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WHY PEACE ACCORD DOESN'T LEAD TO DURABLE ORDER? POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS OF BODO AGREEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial Indian State has faced several challenges on political violence with minority groups in Northeast India. Works by Sanjay Baruah (2005), S. Bhaumik (2009), and Udayon Misra (2017) have highlighted the multiple ways in which political violence has engulfed and contained Northeast India. Despite signing multiple agreements with ethnic leaders, peace and durability continue to elude India's northeast. This paper critically reviews the peace accords conducted by the Indian government with the Bodo insurgent groups of Assam. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted for six months in 2021 and discourse analysis of peace accords signed between the Indian Union and Bodo leaders in 1993, 2003, and 2020, this paper makes three interrelated points. First, peace accords provide a veneer of legitimacy to the Indian State, while the real issues of recognition and redistribution are neglected. Second, fissures of ethnic identity and land rights within the Bodo tribal movement are complicated. Misunderstanding of the critical factor has led to limitations of peace accords, engendering newer dynamics of post-agreement conflict. Third, this paper argues that peace accords signed by the Indian State are limited in scope and potential. The frequent spillover post-agreement violence in other Northeast regions attests to this fact. In the conclusion, this paper highlights certain recommendations for durable peace and restitution in the region.

Keywords: Bodo, insurgency, peace accords, conflict, recognition

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of India's Independence, the newly born state encountered challenges of political integration from the NorthEast region. As the nationalist discourse ran high post-independence in other parts of the country, there was a parallel nationalist discourse running high in this frontier region of the country. One of the earliest challenges to the Indian State from this region came from the Naga hills and their rising discontent against the socio-political administrative design of the newly formed Indian State. Their discontentment has roots in the pre-independence period when Nagas united to form the "Naga Club in 1918" and their fear of "interference" and "exploitation by the plains people" exacerbated their anxiety (Kikhi, 2020). Beginning with the Naga homeland demand, other parts of the region also saw groups emerging with separatist demands and other forms of autonomy and self-governance. The Indian nation-state started on a bumpy approach as it began to deploy special forces known as the "Armed Forces Special Powers Act" 1958 act to tackle what was to become the longest political movement in post-colonial Northeast India. The region witnessed immediate demand for complete autonomy and self-governance to decide their political future. There was a crisis in the Indian state's legitimacy and this sentiment has prolonged in the decades to come as many more groups or ethnic nationalism took root in different parts of this region. Sanjib Baruah (1999/2001) in his work "India

against Itself” talks about the complexities of “nation building” and foregrounds the contestations of “nation building” by disrupting the paradigm of nationalism by proposing the notion of “sub-nationalism”. Parallel to the currents of Indian nationalism, the sub-nationalist aspirations of this region have compounded the state-building process as it showed a lack of approval for the new modern Indian nation. And the disposition of special forces to this region has only endured and persisted the roots of alienation. Sanjib Baruah (2005) in his “durable disorder” maintains that the counter-insurgency operatives have only prolonged the sense of alienation and eroded the democratic ethos of the region as it led to institutionalizing military rule and authoritarian practices.

The conglomeration of northeast region is made up of diverse history, culture, and politics and the feeling of non-belongingness to the great Indian tradition persists despite its shared colonial history under British rule. There has been a certain “feeling of neglect and alienation among the different nationalities of the northeastern region, often encouraging them to deny their claims of Indianness” (Misra, 2014, p. 8). The region has been reduced to a cauldron of conflict for decades when ethnic-nationalism took a violent turn and has created severe security issues for the Indian State. Subir Bhaumik’s (2009) “Troubled periphery” navigates and analyses the “perpetual crisis in this region since independence” and attributes its leading contention to the issues of ethnicity, ideology, and religion and how over years it has shaped the conflicts. One of the leading contention in this region has been the ethnic-nationalism aspect as it has seen a proliferation of small groups, mostly tribal communities demanding political space and counterclaims to such demands by “non-tribal” communities. The tribal discourse has led to politics of inclusion and

exclusion which pushes the process of constant “self-invention” and “re-invention” of their identity (Prabhakara, 2010/2012, p. 263).

With this background, this study aims to look at one of the particular approaches the Indian State has adopted in dealing with the unrest and legitimacy issues. In their hopes to end armed violence and bring forth a framework of peace, the Indian State has adopted mechanisms of peace dialogues’ or peace accords with the belligerent groups. Such accords are conducted between the Indian State and the belligerent group that comes into a compromise to build a framework for governance. The Indian State has signed around 14 accords in the region between 1949 to 2005 (Rajagopalan, 2008, p. 2) and the numbers have increased post-2005 with new accords signed with different groups from Assam like Karbi and Boro. From what can be discerned from the continuity of violence and contestation, the numerous peace accords haven’t managed to solve the crisis or lead to the final destination of peace and durable order.

