Power Relations In Bodo Social Practices: An Analysis With Reference To Foucault’s Conception of Power

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Abstract: The Bodos constitute a very important section of the various races and ethnic groups of Assam, India, with their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits. They are considered to be the earliest settler among the various ethnic groups of Assam and they have contributed immensely to the growth of the society and culture of Assam through the ages. In their everyday life Bodos live in constant interaction with each other as they live in traditionally build community with the aim of promoting common goals of their society and thus one can witness various kinds of power relationship among them. An analysis of power relations among Bodos in view of Foucault’s notion of power will help us to more broadly realize the positive aspects of the social practices of the Bodos that are not hindering the human freedom. Thus, the objective of this paper is to gain insight of the productive aspect of power in the power relations among the individuals of the Bodos in their everyday social affairs and thereby affirming Foucault’s notion of power that is ‘power is productive’.

Key Words: Bodos, social practices, Foucault’s notion of power, power relations, coercion, productivity, community, individuals.

Introduction

Power relations in human society is intrinsically woven in every human interaction whether between equals or leaders and ordinary people as each word or even most of the human actions affect the other to her/him in the society. In each society, there exists some kind of hierarchy of power structure which may be directly visible and often invisible, but, affecting the lives of people. The analysis of such power relations among the Bodos in their social practices will richly enlighten us to understand the way power works and more specifically it will project the harmonious and peaceful co-existence of Bodos in the midst of other tribes and this will ultimately conform Foucault’s conception of power. For Foucault, power cannot be solely characterised as coercive or oppressive, instead it is also productive that promotes life, nor does it flow from above towards the least powerful in the community instead it is in every individual and thus come from everywhere. Analysing the power relations among the Bodos with reference to Foucault’s conception of power will ultimately show that Bodos respect freedom of each individual in their society and each one’s opinion is taken into consideration which gives rise to equal and fraternal feeling among everyone.

Bodos and Their Social Practices: A Brief Note

The Boros or Bodo-Kocharis are one of the indigenous tribes of the Northeast India. (Brahma). They racially belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Mongoloid or Indo-Tibetans family. (Boro). Sydney Endle, a Christian missionary, who worked among the Bodos more than 40 years during the British reign, described them as square set faces, projecting cheek-bones, with almond-shaped eyes, and with scanty beard and moustache (Endle). Mathias Hermans affirms the Mongoloid features of the Bodos and highlights their strong cheek-bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair on the body, scanty beard, shorter and stockier than the Indians of Northeast (Boro). Furthermore, Sydney Endle portrays Bodos as clannish being in community spirit. They have a certain strength of will by which they are ready to act upon any community decision. This peculiar character is evident in Endle’s remark: “If they once make up their minds, and they are abundantly capable of doing this, to act in a certain way, it is mere waste of time to attempt to reason them out of their resolution, for nothing short of absolute and overpowering physical force is of any avail to turn them from the course they have once for all resolved to adopt and act upon” (Endle).
He also attributed some simple virtues of great price found among the Bodos namely, honesty, truthfulness, straightforwardness and general trustworthiness (Endle).

The opinion regarding the origin of the Bodos differs. “The origin of Bodo-Kocharis is a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history”, says Sydney Endle. He, basing on the physical features, points to Tibet and China as their original homeland. (Endle). For some other scholars the Bodos are Tibeto-Burman origin and belong to the Tibetan-Chinese language stock (Prakash). On the other hand, R. M. Nath, in his essay The Background of Assamese Culture tells that the Bodos migrated from the land called Bod, the homeland situated in north of the Himalayas and the west of China. The inhabitants of various parts of the Bod country were known as Boddo-Cha (Ficha – cha means children) or Children of the Bod country. Later, they were simply known as Boddo or Bodo (Nath).

They are now scattered all over Assam, North and East Bengal and in some parts of Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. A few of them are also found in Burma, Bangladesh, Sikkim and Bhutan (Sen). The majority are found in the bank of Brahmaputra. They have their own culture, customs, language and religion which give them separate identity from the other neighbouring inhabitants (Brahma).

The Bodos have very rich and multifaceted culture. Their cultural traits are displayed in diverse ways especially in building houses, religious worship, rites and rituals, various ceremonies, seasonal and agricultural festivals, handicrafts, food habits, handloom, dresses, art and sculpture etc. (Boro).

