1960s, the Bodoland Movement and its forms of protest as well as the political achievements of the Bodo Accords of 1993, 2003 and 2020.

These cases demonstrated the significant extent to which Bodo history is historically related to activism. During the evolution of the Bodo identity, activism and historiography were not only connected but inextricably interlaced given that the functionality of the authenticity of Bodo history had possible or actual consequences for existential political improvements or drawbacks and vice versa. For instance, Charan Narzary pointed out that the PTCA movement, irrespective of its success within the formal political structures of the Indian nation state, 'created its own history' and thus managed to produce valuable historical content (2011: 192). At the same time, the achievements of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in the fields of language,



literature and education, periodised by the Bodo poet and writer Brajendra Kumar Brahma in 1991, produced a field of knowledge which, for example, legitimised the demand to upgrade the Bodo language to a national Indian language in 2003, while the BSS itself had often become the nucleus of agitations like in 1974 during the Roman Script Movement.

Likewise, the violent and controversial Bodoland Movement with its diverse forms of protest helped to create the historical terms and political conditionalities for future claims about a separate state of Bodoland and to achieve the Bodo Accords which made the Bodos known beyond the borders of Assam. Cases like that suggest that in the face of political and social survival, activism and historiography cannot clearly be separated given that in moments of lacking resources, actions and assertions assume a multiplicity of functions.

The close analysis of the two monographs based on the framework of New History could show how the body of works that emerged from the conflation of Bodo activism and historiography relates to the terms of New History. Like the New Historians in the Kyrgyz context studied by Svetlana Jacquesson, Bodo New Historians use partly anachronistic scholarly tools and sources to make claims on the past. Their methods include etymology, lexical congruences, genealogies, but also colonial race research and race-language models. Apart from the Mahabharata epics, the sources of Bodo history overwhelmingly consist of late colonial studies in English. There are a few exceptions like *Völkerstämme am Brahmaputra* (1883) by the German orientalist Adolf Bastian or *Cultural Creation and Pro-Creation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Practices* (2001) by Monika Böck and Aparno Rao which suggest the glimmering through of a translocal and multilingual source base. These methodologies are controversial or even problematic but made transparent to the readers which strongly differentiates Bodo history from "wrong" or "fake" history.

Second, informed by the source base, Bodo history is an initiative of ethnic nationalism which draws on a selection of beneficial orientalist and colonial categories. Enormous linguistic and ethnic pedigrees that stretch as far as Mongolia or China and that are structured around various royal successions as well as kings, dynasties and peoples prefixed with "Bodo-" are invoked to either argue (Basumatary) or indirectly suggest (Narjinari) that the achievements of the Bodo nation constitute the fundament of Indian literature, civilisation and languages. In these cases, the "newness"



of Bodo ethnic nationalism compared to other nationalisms lies in the trans-local practice of imagining links to distant times, places and peoples subsumed in daring ways under the own national framework.

Third, the analysis of the actors and networks suggested that Bodo history is based on a network of educated individuals from diverse backgrounds who create a distinct knowledge base and found their own historical organisations and platforms such as the World Bodo Historical Society. As it is common among New Historians, none of the discussed authors is a professional historian from an official research institution. Hira Charan Narjinari is a former civil servant who holds a bachelor's degree in history while Hira Charan Narjinari was a lawyer and legal advisor. Both of the analysed monographs are clearly influenced by the vocational and educational backgrounds of the authors.

The final analysis demonstrated the intricacies of the relations between activism and historiography as reflected in the structures and the contents of *The Saga of the Bodos* and *Why a Bodoland*. This suggested that within Bodo New History, politics and history (and thus the categories of the memorandum and the history book) become almost interchangeable. Through the prism of the national, they both eventually take the form of the timeline and "contemporary history" of the Bodo national project and its demand for a separate Bodoland. As part of the concept of chronicling activism/activating histories, I suggested four relations between activism and historiography expressed in the practice of Bodo New History: activism as the content of historiography, activism as moments of reflections on pasts and futures, the conscious processing of history into a resource for activism and historians as activists who encourage readers to participate in social movements.

Many new questions came up while writing this essay, for instance: how can the assertions of New Historians be integrated into larger debates about the past and its practices? The presented results suggest that New History both in the Bodo context and elsewhere needs to be taken seriously as an idiosyncratic and valuable expression of the past.

Endnotes

¹ The term "historical space" in relation to history-writing in South Asia was drawn from Chatterjee (2002).



² Based on Wiktorowicz's (2004) notion of "Islamic Activism" and the definition of "Social Movement" by Rucht (2017), I define Bodo activism in this work as the mobilisation of contention to support Bodo causes as part of a network of individuals, groups and organisations based on the sense of a collective Bodo national identity.

³ I owe the basis to develop this theoretical angle to the productive debates in the research group "Representations of the Past" at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) and to the conceptual frames of "mobile histories" and "activated memories" developed by Saadi Norman Nikro for our internal workshop held at ZMO in November 2020.

⁴ The whole quotation goes as follows: 'The wide extend and long duration of Bodo domination is shown by the frequent occurrence of the prefix di or ti, the Bodo word for water, in the river names of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining country to the West, e.g. Dibru, Dikhu, Dihing, Dihong, Dibong, Disang, Diphang, Dimla etc.' (Gait 2013: 6-7). For details about the criteria of the associated field research, see Vantard (2017).

⁵ The book this quote is taken from and which I refer to in this work several times is a personal reflection of the author's involvement in the Udayachal movement, not an academic monograph. I use it to illustrate dynamics of Bodo historical activism. To sufficiently address these developments, on-site archival work is needed.

⁶ A third Bodo Accord signed on 27 January 2020 augmented the legislative, executive and administrative rights of the Bodos and renamed the BTAD area Bodoland Territorial Region alias BTR (Government of India et al. 2020).

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