An Impasse

Post accord doesn’t equate to a post-conflict situation, rather a situation of impasse arises which has kept the region militarised, and subject to strict regulation of civil and political rights. Counter-insurgency measures, developmental packages, and reorganizing territorial boundaries intended to address the issues have been instituted and inaugurated over the years, yet the violence continues. Lacina argues (2009, p. 330) “neither military interventions in the region nor emphasis on development is the most important priority because it can be thwarted by corruption and coercion”. But what it demands is the “local northeastern politics” and understand the dynamics of the relation insurgent groups have in the local politics. One of the crucial failures

and reasons for an impasse even in the light of burgeoning political accords to bring a framework of peaceful governance is that the political solutions agreements are acceptable to some groups and objectionable to another group that continues to fight. The conflict has stretched for decades as there are many splinter groups along ideological lines and has created numerous groups of self-proclaimed insurgencies.

Many of the accords are not conclusive and all-encompassing but piecemeal offerings for short-term goals and they focus on “finite, measurable, immediate outcomes, and milestones” (Rajagopalan, 2008). As it narrowly focused on ending violence, it is inconclusive as it fails to bring in all the stakeholders and engages with subgroups. One of the patterns of the Indian government has been to conclude accords with sub-sections, which has proven as a failure to solve the conflict in long term. It focused on one group at a time and the in-sustainability of such myopic policies has led to numerous successive accords with different subsets from the same tribe or representing particular ethnic nationalists. John Paul Lederach (2005) says accords are not the panacea to achieving peace and requires constant engagement after signing an agreement as well as to keep having dialogue at multiple levels by recognizing that conflict remains.

Who are the Bodos?

The banner of ‘plains’ people came to be first used in colonial Assam to refer to a diverse set of people inhabiting the foothills of the Himalayas living in the Brahmaputra Valley who were then classified under the banner of “primitive and backward tribes” (Sonowal, 2013, p. 70). Plains population wasn’t a unified category like the ‘hill tribes’ but consisted of different ethnic groups and a predominantly Bengali-speaking population. Two important groups made

up the plains tribal people and they were the ‘Bodo’ group and the ‘Miri’ group. Multiple small groups made up the Bodo group and they were the Kachari-Bodo, Hojais, Lalung, Mech, Rabhas, Sonowal, and Barmans of Cachar having the same origin and the Miri group originally belonging to the hilly areas of the present Arunachal (Hazarika, 2006, p. 55).

It was a unique administrative discourse created and used from the 1930s onward to club together groups under the generic term ‘plains tribes’, as they were all valley people. Khema Sonowal argues that the reason why the early 20th century saw tribal communities joining hands together was due to their dissatisfaction with the role of the “national political parties and felt socially and politically exploited and suppressed”. In the face of hill tribes receiving ‘protection’ from colonials through legislation like inner line regulation, the coalesce of groups living in the plains identifying as plains tribes brought a new dimension to the discourse of the identity of tribes. Plains tribes became a phenomenon as groups united to come together for political reasons. In the colonial discourse identifying tribes with a specific socio-geographical location especially, hills were much common and dominant. Therefore, locating ‘tribes’ in the Brahmaputra Valley as ‘plains tribes’ added a new dimension to the understanding of tribal and tribal leaders of the valley and succeeded in crafting a ‘tribal’ identity for varied groups together. It was a monolithic notion of ‘plains tribes’ that emerged against the dominant idea of hill tribes but soon its interests’ was opposed by the Muslims, caste Hindus, and tea garden workers who also lived on plains (Hussain, 1992).

It shaped the future course for political and socio-cultural consciousness among groups and as a result, many groups sprang up on an individual basis. The Boro movement is one such independent movement that arose out of the plains

tribal movement in the post-colonial context.

Post-Independence Identity Assertion

On the eve of the independence, however, the constitutional sub-committees formed to provide a recommendation to administer the Northeast Frontier tracts emphasized the hill districts and the “hills men”. The Plains tribal population of Assam was disregarded on the basis that it was a case of a ‘minority’ and assimilated highly with the plains. This reflected the association of tribal with “hills men”. Their case was argued against providing any kind of autonomy similar to the hill district though plains tribes constituted around 2,484,996 according to the census of 1941 (Rao, 1968, p.708).

