

Ethnic Unrest in Bodoland and Electoral Politics at Play

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Abstract- The aspiration and cultural dominance of one ethnic group to carve out an exclusive territorial and political space based on being indigenous to the land excluding the other community as the 'other' or 'outsider' who has historically been part of the same territorial and political space has resulted in creating strife in the society. The Bodo- non Bodos conflict in Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) area has been marked by separatist insurgencies and violence which could be seen as a manifestation of preserving a distinct identity of being indigenous to the area. The policy framework by the government of India has further aggravated the conflict scenario in the region. The construction of the 'us' and 'them' and interplay of politics have led to fragmentation of the political system along ethnic lines. Violence is a manifestation of secessionist tendencies related to conflict in the region.

Index Terms- indigenous, ethnic, territorial, Bodoland

I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-independence era, there developed a growing ethnic unrest with the ever-increasing flow of immigration into North-east region particularly Assam from the neighboring country of Bangladesh. The growing ethnic unrest owing to the threat of demographic and cultural invasion caused by large scale immigration from Bangladesh ultimately led to the outbreak of the famous Assam Movement.¹ Identity assertion and ethnic conflict is a widely debated issue in the political and academic discourse in Assam today. The region has been witnessing conflicts arising out of the aspiration for a separate and distinct ethnic identity among various groups in the multi-ethnic fabric. It also appears to be at the center stage of Assam politics. Competing claims over resources and creation of an exclusive ethnic homeland intertwined in politics of the region have been marked with contests over the ethnic 'self' and the 'other' construction. Often the migrant outsiders who have settled in the area and have been sharing the same political space are delineated as the 'other' and different from the indigenous 'us'. The politicization of the construction of the indigenous 'us' and delineation of the migrant as the 'other' have given rise to a political culture of violent separatism. The pervasiveness of the

¹The Assam Movement is popularly known as the Assam Agitation or Asom Andolon that continued from 1979 to 1985 against government. The movement was ostensibly an upsurge of the "people of Assam" against the influx of large scale immigration from erstwhile Bangladesh. For more details see Hussain, Monirul, 1993. *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, Manak Publications, Delhi p.27

unrest in the region can be attributed to the trend among the ethnic communities to claim separate statehood corresponding to the search for an exclusive homeland compounded by territorial claims and often marked by violence. As a result, the region is often viewed as precarious and unstable. An ordeal of the trend could be seen among the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)² demanding a separate state from Assam. The electoral campaign in this constituency revolves around the contentious issue of a separate state for the Bodos. To achieve this end, the militant outfit indulged in violence and attacked the Adivasis, Bengali and other communities sharing the same territory with the indigenous Bodos. Out of this mayhem the Adivasis, soon set up their own militant group the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam (ACMA) against the Bodo sponsored violence. Another Bodo group, Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) was also formed to fight for a separate Bodo state within the Indian Union.³

II. ASSAMESE NATIONAL ASPIRATION AND SECESSIONISM

The historic Assam Movement was an upsurge of the indigenous Assamese against the enfranchisement of, who they believe were, illegal immigrants from the neighbouring areas of Bangladesh post-independence. The agitators addressed appealed to the sentiments of the indigenous Assamese fold calling as an invasion and encroachment of foreigners or illegal migrants in their land. They called it as the last struggle for survival against the cultural, demographic and political transformation of Assam by the illegal immigrants.⁴ The perceived threat of being reduced into minorities on their own land due to the onslaught of the migration generated the fervor of protesting against such encroachment. The culmination of such dissidence was expressed in the form of the famous Assam movement of the 1980's. The movement gained unprecedented support across the region. The movement which was initiated to safeguard the interest of the indigenous Assamese was soon surfaced with tensions with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Government

²An outfit named Bodo Security Force (BdSF), under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary, was formed on October 3, 1986 to take up the cause of separate sovereign state of Bodoland. On November 25, 1994, the BdSF rechristened itself as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB).

