

IMAGINED HOMELAND, CLAIMS AND COUNTER CLAIMS

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Introduction

Society is impossible without conflict. But the society is worse than impossible without control of conflict. - Paul Bohannan.

Every conflict especially in North East India is seen as a law and order problem. The only answer that the state seems to have while dealing with the dynamic range of conflicts here is to either sign ceasefire agreements or true pacts (Sengupta 2011:86). Peace accords are basically signed between the state and the other adversaries involved in some form of discord, in an attempt to bring about peace. The outcome of these attempts to mitigate conflicts sometimes results in more difficulties. As John Lederach Paul has pointed out, "Peace accords often become an agreement that represents the process for continuing the conflicts under new definitions." Contrary to the genuine expectations that peace accords will bring peace, in many cases that have actually leads to new conflicts.

The paper mainly deals with the issues that have come up after the formation of the BTAD area. For the people who are historically sharing the same space along with the Bodos, there is always a fear of exclusion. In a contemporary period, the conflict between the Bodos and Non-Bodos has become more vicious and contested, as has the political mobilization. There are few discussions around the paradoxes in a scheduled area. This paper

seeks to understand the post-2003 phenomena, the stories from the field of BTAD region, what happens to those staying on those homelands. The study is based on qualitative research, including field visits to displaced villages and interviews in the different parts of BTAD areas, Kokrajhar, Gosaigaon, Fakiragram, Moinaguri, Bijni and Goreswar and on secondary materials including books, articles, local newspapers. As a part of this, we attended different protest demonstrations of the stakeholders in Lakhidhar Bora Khetra, Dighalipukhuri and the Golden Jubilee celebration of the All Bodo Students Union in Dhekiajuli. Interviews were conducted by utilizing the snow ball sampling which includes the conflict-affected people, public figures, members of the BTC, and stakeholders and local NGO workers. Such an intense field visit helped to understand the issue in depth, rather than merely exploring it through secondary literature.

The objective of this paper is to look into how state-initiated institutions create unintended consequences to those staying in the same space, and how they often create another form of inequality among the residents. Why is there continuous form of violence in the BTAD region? How is the federal structural arrangement of local government not able to address the problems of all parties staying in the new arrangement?

Asymmetrical Federalism and its pros and cons

Normatively and empirically considered, the debate on asymmetric federalism is primarily about the politics of recognition that undergird multinational state's responses to competing nationalist claims of territorially concentrated sub-nation states. Granting differential constitutional status and powers to territorially concentrated sub-state nations under this rubric as a means to recognize their distinctiveness and to extend "self-rule" within the framework of "shared rule," as Jan Erk and Lawrence Anderson have reminded us in a different context, an inherent paradox, that is; it can be both "secession-inducing" and "secession-preventing" (Hausing 2014:87-111). On the other hand, another group of scholars have considered that recognition and accommodation of distinctive nationalist claims of sub-state nations through asymmetric federalism help in regulating conflicts and stabilize multinational federation. Normatively, asymmetric federalism is considered to promote

not only "what is good and valuable in society" (Gibbs 1999:73-93) but also to have "secured the conditions of an enlarged democratic setting" by leveraging group equality, inclusive participation and justice.

In North East India, asymmetrical federalism under sixth schedule was initially envisioned to primarily accommodate Nagas and other tribal groups in the hill areas of Assam at the time of writing the constitution. When the report on the sixth schedule, drafted by the Bordoloi Committee,¹ was debated between 5th and 7th September 1949, Brajeshwar Prashad opposed the placing of tribals under this arrangement. To him, doing so would be the surest way of inviting chaos, anarchy and disorder throughout the length and breadth of this country (Constituent Assembly Debates, Official Report, Vol 9, page 1009, 1949). Kuladhar Chaliha argued in the same debate that he saw an "old separatist tendency" in the proposed sixth schedule. He said that it may lead to "Tribalistan" or "Communistan" and to misrule, to a primitive rule. BR Ambedkar has justified the rationale of having a "different sort of scheme" for the tribal North East India by averring that unlike other tribal people, who are more or less Hinduised, more or less assimilated with the civilization and culture of the majority of the people in whose midst they live, tribals in Assam have their roots in their own civilization and their own culture" (Ibid).

Under the sixth schedule, district councils were given the powers to make laws with respect to: land use and allotment (not override the compulsory acquisition of land for public purpose by the government); forest management; irrigation, regulation of shifting cultivation; establishment of village or town councils; inheritance of property; marriage and social customs. Autonomous District Councils (ADC) have some rights to raise revenue, and to regulate moneylending and trading by non-tribals, but overall rely heavily on State governments for their finances.