The Bodo men and women are fond of hunting and fishing. The art of hunting and fishing displays their community spirit and unity. The art of weaving is a special skill of the Bodo women. They rear silk-cocoon and spin fine yearn out of them and make lustrous cloth, dye with blue, red, yellow pigments.

The Bodos observe some rites and rituals relating to the life cycle (birth, marriage and death) (K. Brahma). The fair and festivals, songs and dances are other aspects of cultural life. These traditional practices and merrymaking help them to keep away from the worries of hardships, struggles, trials and tribulations of life. These festivals and songs highlight the integrated and balanced life of the Bodo people. (Mosahary). The main festivals are Baicagu, Domaci, Katigaca, and Anthicia. In addition to these, they have two major religious festivals namely Kherat and Garja that are socio-religious in nature. (Boro).

The Bodo society is patriarchal. The Father of the family is the head and the guardian. After the death of father, the eldest son has the responsibility to assume the role of his father. He runs the family in consultation with his mother. The property of the family is equally distributed among the sons. Generally, daughters do not have any right to possess the father’s property. But in some cases it is seen that the daughters also own their father’s possessions. This is found in the absence of male child and in the case of rich family (K. Brahma).

The family system is a kind of joined family which is called ‘Nokhor’. Every member has an equal right within the family circle. A son is free to leave the joined family and live separately with his wife and children even during the life time of his father.

In the olden days they had two important social institutions such as ‘Hadengoura’ (Institution that has a jurisdiction over twelve adjoining villages) and ‘Hachung-goura’ (a subordinate institution established in each village to help the Hadengoura). At present there is a common institution in every Bodo village which is called ‘Gamini Raijw’ (village council) headed by ‘Gaobura’ (village headman) and assisted by ‘Halmazi’ who perform the social duties of the village (Sen). One of the distinct characteristics of the Bodo society is a cooperative relationship between individual and community. It is a collective effort of individual member of a village to meet social and economic hardships of fellow villagers. This traditional practice or mutual help system involves a community labour, offered on a voluntary basis by the co-villagers, to execute a major individual endeavour, such as constructing a house, harvesting of crops, erecting granaries etc. This system of mutual help is called ‘chauri’. In cases of minor works at home, one can also ask the help of some persons for a day, which involves in providing meal and rice bear. Another system is known as ‘gatha’ or ‘chaori-bodol’ where each family in turn, renders a cooperative service to each other when major work arises with regard to cultivation and harvesting. In such cases no meal and rice bear will be supplied for the individual who rendered a service on mutual support (Prakash).

The economic life is mainly based on agriculture (Das). Their agricultural expertise had been praised by the British officials and American missionaries who worked among them during the early nineteenth century. Capt. Butler described the Bodos as the best cultivators in his sketch of Assam. Along with agriculture another related economic source was animal husbandry as a natural
propensity, specially rearing pigs and fowls. The second most important economic life is the special art of women to rear silk worm and draw silk threads from the cocoon. The women produce various types of cotton clothes.

Bodos have a common granary system in every village which sustains their economic life in the crisis period. It is a practice of raising a common granary in the village by individuals, contributing certain amount of grain voluntarily just after the harvest. Any family in crisis period is lent the necessary amount of help from this emergency holding granary at a normal rate of interest. This practice helps them to sustain each other in economic life (Prakash).

Michel Foucault on the Notion of Power

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is probably the most discussed philosopher in the province of poststructuralism and postmodernism. The focus of Foucault’s investigation is ‘power’. It is his conviction that power is the principle of development and integration within our society (Fink-Eitel). He has contributed enormously in shaping the understandings of power that have projected power not as an instrument of oppression, repression, domination, coercion and so on, but rather productive and more efficiently accelerating the progressive aspect in each society that promote human development. Foucault’s conception of power also has made the idea of power as manifest everywhere. According to him, “power is everywhere, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and regimes of truth” (Rabinow). Power was conceived in the sense of coercion, oppression etc. before Foucault, but his works made radical departure from the earlier notion of power and he projected it in such a way that, it cannot be compromised with the past idea of power. The previous modes of conceiving power cannot be integrated with Foucault’s notion of power, because power is diffused rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them (Gaventa, Power After Lukes: A Review of the Literature).