³Misra, Udayon, 2001. 'The Transformation of Assamese Identity', *North East India History Association*, Shillong., p.25

⁴Hazarika, Sanjoy, 1994. *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, Viking New Delhi p.148

of India and leaders of the movement.⁵There was growing apprehension for a hegemonic distinct ethnic Assamese identity being created with the signing of the Accord in the region. This irked the Bodos community who participated in the movement alongside the Assamese people in their struggle against the illegal invasion from Bangladesh. This has found expression in the fragmentation of the movement along ethnic lines and confrontations and violence.

The Bodos were apprehensive and suspicious of the cultural dominance and assimilation into the Assamese fold losing their distinct cultural identity and heritage with the inclusion of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord⁶ which gave legitimacy of the imposition of Assamese language and culture upon the Bodo people and other ethnic communities of Assam. The provisions implicit in the Assam Accord constructed an exclusionist ethnic Assamese identity which alarmed the other ethnic minorities and encouraged them to construct their identities to claim politico-territorial autonomy and seek political legitimacy in their respective traditional homelands. The discursive 'singular indigenous Assamese identity' adopted by the ethnic Assamese paved the way for articulating the notion of indigeneity, which consequently became too sharp for an exclusive identity politics in Assam. The unassimilated linguistic minorities perceived the feeling of being marginalized and dominated by the growing Assamese nationalism under the political arrangements. This dissatisfaction continued to simmer in the region of Assam particularly among the Bodo tribes residing in western part of Assam. It also legitimized the creation of more radical armed groups with more stringent demands for self-determination. The unarmed peaceful movement soon turned into an armed national liberation struggle under the aegis of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) a banned militant outfit in contemporary Assam.

⁵Baruah, Sanjib, 2003. 'Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands, and the Crisis of Displacement in Northeast India,' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 16 No.1. p.51

⁶The Assam Accord (1985) was a Memorandum of Settlement signed between representatives of the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam agitation in New Delhi on August 15, 1985. The accord brought an end to the Assam agitation and paved the way for the leaders of the agitation to form a political party and form a government in Assam soon after. The Assam Accord was a tripartite agreement between AASU, the Government of Assam and the Government of India. After much debate and negotiations, AASU retracted from its earlier position of deporting all migrants who came after 1951 and agreed to recognize 25 March, 1971 as the cutoff date to determine foreign infiltrators in Assam. Clause 6 of Assam Accord states for constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote social, linguistic identity and heritage of Assamese people. Clause 10 provides that it shall be ensured that relevant laws and prevention of encroachment of government lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down in such laws. See details ibid. p.134

III. ULFA AND MILITANT NATIONALISM

At that juncture, the Assam agitation spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) met with initial success catching the imagination of the Assamese public. However, the 1983 elections to the State Legislative Assembly and the widespread violence associated with the electoral process⁷ was met with resistance by the people of the State. The perceived feeling of being alienated when the state engulfed in the problems of influx looked upon the Centre was guided by electoral gains conducted the parliamentary elections consolidated into full blown secessionism through petty violence. Such policies and attitude by the government led to a radicalization of Assamese sub nationalism, giving it a separatist turn. It was at this juncture that the newfound secessionism found expression in to a well organised outfit the United Liberation Front of Assam a strong revolutionary political organisation, who declared its aim to create an independent, Socialistic Assam exploitation-free, classless, healthy, progressive, with disparity' and free from Delhi's colonial occupation and exploitation.⁸ Though the ULFA was founded on April 7, 1979, it came to be noticed as a nascent-armed organisation only in late 1983. The ULFA soon lost its popularity among the people of Assam owing to its obsession with sovereignty and fight against Delhi. It failed to address the everyday problems faced by the people of Assam like corruption and migration from the bordering areas.⁹

Most of the indigenous ethnic groups in Assam are now demanding a separate autonomous territory if not a separate state waging violence in the region and causing widespread displacement.¹⁰ In the contemporary period the ULFA's secessionist rebellion have sprouted other rebel groups for the pursuance of secessionist and separate statehood in Assam. Against this backdrop of newly aroused tensions running along perceived ethnic lines the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) took up arms to wage a bitter battle with the state and demand for separate state of Bodoland within the Union of Assam. It is argued that contentious politics is a part of the violence in Bodoland.¹¹ Drawing inspiration from its counterpart ULFA the BLT also adopted violent means in pursuance of their claim with serious implications.