The sixth schedule was not unanimously embraced by members of the Constituent Assembly either, some of whom expressed their desire for a more assimilationist approach, highlighting concerns that special provisions

¹Bordoloi Committee was a subcommittee of the Constituent Assembly's Advisory committee on the Rights of Citizens, Minorities, Tribals and Excluded areas.

exacerbated the likelihood of separatism. Kuladhar Chaliha, a member from Assam, averred, "If you see the background of this schedule you will find that the British mind is still there. There is the old separatist tendency and you want to keep them away from us". Later, plain tribal, Bodo also sought constitutional recognition of their community rights within Assam through the Bodoland movement, which resulted in the Bodo Accord of 1993 though it was not able to fulfill the aspirations of the Bodo people due to some of limitations in the Accord itself, for example, it left the question of its precise territorial jurisdiction open and provided that the government will "scrutinize the list of villages submitted by the Bodo activists having 50 percent and more tribal population which will be included in the BAC. For the purpose of providing a contiguous area, even villages having less than 50 per cent tribal population shall be included" (Memorandum of Settlement, Bodo Accord, 1993). The state assembly passed the BAC Act in the same year, which provided for a General Council to be constituted by 40 elect members including 30 seats reserved for the scheduled tribes. The Act also provided for functional autonomy to the BAC over a total 37 subjects (Sarmah 2002:87).

Though an interim BAC was formed later that year, elections for BAC could not be held because of the disagreement and confusion over the territorial jurisdiction of the new body. The BAC however could never exercise limited autonomy that was provided by the Act mainly because of insufficient financial powers and overwhelming domination of the state government over most of the transferred subjects (Nath 2003:533-545). However, the state-initiated process of a peace accord did not work out. The government of Assam unilaterally demarcated and declared the boundary of the BAC in the later part of 1993, which was rejected by the ABSU and BPAC and this resulted in large scale violence in different parts of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar and the gruesome massacre of Barpeta in 1994. In July 1994, ABSU launched an agitation against the non-implementation of the Accord and in 1996, it revived its demand for a separate state. The Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) was formed with an aim to create a separate state. Another group of youth formed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) to create a sovereign Bodoland through an armed struggle.

On 10 February 2003, the central government, the BLT and the state government signed a new accord for the creation of a "Bodoland Territorial Council" (BTC) under modified provisions of the sixth schedule of the Constitution. Under the sixth schedule, the BTC will have control over 10 major socio-political areas. These include land, any forests other than reserved forests, any canal or water course for the purpose of agriculture, any form of shifting cultivation, establishment of village and town committees, all matters relating to village and town administration, appointment of headmen for villages and towns, inheritance of property, conducting marriages and divorces and other social customs. The laws made by the Council in all the areas under its control must have the assent of the Governor of Assam. The governor also has the power to dissolve a council on the recommendation of a committee appointed by him for the purpose of reporting on its functioning. It can be seen that in the whole administrative set up, the Governor has all the authority. In the name of a local government, Governor, who is liable to the Center has been granted so much power and responsibility. This creates other problems during the legislation process at the local level in the Council. Thus, it can be argued that state-initiated arrangements brought these challenges and confusion which led to unintended consequences over the region. The next section of this paper discusses the new problems and issues in the post BTAD formation process.

Despite the inclusive participation of the tribals in the scheduled area, the federal order has created unintended consequences in respective areas. Sanjib Baruah argues that this order has propped up a problematic two-tier citizenship regime of privileged tribal "citizens" and deprived non-tribal "denizens" specially on de jure ownership of land and resources. This order which he termed as *cosmetic federal regional order* also sits uncomfortably with the existing political economy in North East India as the attempt to protect tribal land and identities through this order has been made ineffectual by the insidious nexus between the "foxy" tribal elites and non-tribal migrant "outsiders," thereby making the latter de facto land owners (Baruah 2003:44-66). The same scenario is being observed in the BTAD area. The non-Bodos are facing problems in transaction of ancestral land due to non-mutation into their own name. The space which was historically shared by both of

these communities, have become much contested. The region was created by incorporating four districts of Assam (Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar). Though some parts of the region were in the tribal belts and blocks, as a result of whole-sale inclusion many non-tribals also come under the scheduled areas. Inclusion of such areas has created a paradoxical situation in the autonomous region in contemporary period.

Mahanta has argued that the crisis in Bodoland is a reflection of the abdication of responsibility by the Indian state. First, the state has not addressed the structural issues that confront indigenous tribes like the Bodos since the dawn of Independence in 1947. Second, it has failed to address the multicultural, multilinguistic and multi-ethnic composite culture of the region; rather, it has continued with the policy of insularity and ethnic homeland followed by the colonial rulers. For him, instead of the appeasement policies towards the ethnic and religious minority groups, the state needs to promote an all-inclusive policy that ensures justice, fairness and representation to various communities living in the BTAD. The recommendation of the Bhupinder Singh Committee which was appointed by the Center to look into the autonomy issues of the plain tribes of Assam in 1991 must also be implemented (Mahanta 2013:49-58). The Committee suggested a structural framework of autonomy which will be more suited to the North Plain. The framework conceived of a three-tier politico-administrative structure for both the West-Central and Eastern sectors of the north plain. At the bottom, is a village council, known as Gami Jothum in the Bodo West-Centered area and Dolung Kebang in Mishing Eastern section. Above the village bodies, is a regional council is called Bodod Gudi Jothum, and Mishing Banke Kebang in the two sectors. So, the Committee conceived two Apex councils in the north plain, one for the west central sector and other for east sector. Based on the traditional pattern, they should be capable of exercising both legislative and executive functions.² It can be seen that administrative structure suggested by the committee is decentralized and seems to be participatory in nature. However, the state intervention in