“This portion of the plains tribal is of course a population which has assimilated in a high degree the life of the plains” (Rao, 1968, p. 708).

However, provisions for protecting the indigenous group were initiated in the form of tribal belts and blocks, to address the problem of the influx of population. The fixated notion on tribes which give more emphasis on the geographically defined concept of ‘hills tribe’ was believed to constitute a separate entity from the people in plains and the issue of plains tribes was considered as a sub-nationality of Assamese and therefore plains tribe like the Bodo, the Mishing, the Sonowal, the Tiwa’s and the Deuri’s don’t come under the provision of the sixth schedule (Hussain, 1992). The collective tribal nationalism of the colonial period soon transpired into the Bodoland movement in the post-independence period. And the dawn of liberation saw conscious groups of Bodo asserting their distinct identity. There was a general belief that post-independence Bodo of Brahmaputra Valley would soon assimilate with the mainstream Assamese community as the census figures of 1951 and 1961 showed a decline in the growth

rate of the Bodo population, taking note of the fact that many Bodos identified themselves as Assamese speakers (Choudhury, 2007, p. 2). The social absorption by the dominant community towards the indigenous minority was inevitable and the social mobility that was inherent in shifting identities became paramount in the early years after independence.

The Assam official language act of 1960 which made the Assamese language the official language of the state of Assam in their hegemonic project of Assamese nationalism was intensely opposed, accusing the Assam government of assimilation project and imposition of culture upon the tribals undemocratically and violating the constitution of India. The tribal population of Assam felt threatened by the steps taken by the Assam government in making Assamese the official language. In 1963, the Bodo language was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary school and secondary stages in 1968 (Deka, 2014). The peaceful mass movement demanding roman script in 1974-1975 led by Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) was met with suppressive measures from the Assam government in which 15 people lost their lives in police firing. Following repressive measures to suppress the Sabha’s demand for the Roman script, Bodo became a written language with the Devanagiri script.

On February 27, 1967, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed to articulate the demand of the plains tribe residing in the plains of Assam. The memorandum was submitted on 20th, May 1967 to the central government, asserting the common grievances and injustices experienced by the tribes of plain in Assam and it is only through complete autonomy that their aspirations will be achieved (Memorandum by PTCA, 1967). If we see the arguments forwarded in the memorandum, it is discernible that they

want to maintain their 'tribal' identity, which they feel is threatened by the Assamese culture and language.

The birth of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967, under the leadership of Modaram Brahma, was born with an aim of autonomy for the plains tribe. The idea of autonomy was reflected in their concept of 'Udayanchal'. To quote their memorandum agenda.

"Udayachal is our goal and urgent demand. The fate of the plains tribals' will remain bleak till we remain tagged to the apron of the Assamese hegemony. More than often we have given reasons for the urgent necessity to give a homeland UDAYACHAL to the plains tribals' to be carved out of the present state of Assam. This will permit us to keep our identity intact, progress, and be vigorous partners in the march forward of the country" (Memorandum, 2006, p.103). Udayachal was envisioned in the northern tracts of the Brahmaputra River along the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal, stretching through the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, and Dibrugarh (Choudhury, 2006, p.105). The areas envisioned in Udayachal by and large were covered by the tribal belts and blocks, under chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886 under the colonial regime.

Tribal nationalism

The All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) began mass mobilization for Bodoland along with an umbrella organization named 'Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) in the 1980s. With the growth of ABSU, Bodo nationalism gained new vigor in its demand for a separate political identity. It gained momentum from the anti-foreigner agitation by the All-Assam Students' union, where the Bodo leaders supported the AASU agitation. However, the apprehension against the dominant

caste of Hindu Assamese-speaking people and the government to establish a hegemonic Assamese identity was soon felt and gradually ABSU leaders started disassociating from the AASU movement (Sonowal, 2013, p. 81). ABSU leaders had misgivings about certain clauses in Assam accord "clause 6" which asked to safeguard and to "protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people". This was seen as a complete disregard for the indigenous tribal identity of Bodo distinct from the Assamese identity.