IV. THE BODOLAND MOVEMENT AND ETHNIC UNREST IN THE REGION

Ethnic groups try to consolidate their identity due to the perceived fear of marginalization and discrimination and a threat

⁷Maitra, K., 2001. '*The Noxious Web-Insurgency in the Northeast*', Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi

⁸Hazarika, Op. Cit. p. 168

⁹Mahanta, Nani Gopal., 2013. '*Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty*', Sage Publications, New Delhi p.348

¹⁰Hussain, Monirul and Pradip Phanjoubam, 2007. '*A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur*', Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata

¹¹Kundu, D.K. 2010. '*The State and the Bodo Movement in Assam*', APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi

to their social, political and cultural existence by the majority and often in their search of identity and struggle to perceive as oneself as being different from the other often resorts to violence. The signing of the Assam Accord aroused suspicion and apprehensions when the interests of the Bodo community who has been sharing the same political space with the indigenous Assamese were not taken into account. The language policy and provisions of the Accord created a deep sense of alienation in relation to the Assamese society of which they had been considered to be a peripheral part. This was reflected in the violent clashes between the Bodos and the Assamese in the late 1980's. The aspiration for autonomy soon turned into a demand for a separate state adopted by groups like the Bodo Security Force (BSF) later renamed as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which demanded a separate Bodoland. In 1993 a memorandum of settlement was signed between the State government, ABSU and Central government to create the Bodoland Autonomous Council. The design was a failure and the militant outfit intensified its struggle. In 2003 after large scale of agitation second Bodo Accord was signed and B.T.A.D was created to subdue the rising violence in the region. The creation of the B.T.A.D curtailed the rights and privileges of the non-Bodos leading to greater insecurity amongst the non-Bodos. The Bodos framed their demand on their claim that the Bodos are the indigenous people of Assam. In Assam whenever a singular cleavage of language or 'indigeneity' mobilised, political competition has often spiralled into bloody riots. In constructing a single distinct indigenous identity, the Bodos ignored the specificities of smaller communities that existed in Bodoland. The antagonism perceived in this context can be attributed to the outbreak of irreconcilable conflicts between the Bodos, Adivasis, Koch-Rajbanshi's over the issue of the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) under the revised 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

V. ELECTORAL POLITICS AND UNREST IN BODOLAND

In course of time the aspiration for separate statehood in Bodoland has percolated into the realm of politics. In the political parlance, the fear of loss of identity by smaller ethnic groups and aspiration for a distinct identity and preserving and protecting it against the politics of homogenization is one of the most significant aspects of ethnic politics in the region. Often the state adopts various mechanisms to articulate the interest of communities. The Sixth Schedule was a significant part of the institutional arrangement to foster a privileged position for minorities or tribal communities and to give them effective responsibility in matters of governance concerning them and instill a sense of belonging and participation. It was primarily intended to cater to the aspirations of minority groups and to protect them from the threat of marginalization, domination and homogenization by the majority. It has been used not only as a mechanism to accommodate the claims of territorially-organized ethno-linguistic groups but simultaneously as an attempt in shaping the public space for the expression and maintenance of identity of the territorially dispersed minority groups and communities. However, this arrangement of accommodating the articulated interest of one ethnic group led to exclusion and alienation of the others. It is pertinent to examine the contentious

politics at play in this regard. Bodoland has been on a theatre of statehood agitation since the mid-1980s. Numerous political tactics have been utilised by the successive agitators to recognize the Bodos as the indigenous ethnic group. The institutional arrangement prevalent in the region has made these autonomous councils grounds for contesting multiple claims for an ethnic homeland where ethnic groups compete for space, resources and legitimacy within the boundaries of these arrangements.¹²