²Chapter X, Summary of Recommendations, Bhupinder Singh Committee Report on BTAD

the BTAD can be seen as little problematic. The approach towards the resolution of the conflict seems to be driven by electoral and political benefits. Without addressing the structural issues, any strategy of conflict resolution is not going to work out.

Bethany Lacina argues that the Center's support for localized autocracy to maintain political stability has become a generalized pattern of governance in North East India. In the long term, this pattern of governance leads to the negative consequences. Due to the absence of institutionalized solutions, violence among intra-group rivalries and conflicts persists (Lacina 2009:998-1020). Thus, the potential for reemergence of severe insurgency continues, which can be observed from the formation of Kamatapur Liberation Front (KLO) and Adivasi Cobra Militant Force in the region.

What happens to the other ethnic groups within the autonomous region? The new arrangements may end violence between the state and the guerillas but will later turn their guns on the other groups in the area. (Wilson 2016:287-307). Wilson argues that the creation of the BTAD has ended the Tigers' struggle against the state and the central governments but not violence against other communities in the area. Indeed, these attacks have become more frequent and deadly since 2012. As will be seen, police investigations and other evidence demonstrates that the main perpetrators of these killings have been militants closely linked to the ruling BPF.

Therefore, it can be said that objective mechanism for peace building is not very fruitful. In the name of autonomy, power is transferred to only those who were once militant groups. It simultaneously allowsthem to retain weapons and monopolize political power in the new region. Two accords had been signed between the Bodo stakeholders and the state. But the non-inclusion of other communities in the area impactsefforts to bring peace to the region. In fact, the non-inclusive pre-agreement talks, and sidelining stakeholders are believed to contribute to the failure of the ultimate goal of the state in bringing peace to the region. For example, during the 2003 Bodo Accord, the Central government arranged 21 round table discussions with the BLT groups, whereas the organization which represents the other people residing in the region had not been invited. Though an invitation was sent to the Sanmilito Janagusthio Samgram Samiti, it was withdrawn by the Center. Such an exclusionary

agreement or peace talk agreement was not successful in bringing sustaining peace to the region.

The Bodo-Non-Bodo Conflict, story from the field

Picture1

Sarkar Murmu was not at his home in the Adivasi village of Kabrijuli on the evening of 23 December 2014. He had gone to Saralpara, the farthest village in the Ultapani forest along the India Bhutan border in lower Assam's Kokrajhar district, to mill paddy harvested from his fields. When he heard that there was trouble in his village, he rushed back, harvested from his village, only to run his life into the nearby jungle. He said, "As I reached my village I heard rattling sounds of firing and ran into the jungle and hide there. I came out around 8 pm, only when army personnel arrived. When I reached my house, I found my sons Cornel and Antony lying dead. Some villagers told me that militants dressed in black, came just as the sun had set and fired indiscriminately. Twelve persons, including my two sons, were killed in the attack." Sarkar Murmu could not find time to mourn the death of his sons as he and other survivors of the militant attack were moved to a relief camp at Saralpara the next morning.³

Picture 2

The president of All Bodoland Minority Students' Union (ABMSU) and a popular minority leader in Kokrajhar, Lafikul Islam, was gunned down on the afternoon of 1st August 2017 by unidentified assailants, who police said could be known to him. Islam was shot from point -blank range inside a hardware store at Titaguri, about 3 kilometers from the Kokrajhar town, at about 4:30pm. He had stopped there while returning from an ABMSU meeting in a nearby town. The two assailants came on a bike and fled after shooting him. An eyewitness said both wore helmets covering their face.⁴

³Talukdar, Sushanta. Killing Fields. *Frontline*, 2015
<https://www.frontline.in/the-nation/killing-fields/article6756707.ece> accessed on 21st June, 2018.

⁴<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/cbi-to-investigate-lafikul-islam-murder-case-4817773/> accessed on 21st June, 2018

"My brother took the lead role in getting a non-Bodo elected to Lok Sabha in 2014, he was threatened that time," Mahijul Islam, younger brother of Lafikul told to NTDV. "Lafikul was the prominent anti-establishment voice of Bodoland area. His voice has been silenced," said Rezaul Karim Darker, General Secretary of All Assam Minority Students Union.⁵

These two pictures construct a picture of the present BTAD, right after the formation of the BTC under sixth schedule. The conflict has manifested in more violent ways nowadays. Though the initial hope was peace in the "Killing fields" of Assam, as time flies the instances of violence have also been increasing in the region.