The longstanding treatment of the Bodo issue as a mere socio-economic problem by the Assam government only sowed the seeds for the germination of the more assertive Bodo nationalist. Numerous issues and factors crept up which facilitated the sense of alienation amongst the Bodo, the demand by AASU leaders to do away with SC/ST reservation and end scholarship, reinforcing the Hindu caste prejudices. With state brutalities and human rights violations surging in number, for instance, the No.12 Bhumka, a Bodo village in Kokrajhar district, where stories of mass rape still haunt the village (Gohain, 1989, p. 1378). Memories of state brutalities and prejudicial policies only helped in building up a mass resentment against the Assam State, its mechanisms, and policies. Women were caught up in the. As the Assam movement steered the concept of Assamese identity in its agitation against the immigrants, the composite Assamese identity saw fragments when ABSU became more vociferous in the identity assertion claiming its distinctiveness from the Assamese. With organizational politics gaining much strength and vigor under the leadership of ABSU members, they launched a movement for autonomy in the form of Bodoland and released a list of 92 demands (Memorandum, 1993). There are three major demands: formation of a

separate state of Bodoland on the North bank of Brahmaputra; setting up autonomous district councils in the tribal-dominated areas and thirdly incorporation of the Bodo Kacharis of Karbi Anglong in the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution (Memorandum by ABSU, 1993). The fear of losing their identity ran counter to the effort of Assamese linguistic nationalism. Udayon Mishra (2014) says that it is the overzealousness of the Assamese in protecting their language that has alienated the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Stages of Bodoland Movement

The movement led by the ABSU staged many protests and organized bandhs to put pressure, for instance, the 36-hour tribal area bandh declared by the ABSU from 24-25th September 1987 saw violence when volunteers were fired upon and lathi-charged by the police. The repressive measure by the state created more resentment among the Bodo which created a more favorable environment to mobilize and gain mass support for a separate homeland. The radical demand saw more violence in 1988 when the 72-hour bandh on 27th April 1988 turned violent when the state witnessed 28 bomb blasts in Kokrajhar and Udalguri sub-division and defused 23 live bombs, leading up to the arrests of hundreds of ABSU supporters (Deka, 2014). Bodo political identity consolidated and the instability associated with the emergence of groups that took recourse to violence marked a transitional phase in the history of Bodo identity assertion in the 1980s. The ideological differences among the PTCA and former PTCA members took a volatile turn when the Bodo Voluntary Force (BVF) a wing of the ABSU, formed by Prem Singh Brahma was involved in targeting non-Bodo community as well as Bodos who were sympathetic to PTCA and opposed ABSU led movement. Other developments like an underground

militant outfit Bodo Security Force (Bd.SF) demanded a sovereign Bodoland, which was later rechristened the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) (Hakhrari, 2017). It was a transformation of ethnic tribal identity assertion to more forceful nationalist demand. By the 1990s Bodo identity movement had become more aggressive and pose a challenge to the political structure of Assam and its boundaries and sent Assam for more than a decade long in a state of frenzy. It witnessed a significant rise in violence and militancy, killing, abduction, extortions, and infrastructural destruction became rampant.

Towards a Solution: The First Accord, 1993

The first Bodo accord was formally signed on 20th February 1993, which led to the formation of the "Bodo Autonomous Council" (BAC), an accord signed by the representative of ABSU-BPAC and the government of Assam. The ABSU-led movement resulted in the first accord for the Bodos people and created a 40-member council of which 35 members were to be elected and the remaining 5 to be nominated were to constitute the council assembly. The territorial drawing was marked towards the eastern and western boundaries on the North bank of Assam, however, the southern border emerged as an issue of concern due to the majority of the "non-tribal" population. One of the important criteria for territorial demarcation was that 50% of the population needs to constitute the Bodo tribe. It was a council bestowed with some form of governing power on education, forest, land, and revenue. This was an "administrative system envisaged within the state of Assam with maximum autonomy to the Bodo people for their education, cultural, social, ethnic, and economic advancement" (Sudhir George, 1994, p. 889). However, the accord soon failed due to the reluctance of the Assam government to provide funds and the non-

implementation of the clauses. There was no clear assurance of the territorial demarcation. S. K. Bwisumatary, an ex-MP and former president of Bodoland People's Party quit the council and resigned when their demands were not met. He says 'Until the Assam government and the Union government agree to our basic demands, I gave an ultimatum to quit on 16th November 1996. It was a necessary protest act or else our demand for Bodoland would have died down. Many blamed me as an escapist, but the inner politics of the council didn't fulfill our criteria and the accord would have been a living dead body with no substance.'