The Bodo movement initially emerged in a peaceful manner within the Constitutional framework. In course of time, it turned violent when the state used repressive machinery and resorted to violent methods to suppress the ethnic mobilization taking place by invoking force. The territorial demarcation of the BAC failed and became a bone of contention between the Assam government and ABSU leadership in turn led to the collapse of BAC. A shift was noticeable in the nature of politics in Bodoland in the context of the collapse of the Bodo Accord. As regards to violence, instances such as of the Adivasi Cobra Militants and the Bengal Liberation Tigers attacking several Bodo villages proved that it was violence and counterviolence, resulting in a chain of violence, with each party trying to assert its own point. It was alleged that violent conflicts between the Bodos and non-Bodos was a political design of the state and some underlying force whose motive was to disrupt the Bodoland movement by taking advantage of the already divided Bodo society and the opposition to the formation of Bodoland by various forces.¹³ Though the BAC failed it bolstered the imagination of a territorially contiguous ethnic homeland among the Bodos that would include and protect all the indigenous Bodos from the outside intruders. The harbouring idea of an all-Bodo homeland escalated into large-scale mass violence against the non-Bodos within the boundaries of the imagined homeland of the Bodos.

It was quite apparent that the decision of the state to open a peaceful political engagement with the secessionist movement triggered a serious conflict. After the collapse of BAC, the Bodoland Territorial Council was created by a tripartite agreement between Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT which was in ceasefire since 2000), the Assam and the Central government under the protection of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution with definite territorial demarcation.¹⁴ With the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (Mos) the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) was formed in 2003 and the political autonomy of the Bodos was greatly enhanced on the one hand, and was considerably contained on the other. The creation of the BTC met various formidable challenges, including that of the NDFB which was committed to a sovereign Bodoland. Besides

¹²Barbora, Sanjay .2008. 'Autonomous Districts and/or Ethnic Homelands: An Ethnographic Account of the Genesis of Political Violence in Assam (North-East India) Against the Normative Frame of the Indian Constitution,' *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 15, p.313-334

¹³Kolas, Ashild. 2017. 'Framing the tribal: ethnic violence in Northeast India,' *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 22-37.

¹⁴Misra, Udayon. 2012. 'Bodoland: The Burden of History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVII (37), p. 36-42.

internal opposition from within the Bodo community, the creation of the BTC also faced opposition from the non-Bodo community who was opposed to any form of greater political autonomy for the Bodos. Subsequently, the BTC comprised of the four districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalgur, otherwise known as the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). The discontent and uncertainties in the BTAD and perceived threat of Bodo militant groups to oust them from the Bodo dominated areas led the non-Bodo communities such as the Santhals, Koch Rajbongshis to form their own militant outfits with the motive of countering the depredations committed by the Bodo militants. The Santhals formed the Bisa Commando Force (BCF) and Adivasi Cobra Militant Force (ACMF), the Koch Rajbongshis formed the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO).

VI. THE CHANGED POLITICAL SCENARIO IN BODOLAND

The political scenario in the BTAD exhibited the polarization of the existing ethnic cleavage between Bodos and non-Bodos in the region. The power struggle and fratricidal nature of Bodo politics fostered factionalism in the electoral politics of Bodoland. After the autonomous council was formed in 2003, ex-militants formed a political party, the Bodo People's Front, which further splintered, into Bodo Progressive People's Front.¹⁵ While the BPF won the Lok Sabha election in 2009, in 2008, the BTAD areas witnessed a fresh round of fratricidal killings. In the subsequent Assembly elections of 2006 and 2011 a split occurred between the BPF and BPPF guided by factional interests to win over the community with each fraction trying to outdo the other in clamouring for separate statehood and even a sovereign country for the Bodos.¹⁶ This bickering spiralled into several incidents of violence against its own community as well as the other communities who were often labelled as the other outsider.

The anxieties and perceived fear of identity loss, language and cultural hegemony have dominated the polemics of Bodoland politics. The BTC have failed to prevent the recurrence of violence and damage to lives and property of Bodos and non-Bodo populations living in Bodoland. Sporadic incidents of violence following between Bodos and Muslims in 1993, 2008, 2012 and 2014, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of displacements and the Adivasi and Bodo conflicts in 1996, 1998 and December 2014¹⁷ has been preceded by politicization and fragmentation of the population along ethnic lines. The politics of indigeneity in this context has fostered the creation of separate