Picture 3

On 2 February 2018, a notification from the Land Revenue & Disaster Management department regarding the transfer of land in BTC area arrived. It has been notified that "As per the spirit of the Bodoland Territorial Act, 2003, no tribal could sell his/her land to any non-tribal and no non-tribal could sell his or her land to any non-tribal in the BTC area without the permission of the Council Authority, included in the tribal belts and blocks of BTC area created by Chapter X of Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886. As per the Sixth Scheduled Act of 2003 creating BTC area supersedes the State Act, therefore the protected class of people as defined in Chapter X of Assam Land Revenue Regulation 1886 would not be applicable in the BTC area and these protected class of people would be treated as nontribal people in the BTC area."⁶ Though the notification was withdrawn by the BTC chief, it still created a fear among the non-Bodos staying in the region which was reflected in the protest rally and demonstration in Udalguri and other parts of the BTAD where the slogans "We want our Land," "Dissolve BTC," and "No Conspiracy with the new land law" were heard.

The last picture shows the insecurity of the non-Bodo population staying in the region who once shared the same space along with the Bodos. The

⁵<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/student-leaders-killing-leaves-assams-kokrajhar-once-again-on-the-edge-1732734> accessed on 21st June, 2018

⁶The Land Revenue & Disaster Management Department of Bodoland Territorial Council issued this notice in January, 2018 and later withdrew it

attempt to remove Nath Yogi, Koch Rajbanshi, and Santhals from the protected class reveals the insecurity in the region. The recent attempt of the BTAD Council to remove the protected classes from the Clause X of the 1886 Land Revenue Act can be looked as an attempt to regain the land rights of Bodo people over their imagined or real homeland that they have lost gradually over a century due to their pre-modern land use practices as well as politically motivated government policies.

The denial of sixth scheduled status for the Bodos, which would have provided constitutional protection for their land and identity when they needed it the most, can be seen as one of the primary causes leading to the alienation of tribal land in the post-Independence years. The Bangladesh war added to the changing demographic scenario of the state, with several lakhs of immigrants, mostly Bengali Muslims, staying back in the Brahmaputra Valley (Mishra, 2012). Going deeper into this issue, the reason of land alienation has its roots in other causes also. The Bodos were the Jhum cultivators, who didn't settle in a particular place for a longer period of time. As a result of their shifting cultivation, they routinely lost their land to the other settler communities. Without proper, formal land documents, they were unable to stake their claim over a particular land. As a result, land alienation took place at their own areas. In ninetieth century most of the Bodos were still under the influence of shifting cultivation and some of them were also practicing intermediary forms like plough-based agriculture with shifting modalities (Choudhury 2007:48). Amalendu Guha, who makes an intensive investigation into the problem after consulting almost all extant records comes to the following conclusion: (Guha 1991:69)

- (1) The Bodos continued with their shifting hot cultivation as late as the nineteenth century
- (2) Where they went for the plough cultivation, they continued semi-nomadic habits and opted for a settled habitation at a later stage
- (3) It is not possible to say when actually the transition to plough cultivation began but evidence shows that Bodos were "going through a process of learning the use of plough till late nineteenth century"

As Prabhakara argues that the land question in Assam is extremely complicated. Even more than the identity and ethnicity, it was the land question that invested the Assam agitation with a measure of legitimacy. Vast areas of the state have for years, and even decades, been settled upon and cultivated by people who have no formal claims on the land (Prabhakara 2012:212). Under the Saadulla's scheme of "Grow More Food" the grazing areas were opened for the settlement of the East Bengal origin peasant population. As the land is the exclusive identity for the plain tribal in Assam, they started losing it, i.e. land to the settlers of the region. In August 1943 the Saadulla ministry adopted a new resolution on land settlement which provided for the opening up of grazing reserve areas and wastelands in the districts of Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup to immigrants from Bengal as part of the "Grow More Food" programme aimed at helping the war economy (Mishra, 2012:36-42). Referring to the scheme of settlement and opening up the reserved grazing areas for peasants from East Bengal, Amalendu Guha writes, "S P Desai, a senior ICS man, was appointed Special Officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserve could be declared as surplus, available for settlement. Desai reported that the forcible occupation of grazing lands by immigrants had already taken place on a large scale, even in predominantly Assamese and tribal areas. He concluded that there was no surplus land available for new settlement. Ignoring the report, Saadulla's Muslim League Coalition government threw select professional grazing reserves open for settling immigrants (Guha 1977:281-282). As a result of these schemes, the tribal land alienation continued and vast areas of Western and Central parts of Assam were opened for the migrants. Speaking at the budget session of the Assam assembly in March 1945, Gopinath Bardoloi put up a tough fight against this policy of the Saadulla government. Referring to the anti-tribal policy of the Saadulla government, Bardoloi said: The government resolution makes no provision for Tribal Blocks in areas other than places which have been termed as Tribal Blocks. This will make tribal people move to the hills if they require land for settlement and cultivation (Mishra 2012:38). The tribal people are spread all over the state, apart from the designated 45 tribal belts and blocks demarcated formally as areas where transfer of land to non-tribal is not permitted. But the on-ground reality is