(22th September, 2022, Kokrajhar)

Another ensuing issue after the accord was the violent phase of the Bodo movement which was at its peak led by BLT and NDFB. A repetitive ethnic conflict was witnessed in the Northwestern part of Assam between the Bodo and the Adivasis, which brought a greater rift between the two communities. The 1996 Bodo-Adivasi conflict in Kokrajhar, saw several thousand people displaced and rendered homeless, resulting in taking shelter in refugee camps. In May 1996, Santhalis a tea tribe community in western Assam became a target, witnessing large-scale displacement, killing more than 200 people and some 2,00,000 people displaced. The trajectory of ethnic movement created a sharp divide between the Bodo and the Santhals in the erstwhile BAC of 1993. Such ethnic clashes also became prominent with other migrant groups like Muslims in 1994 (Misra, 2014). Such violent clashes hint toward the idea that such autonomy assertion harbors unfavorable attitudes toward the 'other' who is viewed from the lens of the 'other' as someone who is impinging and encroaching on the political space or at times socio-economic space. The

perception of the 'other' is a significant undertone in many ethnic assertions for autonomy because it leads to the 'victimization' of the other and in their quest for homeland at times makes way for violent clashes.

Peace was expected to prevail but soon the accord was termed anti-democratic and anti-bodo. The southern border became a bone of contention which was promised but wasn't implemented and incorporated into the BAC domain. By late 1993, in what was termed "ethnic cleansing" (George, 1994, p.890), communal riots transpired between Bodos and the minority settler community leaving thousands homeless and seeking refuge in relief shelters. Between 1993 and 1994, there were three riots in total which left thousands internally displaced and claimed many lives. Such riots and communal clashes have been termed as targeted killings by the Bodo insurgent groups and have led to counter-productive consequences of being considered an undemocratic movement as it seeks to create a Bodo majority territorial region. The Land issue has been the crucial factor in the continuing violence and ethnic clashes as the protected tribal belts and blocks have seen continuous settlement which impinges on the cultural and political identity of the Bodos¹.

One of the most affected groups has been the tea settler communities who are caught up in the structural injustice of the Assam State and the Indian government. The question of tea tribes is an overdue one as it is one of the longstanding agitations for recognition of their identity. The location-specific identity application has left the labor community fighting for recognition and indigeneity status. They represent the 'other' in the sea of ethnic mobilization, who is not an 'original indigenous' settler in the ethnic-politic space and whose history has been submerged in the booming tea industry of the colonial period. One of their

longstanding demand has been to be included in the ST list, as they are one of the most deprived communities of Assam.

Their location in the socio-economic and political milieu has created a precarious position for them in the ongoing Bodo movement. The rhetoric of homeland and political imagination witnessed attacks on the 'non-autochthons' groups like the Santhals in the 1990s. This part of Assam saw a rapid rise in militarisation and insurgency activities which reduced the region to a cauldron of violence. The peace accord had been a failure as it rather saw counterproductive movements and riots and reduced human lives to destitute and poverty during the conflict. The repercussions and loss of lives and property have still not been recovered and the precariousness and abject poverty and living standard were further worsened which continues to this day. Some have relocated to new places and have begun new life but the trauma and the resource crunch that put their life years back in terms of upliftment is evident. The continuing and rising arms movement created further counter-attack measures which led to numerous army operations in their hunt for insurgent members leading to scores of human rights violence and women getting caught in the patriarchal state violence and subjected to sexual assault and rape².

The 1993 post-accord scenario was unstable and created more unrest and a legitimacy crisis. The deadlock couldn't be solved as more groups emerged with internal splits in the parent organization. It could neither solve the Bodo identity movement nor it could create a condition for any stability in the region.

The 2003 Accord

The second political accord was signed on February 10, 2003, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial

Council (BTC). It was a tripartite agreement between the Assam government, the Union government, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). It led to the creation of an autonomous governing body constituting 46 council members within the state of Assam and provided constitutional protection under the sixth schedule (Mos, 2003). It was to comprise 3082 villages and will be divided into 4 contiguous districts (Mos, 2003). Similar to the last accord of 1993, villages constituting not less than 50% of the tribal population will be included in the proposed area of BTC (Mos, 2003). It also ensured the settlement rights, transfer, and inheritance of the property of "non-tribals" (Mos, 2003). The immediate outcome of the accord was the 'Bodo Liberation Tigers gave up arms movement and came to the mainstream to form a government. The BLT was transformed into Bodoland People's Party (BPP) and the accord ushered in new hopes of representation and development.