Power is not confined to a few vested group of people who may be considered as authorized to wield power by way of sovereign acts of domination or repression, instead power is pervasive according to Foucault. Since power is everywhere, no single individual or organization can claim to possess it exclusively in any circumstance within or outside the sphere of one’s own. This implies that power is not a property, possession or privilege. Power is not simply what the dominant class has and the oppressed lack. Power, Foucault prefers to say, is a strategy, and the dominated are as much a part of the network of power relations and the particular social matrix as the dominating. As a complex strategy spread throughout the social system in a capillary fashion, power is never manifested globally, but only at local points as micro-powers. Power is not something located in and symbolized by the sovereign, but permeates society in such a way that taking over the state apparatus does not in itself change the power network (Foucault).

Power is a kind of regime of truth that pervades society and its structure which is in constant change as a dynamic response to contextual demand for negotiation. Power cannot be derived arbitrarily instead a genuine source must be accounted for which is based on scientific understanding, truth and knowledge, hence, Foucault technically uses the term power/knowledge. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth, that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (M. Foucault).

Power and truth are related to each other in a circular manner which shows that both are generating and regenerating each other. Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which it extends– a regime of truth (M. Foucault).

Foucault is of the opinion that power is not just a negative thing that controls over life and forces us to do things in violation of our freedom in a coerced manner. Instead power is positive and productive element that can enforce goodness in every society. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (M. Foucault).

Foucault also remarks that power is disciplinary by its very nature because punishment in prisons,
schools or other institutions are no longer act of domination. As he projected a productive notion of power unlike the coercive notion of power that was exercised sovereignly by monarchs and autocrats, power is viewed as disciplinary that can be found in contemporary administrative systems and social organizations. Disciplinary power can be seen in prisons, schools and mental hospitals in which systems of surveillance and assessment no longer require force or violence since people have learnt by themselves to be disciplined. For example, Disciplinary punishment gives professionals like parole officers power over the prisoner and the judgment lies within the professionals. He argues that with the right discipline people will inevitably discipline themselves (Gaventa, Power After Lukes: A Review of the Literature). Disciplinary technology and the emergence of the disciplines are co-extensive. Their interaction gives rise to new knowledge of the individual and the possibility of novel ways. Thus, power can be viewed as the major source of disciplinary actions in society.

Foucault’s concept of power transcends politics and sees power as an everyday, socialized and embodied phenomenon occurring in each society. According to him, to challenge power is to challenge oneself, because power is no longer the external social influence that opposes our autonomy, but the force that is continuous with concrete human existence and social life.

Foucault remarks that knowledge and power are interrelated. Knowledge and power enforce one another in everyday life of human society and thus they are in a sense dependent on each other. A power exercised without knowledge is just a blind domination over other. Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (Foucault).

This short discussion about Foucault’s notion of power initiates us into new type of understanding of power, which is productive in nature unlike previous power conception which is seen to be coercive, although it cannot give us exhaustive information regarding what Foucault meant as power. In the following as we engage ourselves into the explanation of power relations among the Bodos in their everyday social activities in reference to Foucauld’s notion of power, our knowledge regarding power in the way Foucault meant will be more widely enhanced even while our main goal in this paper is to shed light in power relations among Bodos.

Analysis of Power Relations in Bodo Society in View of Foucauld’s Notion of Power

From the above discussion we can be aware regarding the concept of power existent in everyday social life as has been remarked by Foucault unlike the earlier notions of power. In view of Foucault’s conception of power an introspective analysis can be made into the power relations that can be observed in social practices among the Bodos. With the few social practices of Bodos as mentioned above one cannot exhaustively say that Bodo social practices are confined only around them. Nonetheless for the sake of our discussion a few have been mentioned with particular consideration.

While a specific mention is made as power relation among a particular group of people, the immediate knowledge cognized may be that one dominates or the leader in a group unquestionably enforces his/her own will upon the other and the other is bound/forced to respond positively to leader’s wishes. Such an assumption will be wrong if we try to apply the same notion on the power relations existent in Bodo social practices. Freedom of people is maintained among Bodos. For example, it is true that father is the head in a Bodo family being patrilineal society, but, power is exercised by mother, and children too in decision making. Sidney Endle rightly remarks: “Among the Kacharis (Bodos), women do not perhaps occupy quite the same influential position as seems to be enjoyed by their sisters in the Khasi Hills, where something like a matriarchate apparently holds the field of social and domestic life. Still with this interesting race the position of the wife and mother is far from being a degraded one. The Kachari (Bodo) husband … usually treats his wife with distinct respect and regards her as an equal and a companion to an extent which can hardly be said to be the rule among many of the Indian people. Kachari ivoinen, both in early life and as matrons, enjoy a large measure of freedom” (Endle, The Kacharis).