that few of these tribal belts and blocks are exclusively for the tribal people. Despite not having formal legislation, alienation of the tribal land has been ongoing, pushing tribals to remote forest areas. Once there, they become encroachers because existing legislation protects forest land. (Prabhakara, 2012). Though the State Congress had created a number of "tribal belts" and "tribal blocks" in the 1950s, which could be owned only by scheduled caste and tribes, encroachment from pre-colonial period and the ongoing land grabbing continues. Due to the mass encroachment, eviction from these tribal belts and blocks is impossible today. Bodo leaders alleged that besides the encroachment, the state government has taken six lakhs acres for the government project, while a maximum number of Bodos remain landless today. Thus, the reduced land holding size ultimately forced them to enter in the reserve forest.

On the one hand they are alienated from their own land and on the other hand, they have become the victims of various government schemes in the name of protection of forest areas, rendering them encroachers. This has marginalized them not only from the mainstream societies but also made them more vulnerable in their own spaces. For example, the AGP government after coming to power for the first time, passed a law legitimizing the eviction of "unauthorized persons" staying in the forests and other reserved lands. As a result, the tribals were forcefully evicted, beaten mercilessly and their houses were burnt. The Bodos have taken the lead in raising their voices against such inequities, charging that AGP is anti-tribal and that its main target is the tribal population of Assam (Dash 1989:335-342). It can be seen that Bodo land has its roots in the opening up of the wasteland schemes and is the source of misery of all problems in the regions.

Contested ideas of belonging and citizenship have always been woven into the complex history of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts in Assam. The creation of Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003, as well as the continuing movement for a separate state of Bodoland have become the points of conflict between Bodo and non-Bodo groups. The idea of citizenship has always been debated in different public engagements. The stakeholders of the non-Bodo group always claimed that they receive second-class citizenship in the region. Once again, we see a dilemma related to identity, and the formation of BTAD

raises some conflicts in the area. The conflict is seen between the Bodos and non-Bodos over issues of ethnicity and language. Jogeshwar Kalita⁷ said that, the non-Bodos lead a life of second-class citizens in their own area, where they are treated as beasts by the Bodo militant groups. Nowadays even the ration cards and NRC procedures are being done in the Bodo language, he argued.⁸ There is an attempt to impose the Bodo language on the communities such as the Adivasi, Koch Rajbanshis and Rabhas. Though the Bodo movement emerged as a opposition to the 1985 peace accord, the activities of the Assam movement have interestingly become their reference point. The strategies and the practices of mobilization are unlike the same with the Assam movement.

Creation of the terms "*Boro and O Boro*" were the reflections of the conflict after the BTAD formation. People were divided on ethnic lines, under these two umbrella terms. O Boro Surakshya Committee, All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union, All Assam Adivasi Students Union, Nepali Students Union and All Assam Muslim Students were some actors which represented the interest of the non-Bodo people. The rise of the Kamatapur demand by the Koch Rajbanshi in the region is seen to be a counter movement to the demand for a separate Bodoland in the region.

Land Transfer Issue

One reason for conflict between the Bodos and other minority groups is also the difficulty faced in the land transfer issue. In a scheduled area, it is difficult for non-tribal people to buy and sell their land. In different interviews, it was reflected that people were scared of thinking about their future as they could not transfer their forefather's land to their own name. As a result, a process of *Land Alienation* has started to take place in the BTAD areas and the land holding size of the non-tribal families has been decreasing. The issue of land transfer has been raised by all the stakeholders of the non-Bodo organizations. They face a problem when they need to transfer this land.⁹

⁷Jogeshwar Kalita is the General Secretary of O Bodo Surakshya Committee, a non-Bodo organization of Assam

⁸The writer attended a public meeting organized by O Boro Surakshya Committee at Lakhidhar Borah Khetra, Dighalipukhuri in Guwahati

⁹Interview with Chand Mohammad, member of O Boro Surakshya Committee, 30 November 2017, Goreswar

On the other hand, the non-Bodo people in some parts of Goreswar had started to sell their land to the Bodo people, as nobody is ready to buy such land due to the difficulties in transferring it at a later stage.¹⁰ People don't want to stay in the conflict prone areas where violence and threatening from the NDFB has become normalized. Hence, they just want to sell their land in the BTAD area and try to buy it in the other parts of Assam. This process of *passive land alienation* has started in the BTAD area among non-Bodo people of the area. In the 2012 violence, the people from the Titaguri village were affected and displaced. After the situation reverted to normal, people were not willing to return to their own villages because of the fear of violence at the hands of NDFB militants who usually come to their villages and collect tax for residing in the village.¹¹ As a result, they have lost property and agricultural land in the Titaguri village of Kokrajhar. Repeated violence in the region sometimes affects the question of citizenship among these villagers of Titaguri after losing the land and property in the violence. We have met those displaced by the violence in Fakiragram, Monaguri and Bodagaon near Khasipara, which is located in the west of Kokrajhar, where they used to stay in houses provided by the Azmal Foundation in collaboration with the Zamiat-E-Ulame-E Hind.