The creation of Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) following the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) movement in the late 1990s, led to the carving out of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, and Chirang districts after signing the memorandum of settlement (Mos, 2003). The imagining of 'homeland' and the autonomous district materializing the 'political space' for recognition of bodo identity, created fear of exclusion amongst groups who are viewed as 'indigenous-other'. It has witnessed the upsurge and revival of identities and assertions by groups who have historically shared spaces and ethnic politics taking a territorial turn. The political unit for Bodos has created apprehensions and anxieties among other groups who also inhabit the same political space. The mobilization by the Koch-Rajbanshis' who are classified as OBC presently, the demand for ST and Kamatapur State is an expression of anxieties and fear of domination. In my

interaction with Mr. Hitesh Barman, the AKRSU leader from Kokrajhar district expressed his dissatisfaction about the formation of BTAD as he says they were not included in the decision-making process for the creation of BTAD. In a region where ethnic grouping rarely coincides with territorial segregation, the creation of political spaces and units which make one group dominant, a wall of separation and rigid boundaries are drawn and strengthened between groups. Such counter demands are also viewed through the perspective of state politics trying to conspire against the Boro tribe in their attempt to maintain the Assamese nationalist agenda as well. As ethnic boundaries are constructed through mutable concepts like 'tribe' and 'caste Hindus', political units with demarcated boundaries give logic to ethnic groups' identity formation and persistence. Walls of boundaries become strong and we see the emergence of social networks and capital which are important to sustaining and maintaining boundaries in plural societies. For instance, organizational bodies of ethnic groups like Bodos and Koch-Rajbangshi students union are important social forces flagging the issue of ethnic identity and mobilization process. And such strong identity movements give rise to 'ethnic-nepotism' which results in favoring one group's members over another.

Keeping this concept in the background it is discernible when Hitesh Barman says that many job opportunities in BTAD are always favored by Bodo's. It has led to a more contentious nature which creates the path for shifting collaboration with 'other' coalescing and bringing together groups as a mechanism in the changing environment, for instance, 'Oboro Janajati' is a network of cross section groups, and 'Sanmilitia Janagosthiya Sangram Samithi' (United Ethnic Peoples' Struggle). It is an alliance of about twenty non-Bodo organizations in the BTC area

along with non-Bodo tribal people who have come together to oppose the creation of BTC and Koch-Rajbangshi being one of the important constituents of such cross-section networks (Dutta, 2016).

Such demarcation has led to assertion on the parts of the non-Bodo population criticizing the discriminatory treatment in the BTC and the syndrome of majority and minority debate has engulfed the legitimacy of the creation of BTC, with groups claiming that many villages included in the BTC area are non-Bodo dominated villages. Non-Bodo Suraksha Samiti has asserted against the creation of Bodoland and the bifurcation of Assam and has staged a protest and declared many bandhs calls against the BTC and Bodoland demand. It has only reinforced the hatred towards the 'other' which is deeply entrenched in the psyche of groups residing in the same ethnic space.

The creation of BTC has provisionally tried to address the decade-long Bodo conflict, but it has witnessed a fresh dimension to the issue of identity and politics with the emergence of new organizational groups opposing the Bodoland movement. Political competition and the intensification of competitive claims take an unpleasant form during elections. The 2014 Lok Sabha election in the Kokrajhar constituency saw the strict rivalry between Bodo and non-Bodo organizations when 20 non-Bodo ethnic and linguistic groups came together under the banner of 'Sanmilitia Janagosthiya Aikkyamancha' to support an independent non-Bodo candidate, Naba Sarania, an ex-ULFA militant leader who won by a huge margin of 3, 55,779 votes (Dutta, 2016). This was a strong blow to the Bodo community as he became the first non-Bodo MP from the Kokrajhar constituency as political competition increased the differences with ethnic groups and led to more pluralism in previously monolithic ethnic parties and gave rise to factionalism.

The creation of BTC/BTAD in 2003, has created quite the stir and saw tribal mobilization among different groups and any future move to create Bodoland has been expressed with strong demur. There have been incidents of ethnic clashes between Muslims and Santhals in the post-agreement political space. In the year 2012, an ethnic clash erupted on the 20th, of July between Bodo and the Bengali-speaking Muslim community. In December 2014, another incident of ethnic clash erupted between tea settlers and Bodo. NDFB(S) faction, a splinter group of NDFB was alleged to be the instigator.