collective identities by the non-Bodo groups who are victims of marginalization, violence and restricted mobility in the region. The elections campaigns in Bodoland has somewhat become a quest to preserve one's cultural identity and protest against the Bodo hegemony in the region. In the wake of aspiration for creation of a separate homeland carving out the communities sharing the same territory, peace in Bodoland continues to be fragile. The formation of the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Aikya Mancha (SJAM) an umbrella organisation of 23 non-Bodo ethnic and linguistic communities residing in Bodoland in 2014 Lok Sabha polls largely to protect the rights of the non-Bodos in the BTAD region and the win of the Naba (Hira) Kumar Sarania, Former commander of the elite strike force 709 battalion of the United Liberation Front of Assam, in the last parliamentary polls from Kokrajhar depicts a changed political climate in the complex politics of Bodoland. The history of ethno political subjugation is seemed to have been collectively challenged by formation of this alliance. The violence that broke out post elections reflected the retaliatory attitude and contention of the Bodos against the non-Bodos. The violence also displaced many Muslim population who were condemned for not voting in favour of the Bodo candidate in the elections.¹⁸

The violence ethnic clashes between the ethnic communities prove that violence inflicted by one group on the other is met with counter violence resulting in a chain of violence with each party trying to assert its claim. The violence that has been taking place in Bodoland had rendered thousands homeless and caused wide spread damage to property and environment.¹⁹ The recent incidents of riots in 2012 -2013 have once again highlighted the volatility of violence and ethnic unrest in Bodoland and sporadic antagonism of the other non-Bodo communities in the region.²⁰ It has also rejuvenated the debate on influx of migrants and citizenship in Assam politics.

In the aspiration to carve out a separate state each ethnic group has carried out armed attacks and counter-attacks against each other giving rise to conflict situations not only in the Bodo areas but also created a volatile situation in the whole of Assam constructing the indigenous 'us' and the outsider 'other'. The existence of militant outfits clamoring the cause of separate Bodoland working in nexus with the political groups have serious ramifications in the politics of Assam. Lack of cohesiveness among the political counterparts and failure of peace initiatives have plunged the region into conflicts and violence largely affecting the lives of common people of the region from all quarters. The creation of Telengana on July 30, 2013 has also intensified the issue of separate statehood in Bodoland

¹⁵ Mahanta, Nani Gopal, 2013. 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 48, Issue No. 23, p.

¹⁶ Goswami, Sandhya. 2012. 'Changing trends of electoral politics, Assam: Unstable Peace,' *Seminar*, December. 640

¹⁷ Prabhakar, M.S. 2003. 'Territories of Fear', *Frontline*, Vol. 20, no. 24, <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2024/stories/20031205003103900.htm> (last accessed on 7th May, 2017)

¹⁸ For more information about the violence, see 'Report of Fact-Finding Team from Centre for Policy Analysis, New Delhi' http://www.iosworld.org/download/fact-%20finding_Baska_Assam.pdf, (last accessed 2nd June, 2017)

¹⁹ Bharali, Gita, 2004. 'Labour Unrest and Social Insecurity of Plantation Workers: A Case Study,' North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati

²⁰ Dutta, Anwesa, 2016. 'The Politics of Complexity in Bodoland: The Interplay of Contentious Politics, the Production of Collective Identities and Elections in Assam, South Asia,' *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39:2, p.478-493,

VII. CONCLUSION

Uneven competition and perceived feeling of marginalization and the institutional mechanism of dealing with various autonomy demands have eventually intensified ethnic conflict massively disturbing the tranquility of the area. The demand for separate state of Bodoland based on ethnic recognition and political autonomy has shaped the politics of resistance and retribution in the region and struggle for political and economic power. The institutional means of accommodation such as granting autonomy to particular ethnic groups in North eastern region have yielded exclusionary tendencies created by both the state and the dominant community. In Bodoland several communities concern for the various perceived threats to their distinct ethnic identities, their anxiety for preservation of culture and language, and aspiration for ethnic homelands is often backed by the ethnic militia. The mobilisation of single axis of identity by the political set up and ethnicization of the party system has led to widespread violence. Riots and violence causing displacement and loss of life and property is extricably linked to the fratricidal politics of Bodoland. The need of the hour is to address the Bodo insurgency in Assam above opportunistic politics at play with due consideration to look into endless possibilities for bringing peace and tranquility in the state. The antagonism that has developed between the Bodos and non-Bodos needs to be resolved in an atmosphere of good faith and adopt concrete programs for redressing their dissatisfaction.

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