A land where nobody is majority and only the rights of a particular group are ensured, has created the most suspicious situation after the BTC accord. The non-Bodo population of BTAD believes that the accord brings the political right and constitutional rights of the Bodos but does not respond to the aspirations of the non-Bodos living in the territory.¹² The organizations such as ABMSU(All Bodoland Minority Student Union), AKRASU(All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union), AASU(All Adivasi Students Union) started uniting themselves under the banner of non-Bodo

¹⁰A discussion with the members of the O Boro Surakshya Committee, 30 November 2017, Goreswar

¹¹Interview with Annuar Hussain of Azmal Model Village, 28 November 2017, Vodagaon, Khasipara in Kokrajhar district

¹²Interview with JugeswarKalita, President of O Boro Surakshya Committee, 30 November 2017, Goreswar

which resulted in the demonstrations and counter demonstrations against the BTC accord and the making of an ethnic homeland, that is exclusively for the Bodos.

Issue of Boundary Demarcation

The O Boro Surakshya Committee wants the government to review the BTC accord and remove all villages such as Bhogpur where there is no Bodo people in the village, and Kanuhar, where there are less than 2% Bodos in the village from the BTAD area.¹³ Sonmilito Jatiya Okaya Mancha conducted a huge protest against the formation of BTAD area by including 9 villages where there is less than 2% people area from the Bodo community.

Accessibility to public office and employment opportunity:

They are in demand of Xomo Adhikar¹⁴ for all people in the region. Prodip Roy the President of All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union (AKRASU) said that the ex BLT leaders have benefitted from the BTC accord, and that nothing much has changed after the formation of the BTAD. "We want all the communities to be developed and get all the equal rights under the Council", he said. He even raised the security issue of the general people, who believe murder cases have become a common phenomenon in the region. The illegal arms of the ex BLT leaders should be taken away by the government, so that the people in the area can live peacefully. Any job interview and advertisement comes only in the name of ST people. In BTAD area, Bodos were the dominant tribes. This is a clear *deliberate denial of opportunity* to the non-tribal people.¹⁵ Thus it seems that this denial of opportunity to the non-Bodos adds to creating a discourse of others in terms

¹³Interview with the members of O Boro Surakshya Committee, Goreswar, and attendance at their meeting in the Lakhidhar Bora Khetra, near Dighali Pukhuri, February 2018

¹⁴*Xomo Adhikar* means Equal Rights for all, along with the Bodos in the region. There are Koch Rajbanshi, Kalita, Rabhas, Muslims, Nepalis and the adivasi people in the region. According to the stakeholders, Xomo Adhikar refers to equal representation in the council, land rights in the region and right to access the public offices in the region

¹⁵Interview with Prodip Roy, 29 November 2017, Gosaigaon

of employment and other government facilities which might further lead to retardation in other communities progress. However, the idea of xomoadhikar has been raised by all of the stakeholders of the non-Bodo organizations. Eventually, the constitutional goal is to bring all such tribes (backward) to the mainstream of Indian life. To achieve this, the first step is to carve out a separate system of administration to take care of such tribes until they reach a stage where assimilation with the mainstream is possible (PIL NO 13 of 2004, 2018, Gauhati High Court). So, this idea of Xomo Adhikar has at times no value as it is going against the ethos of the constitutional validity of the country.

Regional autonomy without a majority

As per the census of 2011, population pattern of four districts of BTAD are mentioned as below. Out of the total population, 33.30% belong to Bodo and other tribes and on the other hand, 66.70% belong to non-Bodo people.

District	Total Population	Bodo and other tribes	Percentage	Non Bodos	Percentage
Kokrajhar	8,86,999	2,84,213	32.04%	6,02,786	67.96%
Chirang	4,81,818	1,83,876	38.16%	2,97,942	61.84%
Baksa	6,53,773	3,39,825	35.63%	6,13,948	64.37%
Udalguri	8,32,769	2,42,686	29.14%	5,90,083	70.70%
Total	31,55,359	10,50,627	33.03%	21,04,732	66.70%

From the above table it is seen that a majority of the population in BTAD are non-Bodos. There is a larger conspiracy to drive out the non-Bodo people particularly the Muslims from the BTAD area to create a Bodo majority area as pointed out by the stakeholders of non-Bodo organisations. After the formation of BTAD, kind of Nrigusthio Safai Abhijan¹⁶ has been going on as claimed by ABMSU leader, Jaidul Islam. To create a "Bodoland" the process of killings is underway under this council. This ethnic cleansing has been used as a method to increase the

¹⁶For the stakeholders of non-Bodo organization Nrigusthio Safai Abhiyan means Ethnic cleansing.

population of the Bodos—a minority in this area—by reducing the population of other communities. This is going to change the demography of the region which may help the Bodos in making their own imagined homeland, i.e Bodoland.