The creation of BTAD has passed through a critical phase, as the geopolitical space hasn't resolved the ethnicity demands among Bodo themselves, and the upsurge of non-Bodo population, Koch-Rajbongshi, and Adivasis gave rise to confrontational politics and set the stage for violence. The ad hoc steps taken by the Indian government in resolving the issue of insurgency and signing a memorandum with one party, in this case with the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) reflected short-sightedness, lacking any long-term implications and intensifies group competition over the state's limited resources, politicizing along cleavages. The creation of BTAD, an ethnic homeland, has seen repeated ethnic clashes between the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims. 'Discriminatory' policies of BTAD, 'extortion' 'intimidation' allegations have been raised against the Bodo leadership, eventually, a series of protests and blockage of highways and bandhs have been declared, voicing its opposition against the creation of a separate Bodoland. Koch-Rajbongshi, one of the major non-tribal community has stepped up its demand for ST and have staged its solidarity and strength while conducting rallies and programs beginning in 2012. When such blockage and bandhs are declared, isolated incidents of low-scale violence like the torching of public

vehicles and injured people have been witnessed in the BTAD region. Recently, on the 1st and 6th of March 2018, a widespread demonstration across the BTAD region was declared against the rumor that the ruling government of BTAD 'decided to take away the land rights of the indigenous Koch-Rajbongshi, Nepali, Santhal, and Nath' only to sink after clarification from the ruling government that no such changes have been made(Pratin exclusive). Such cases reflect the contentious and volatile political atmosphere susceptible to insecurities and violence. Though major conflicts have occurred with the Muslim migrants and Santhals, Koch-Rajbongshi, Bengali and Nepalis have not experienced violence, though setting the stage for contentious group politics.

Identities are also contested as is evident in the contested nature of 'tribal' identity. Such constructed categories take new forms with new political connotations and lead to contentious group politics and at times violence. Ethnic violence arises when a marginal group wants to gain the same status and there is resistance to include them in the category. Identity formation and ethnic violence are two-way processes because ethnic violence also has the potential to construct identities in more rigid and antagonistic ways. It perpetuates antagonistic behavior towards other ethnic groups and becomes aggressive and ethnocentric. Lives and property have been destroyed rendering many homeless for years and forcing them to take refuge in camps. In my field observation in villages like 'Nilaijhora' in Gossaigaon and Alibitha in Kokrajhar district, what was common to the victims of ethnic violence from across the groups was their socio-economic condition and hamlets of villages with multiple groups co-existing and sharing resources like water well. What was interesting in one of my field visits to Alibitha, a village in the Kokrajhar district of Assam, was

individuals from both Bodo and Muslim communities sat together to narrate their state of panic stricken when they heard about violence ensuing in nearby villages in 2014, which eventually lead them to take refuge in one of the camps set up in a village school, leaving behind their homes and cattle's, instances of helping each other from across the community dominated the narration. They inhabited the same space and shared resources, but when the time came to take refuge, they parted ways to their 'respective' camps. Though this study doesn't make a case study of the Muslim community, the same pattern was visible in Nilaijhora, where Santhals and Bodos live harmoniously only to be disrupted frequently. They live in a continuous space, unlike the rhetoric of territory and homeland which tries to disrupt the continuity of space and culture. Such attempts at discontinuation lead to barriers and breakdown of harmonious relationships who struggle every day to make their daily living on the margins of society. It takes them years to stabilize their livelihoods only to be disrupted again.

The 2020 Accord

A tripartite accord deemed to be the final and historic accord was recently signed on 27 January 2020 with National Democratic Front For Bodoland (NDFB), ABSU, and the Union government. Beginning with a holistic approach, it proposes a change from Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) to Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) institutionalizing and consolidating the autonomy and identity of the Bodo people. Some changes are recommended for modification in the territorial inclusion and exclusion. It proposes to include contiguous Bodo villages in the region and exclude non-bodo villages from the region. Development schemes and funds to set up numerous educational and

cultural institutions are designed in the memorandum (Mos, 2020).

The accord is expected to solve the Bodo statehood demand and bring about socio, economic, and political upliftment. In the two years of the accord agreement, new challenges emerged over dissatisfaction with the implementation of the accord. There has been general dissatisfaction with the way the ex-militant group NDFB has been sidelined in their political share in the post-accord political configurations. It saw a small group of ex-NDB members reorganizing themselves as the "National Liberation Front of Bodoland" (NLFB). They were the disgruntled members of the recently signed third accord, however, they were soon brought into talks and surrendered themselves.

The 2020 accord is yet to see its success and complete implementation. The challenges to the new accord also lie in the issue of amnesty delivered to the ex-rebel members which are viewed unsatisfactorily as the founder of the organization Ranjan Daimary is serving his sentence. There has also been an exclusion of the main signatories of the accord which has left them out of the political representations and created security concerns for the ex-insurgents. In the field observation, many ex-NDFB cadres didn't have any sustainable source of income and their discontentment is evident. An ex-NDFB commander says, 'It is very hard for us to accept this peace accord. We don't feel it was ours. The way this accord was framed and signed was done in a hasty manner, which didn't include any significant provisions that we had discussed together. If not statehood, we wanted at least Union Territory (UT), but due to inner politics, this accord of ours was hijacked and we don't stand to benefit from it anyhow. Our fight was not for our benefit, but our nation and our identity.'