In all the family as well as community affairs of the Bodo society intrinsically circular form of exercise of power can be witnessed. Power is not seen to be flowing from the most powerful to the least powerful, instead each one has a role to play while fulfilling the social tasks. Father’s opinion may be enforced and respected in the family even if his opinion may seem oppressive in nature apparently, but the entire family sees the intrinsically existent constructive element that is something positive for the growth of the family. The silent observance of father’s opinion in a certain matter by other family
members is not the sign of cowardice on the part of family members nor the coercion on the part of father, instead, each one is exercising their freedom for common interest. Such an approach is profoundly circular, precisely because the subject (father) is not free in relation to the power system. This fact is very much the integral part of Foucault’s explanation of power relations. Power only exists in circulation as it produces local effects, inducing the formation of particular knowledge that in turn constitute a range of possible responses. Every specific individual occupies various positions in networks of power: mother, brother, father, sister, lover, friend, teacher, employee, student, employer and so on, and so stands in multiple positions in the power/knowledge grid. Power cannot therefore be a permanent one-way exchange; it does not flow down uniformly from the more powerful to the less powerful-it circulates between bodies. We are all subjects of power in the sense that we both simultaneously exercise it even as we experience its effects and in so doing constitute even such fundamental relations with ourselves as our sense of individuality. Indeed, the individual is one of the effects of power, an articulation of power (Barker).

There is a horizontal status and power relationship among all adults of the Bodos. They are more or less equal as far as community decision making is concerned. However, some individuals in community stand out for their skills and knowledge. These often are the people who have the best memories, most successful curers, most gifted speakers, or have some other special ability. Such people become informal leaders. Most often they are given authority by community consensus arrived at through casual discussion. This is possible because everyone knows everyone else intimately as a result of living and working together throughout their lives. Community leaders generally have temporary power at best, and they do not have any significant authority relative to other adults. They can give advice and propose action, but they do not have the formal authority to force others to accept their decisions. Among the community leaders gaobura is the head of village or villages. The village head among the Bodos in a particular village administers and issues certain norms to be carried forward by individuals in the community and decides in community matters in a discrete manner. Such head in the Bodo community is not arbitrarily chosen, instead each individual member’s wise judgement is considered in particular and a collective decision ultimately is put forward for electing an individual as the head of the village. Such an approach in community affairs inevitably projects power residing in each individual which intrinsically comply to what Foucault says: “power is everywhere, not because it is all embracing, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction).

Foucault is of the opinion that although power and knowledge are not the same thing, each incites the production of the other. Power produces both objects of knowledge and the subject to which a particular knowledge relates, likewise knowledge is undetrimental towards the emergence of power. It is the obvious phenomena in the society of Bodos to exercise the sign of respect towards the people that are socially recognized as people of knowledge. Meanwhile the so called wise people are exercising their power over the ordinary people as they unanimously accept the homage from them. This in turn brings a kind of mutual respect and acceptance in the society which brings harmony and peace among the people, and thus Foucault’s idea that power and knowledge are integrated is significantly affirmed.

There are many areas in which power relation can be witnessed. Marriage institution is one such which is one of the most important social institutions among Bodos. Relationship between two individuals (male and female) are constituted as husband and wife only by means of socially recognized marriage celebration. Without socially acceptable celebration of marriage, the Bodo society does not give approval to the relation of physical intimacy between a male and a female and the violation of socially recognized norms by couples may lead to the state of ostracizing and social alienation.Apparently such an act of the society may look like the manifestation of coercive nature of power over individual freedom, while in reality, such an attitude of society brings social discipline as well as the discipline of individuals. This is precisely the kind of analysis that Foucault undertakes in Discipline and Punish. On the whole therefore, one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social quarantine, to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of panopticism. Not because the disciplinary modality of power has replaced all the others; but because it has infiltrated the others, sometimes undermining them, but serving as an intermediary between them, linking them together, extending them, and above all making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements. It ensures an infinitesimal distribution of power relations (M. Foucault).