Claim for separate homeland within BTAD

The demand for ST status by the Koch Rajbanshi along with a demand for a separate Kamatapur encompassing the areas in both Assam and the West Bengal has been coming up more strongly after the formation of the BTAD. Though the issue was already there, it has gained a new dimension after the formation of the BTAD. One reason is the opportunities in the region. In the BTAD area, most jobs are advertised under the ST category.¹⁷ One of the major ethnic groups residing in the BTAD area - the Rajbanshis - pose a distinct challenge to Bodo dreams of united homeland spread over both the Northern and Southern parts of the Brahmaputra. Forest rights should also be given to the Adivasi people, eviction has become a regular and normal phenomenon in the region. On the other hand, the Adivasi people in the BTAD are also demanding ST status for their development. As a result, the development is unequal.¹⁸

In order to check the sudden upsurge among the non-Bodo population within the Bodoland, Bodos have stepped up with their demand for a separate Bodoland state. To counter this, the Rajbanshi have been consistently demanding a separate state for themselves, while Adivasis too, in a recent move, have raised the demand for a separate homeland within the BTC.

Thus, the new federal arrangement or the state-initiated peace resolution process has created inequality among the residents of the same space along with generating similar demands from other mobilized groups. Post BTAD formation has witnessed an emergence of new tribal ruling elite and unprivileged tribal as well as non-tribal groups in the region. The whole

¹⁷Prodip Roy raised this point during the interview during field visit, 29 November 2017, Gosaigaon

¹⁸Interview with Sanjay Marandi, the Ex Adivasi Cobra militant of Assam, 28 November 2017, Gosaigaon

BTAD region has now witnessed a Kokrajhar Centric Development which was not the objective of new federal set up. Jebra Ram Basumatary who was an activist of the Bodoland movement, said that good governance is very much needed within its own limits. Political power is being misused in the council. The leaders, after coming to power, forgot about their promises and responsibility towards the public. The structure should have some process which should hold them responsible and accountable.¹⁹

However, this study has observed some reconciliation initiatives during the field visit which are more beneficial in the peace building process compared to the state initiated peace talks. During the field trip to the Kokrajhar district, we went to the NERSWN office. NERSWN is basically an NGO who works for the youth for generating employments in the region. The initiative that was taken by the NERSWN seems to be the practice of reconciliation. The NGO mainly generated employment opportunity for the unemployed youth. The Adivasi and the Bodo girls were busy in weaving during our visit. Within a land which is volatile in the name of identity and ethnicity, the hostels of the NERSWN give another message of peace in the colorful hand weaving clothes that they have made. In the hostels in the NERSWN were girls from the Kokrajhar, Gosaigaon and the remote villages of Chirang.



Picture: At a weaving center of NERSWN during the field visit on 29th November, 2017

¹⁹Interview with Jebra Ram Muchahary in the Bodoland Children's Home, 30 November 2017, Bijni

The coordinator of the NERSWN, Nakul Nazary informed us that the NGO holds the meeting in the conflict-prone areas by inviting both the communities which are engaged in the clashes. In 2012, after the violence among the Bodos and the Muslims, they organized a peace talk among the Bodo leaders, the Minority leaders, the civil administration and the local people in Gosaigaon²⁰. Arnai²¹ and the gamusa of Adivasi were being exchanged in the year 2014 between the Bodos and the Adivasis in the Kokrajhar where all the Adivasi and Bodo leaders were invited by the NERSWN²². Through these cultural exchanges, and as a process of peace talks, football matches between the Bodo and the Adivasi villages were organised. Recently in September 2017, a football match between the Bodo and the Adivasi girls were organized by in Kokrajhar where team of Joharibeel (exclusively Adivasi girls), Joharbari (Bodo girls) and Nilajura (a mix team of Adivasi and Bodo girls) participated. Thus NERSWN believes in a mix community approach to resolve the conflicts among the different communities. The cultural dialogue, living with each other and sharing opinions between all the communities residing in the area are taken as an initiative for bringing peace to the land.

Such a civil society response is always needed in a vulnerable society. It can be seen that the rate of violence in the nearby villages of the NGO, is comparatively less especially the inter community violence, in the region.