(27th September, 2022, Kokrajhar)

The “legacy of demographic challenge” (Bhuyan, Bora, Gogoi, 2022) will also keep surfacing and hindering the overall inclusive development of the region with the potential of an outbreak of ethnic clashes or contentious group politics and violence.

Contentious Group Politics and Violence

What has been the common trend in all of the accords’ that was signed was the evidence of fragmentation of different groups and the absence of “unanimity in their terms and articulation” (Bhuyan, Bora, Gogoi, 2022, p. 27). The intra-group differences have been the real reason for an impasse in the Bodo movement and a significant hindrance to solving any long-term conflict and creating sustainable peace and order. New organizations’ with re-igniting the sentiments of the Bodo movement have already begun, such as BONSU (Bodo National Students’ Union) have started their new movement for the creation of separate statehood. Their major contention is that the BTR accord doesn’t resolve the ‘Indigenous land rights of Bodo people and was becoming guests in their land due to the failure of the government to protect the land rights (BONSU member testament).’

Another challenge to such political arrangements is the “demographic challenges” and the ever-growing ethnic-nationalism consciousness. The ethnic spurt in Assam can also be explained by the competitive political rewards accrued under the principle of protective discrimination. Myron Weiner (1983) argues that such ‘preferential politics’ followed by the Indian government have facilitated the mobilization of groups towards either preferences or extension and political struggles and backlash on the part of groups who are excluded from the preference. It also majorly influences the

political process, the ways groups are organized to make claims, the policies, and the coalitions that arise in such contentious collective politics. The case of Koch-Rajbanshis’ can be seen in this light, where they feel deprived of the preferences in the changing political climate with the establishment of the Bodoland autonomous council, which provides major political power to the Bodos in a multi-ethnic space. The Adivasis, on the other hand, are fighting for the restoration of their ‘tribal’ identity, which has been lost in their migration from their home origin to colonial Assam. Adivasis’ political mobilization for ST is significant because it reflects their attempt to improve their social standing in the ethnic hierarchy, aimed at not individual upliftment but the positional change of the group. There is a simultaneous mobilization by groups in a political environment where people fear exclusion in a historically shared space and territory. M.S.Prabhakara (2010) says such fear of exclusion has led to demand for ST which will ‘preempt’ such exclusion. And this has become a conducive factor for groups of ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal’ categories to ‘self-invent’ and ‘reinvent’ themselves, to push for changing their official status or reclassification as ST.

The obvious reasons for an identity-making process are political survival and advancement in a competitive sphere, where the limited resources are distributed unevenly among groups which then builds the sense of exclusion and betrayal, perpetuating inter-group competition and at times violence. The marginality experience by each group is unique and at times reinforced by the ‘ad-hoc’ measures of the state which are exclusionary and result in competitive claims and demands. The inconsistency and the ‘ad-hocism’ of the state policy in identifying tribal communities have resulted in contested local politics, with ‘official boundaries’ and discourses challenged.

CONCLUSION: WAY FORWARD

The inadequacy of the peace accords for the Bodos reflected the inability to end the conflict for more than three decades. The number of accords held with different groups tells the short-term goals indicated in each accord and the urgency of the Indian State to solve the issues temporarily rather than rebuilding the region more holistically keeping in solidarity inter-ethnic relations and ensuring that more splinter groups don't arise again from the Bodo community. The latest peace accord of 2020 should seek to avoid the resurgence of conflict and create conditions for the suitability and durability of peace. The security aspect in terms of social, political, and economic rights of the recently surrendered insurgent groups needs to be taken care of unconditionally through holistic amnesty policies. There is always a security threat to the lives of ex-insurgents in their effort to re-integrate their lives into civilian society. The recent killing of an ex-NDFB cadre in September 2021 in Kokrajhar district of Assam, on the pretext of suspicion, create security issues for ex-insurgents who have surrendered and are trying to re-integrate into civilian life. One of the central tasks is the requirement to include the signatories and the belligerent group in the council for the successful implementation of the program. In the face of the inconclusive peace accord, the only way to ensure future peace is to keep engaging in dialogues and negotiations and addressing the roots of the conflict.

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