Although exercise of power may often need violence or force, these are not inherent to a power relation. Moreover, one of the consequences of this
Limit to power is that resistance is the \textit{sine qua non} condition for power. Indeed, a power relation is not an action which determines another action, but an action which influences another action by determining a field of possibility for it. In certain cases of community among Bodos there appear some kind of objections from few individuals against the will of the majority. To cite an example, we can recall the usual phenomena of Bodos strictly adhering to own traditional religion (Bathou Religion) and prohibiting conversion. In such a case the religious freedom of each individual is violated by community and as a result power is used to repress in this regard. This kind of situation has the potency to give rise to violence on the part of oppressed few. Even in such a situation, power has the productive effect. According to Foucault, the goal of violence is either to force the opponent to abandon the task undertaken or to establish a new relation of power. In other words, there is a circularity between power relations open to violence and a violence aiming at power relations. Therefore, there is a constant instability in a power relationship which excludes by definition any form of determinism. By stressing the ontological link between power and resistance, Foucault invites us to an undeterministic reading of the mechanisms of power that he highlights.

There is strong sense of dislike and punishment among Bodos to the crimes committed by individuals in the community or from outside the community. In Bodo society, chastity, truthfulness, honesty, sincerity etc. are important virtues for maintaining one’s own life in integrity and for the good of the entire community. As a rule, the young people of the Bodo society must lead pure life before the marriage. In case any girl is suspected of breaking the law of chastity, the following act of determining a field of possibility for it. In certain cases of community among Bodos there appear some kind of objections from few individuals against the will of the majority. To cite an example, we can recall the usual phenomena of Bodos strictly adhering to own traditional religion (Bathou Religion) and prohibiting conversion. In such a case the religious freedom of each individual is violated by community and as a result power is used to repress in this regard. This kind of situation has the potency to give rise to violence on the part of oppressed few. Even in such a situation, power has the productive effect. According to Foucault, the goal of violence is either to force the opponent to abandon the task undertaken or to establish a new relation of power. In other words, there is a circularity between power relations open to violence and a violence aiming at power relations. Therefore, there is a constant instability in a power relationship which excludes by definition any form of determinism. By stressing the ontological link between power and resistance, Foucault invites us to an undeterministic reading of the mechanisms of power that he highlights.

There are many other cases in which often physical punishment is given to the offenders. It is seen in the Bodo society that the offenders are made subject to some physical punishment at the time of the trial which generally takes place at the house of the village old man (gaoburah). A similar procedure is sometimes resorted to in cases of suspected theft or other strong misdemeanors in the family circle. Such an act of society upon the individuals seem to be rude and intruding the freedom of individuals. But, hindering the young girls from sex outside marriage, the health integrity of girls and unwanted pregnancy which might also generate various evils are tackled apriori. Thus, the power that is exercised by community over its individuals are not to be viewed as oppressive, rather productive that sustains and promotes good in the community. Meanwhile, the individuals that are compelled to confess their offence do also exercise their power that is innate to them by making a public confession. Foucault described such an idea in \textit{The Order of Things}. “The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor, but the authority who requires the confession” (Shumway).

Conclusion

A democratic spirit prevails among the Bodo people in their everyday life interactions with each other that facilitate the exercise of freedom for each individual in the society. Relations between parents and children, lovers, employers and employees, community and individual - all are power relations. In all these relations, each one performs one's role as an autonomous agent meanwhile being concerned towards others in society. Because, in every human interaction, power is subject to negotiation, and each individual having his/her place in the hierarchy, no matter how flexible would it be. Michel Foucault analyses the relations between individuals and community without assuming that the individual is powerless compared to community, institutions, or groups. He does not reduce the restrictions imposed to individuals, but thinks that power is not concentrated, instead diffuse throughout the whole society. This view of Foucault allows us to see it at work in each human interaction and thus to see how resistance always shows up. In power relations witnessed in Bodo society, power is seen as a more volatile, unstable element which can be always contested, so power relations must be permanently renewed and reaffirmed. As far as present system is concerned, power relations in the Bodo society are constructive in its very nature although it cannot be
claimed absolutely to be favorable in all times and for all generation. The responsibility of each individual for oneself and for community and the responsibility of community for its individual constituents are intertwined so much so that power and knowledge are with each other.

References