Conclusion:

The creation of the BTAD has not been successful in mitigating the inter-ethnic and the anti-state violence in the region. The major episodes of interethnic and anti-state violence that occurred in 2008, 2012 and more

²⁰Interview with Nakul Nazary, co-ordinator of NERSWN, 29 November 2017, NERSWN office, Kokrajhar

²¹Symbol of Bodo culture having equivalent status with Gamosa in Assamese culture

²²North East Research and Social Work Networking (NERSWN) is a Non-profit organization in Kokrajhar of Assam. In the office of NERSWN, we met the co-ordinator and finance head, Uttam Narzary and spoke about the initiatives of peace building at the local level specially in the conflict-ridden areas of the BTAD region by organizing football match and cricket match among the different communities of the area and also by inviting stakeholders of various communities in the BTAD area

recently in 2014 have given the example of inability of this federal arrangement. The implementation of the sixth schedule in the form of BTAD has led to the emergence of several dynamics that undermine the effectiveness of this arrangement including the emergence of militarized Bodo ruling elites, competitiveness among the Bodo political elites, a new form of land alienation along with the issues of displacement, the non-Bodo assertion along with a threat of moving to the arm rebellion and communalism. The problem is not with the political autonomy, but the form of political autonomy that has given a new move in the conflicts, because this form of autonomy has not fulfilled the interest of a single community in the region. A satellite form of autonomy (suggested by Bhupindir Singh committee report) or multi layered autonomy is needed for the advancement of the people of BTAD so that everyone can get the xomo adhikar.

Land Issue in BTAD has been the cause or emergence of a major part of all troubles. Due to the failure of Line system along with the wrong implementation of land regulation in the tribal belts and blocks resulted in the presence of other communities in some parts of the region. The claim for an exclusive homeland for the indigenous communities is closely connected with the issue of exclusive land rights and control over the land. The issue of land alienation and loss of land of the tribals of the region to non-tribals has been discussed since the early decades of the 20th century (Pathak 2012:19-23). Leaders of the Bodo community during our field visit have raised their voice against the wrong implementation of the System of Tribal belts and blocks. Due to the state-initiated migration policy and colonization of the wasteland by the outsider in the tribal belts and blocks, the demography of the area has been started changing which leads to alienation from their land as well as culture.

The creation of BTAD (implementation of sixth schedule) was a means of mitigating the violence in the region along with the protection of land, language and culture of the Bodo people. But the contemporary picture of the BTAD does not reflect that. Now, it can be seen that the structure itself has created conflicts and it motivates the groups to engage in violence. In an aspiring dream of ethnic homeland, the militants as well as the aggressive activist have created clashes among the other communities in the region. All

the interviewees of non-Bodo organisations (Zaidul Hussain, the president and leader of ABMSU, Brazen Mahanta, Convenor of Sanmilito Janagusthio Sangram Samiti) termed this violence, especially after the creation of BTAD against the Muslim as well as other communities as "Nri Gusthio Safai Abhijyan" (Ethnic Cleansing), "Safai Abhijyan". This violence is being perpetuated so that they can create a minimum majority in the area for the creation of a separate statehood. *This kind of federal structure shows that how autonomy can again lead to conflict and segregate other communities in the region.* These are some of the unintended consequences of the state initiated federal arrangement.

The case of the **representation** of the other communities in the Council has become problematic. An interviewee argued that the Council is only for the development of the Bodo people. But what about the other communities who consisted more than 70% of the total population in the region? The self-autonomy to the community is not a problem for the others if the others (non-Bodo) are equally being represented in the federal structure. The political rights are being neglected along with social and economic rights of the region. The people belonging to the other communities are being charged for the "be-sarkari tax"²³ (fund is being collected by the militants) and they are afraid of share such things in front of others, because people have seen the brutal violence perpetuated by the militants.²⁴

Identity politics in Bodoland revolves around issues concerning tribal identity (Adivasi and Kochs are also demanding ST status), access to public offices, tribal rights to land and anti-immigrant politics. These issues become the dominant political narrative in the BTAD on which Bodo political parties and organizations mobilize their co-ethnics. Even this model of federal arrangement actually leads to the crisis of citizenship of the "others" in the region which is really detrimental to the ethos of a democratic society.

²³The Non Bodo people living in the BTAD area have to pay taxes to the militant organizations specially NDFB. An interviewee during our field visit stated that all the village members have to pay the "tax" according to their status of living. If the villagers don't pay, the village head is being picked up the militants.

²⁴Interview with Brajen Mahanta, Co convenor of Sanmilito Janagusthio Sangram Samiti at Studio Nilima Office, Guwahati, on 11th February, 2018.

In BTAD it can be seen how the new local governance has turned into the localized autocracy. In the absence of institutionalized and rule-based means of politics, changes to the local distribution of power has led to a kind of autocracy. The absence of the local election for VCDC (Village Council Development Committee) has proved the dominance of the ruling cliques in the region. To form the committee of VCDC, the people are selected for the purpose of the fulfilling the interest of the ruling elites.

The discourse that starts with demand for homeland to the push back of non-Bodos as second class citizens has started the process of ethno-nationalism because they believe that nationalism is inherent, one can neither acquire it if one does not have, nor change it if one does; it has nothing to do with individual will. As Hussain observes (Hussain, 2012) learning to live harmoniously respecting each other's right to life and dignity in a historically evolved shared homeland is perhaps the fundamental condition for deepening democracy in the region. But the question whether the Bodo elites who have acquired a privileged position through years of struggle are willing to consider BODOLAND as a *historically evolved shared homeland* or will continue with their efforts to reclaiming their lost imagined homeland, still remains.

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