

Bodo Conflicts and Signing of Accords

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Abstract:

India's North-East region (NER), comprising of eight states- Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, is inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups. The region is juxtaposed with a large number of challenges simultaneously- armed conflict, ethnic conflict, poverty, inequality, etc. A multicultural, poly-ethnic region, ethnicity and the ethno-nationalists sentiments of the numerous communities of the region have often led fanning political and ethnic conflicts. Ethnic violence can be categorised in three different types- first, there is violence fabricated by armed ethnic organisations in order to achieve their goals, often targeted against the government, involving rival organisations in the same ethnic groups or even against civilians belonging to other ethnic groups. Second, violence is set up by student (and other) organisations, including protests against the government through road blockades, the burning of bridges, and sometimes clashes with police or para-military forces. Third, there are inter-group clashes. Assam, the second largest state of the NER has been in turmoil and agitation since long. The Bodoland region is one of the most disturbed areas in Assam. Inhabited by various ethnic groups like the Bodos, Gorkhas, Assamese, Santhals, Bengali speaking Muslims etc., this region has witnessed several conflicts.

Keywords: Bodo, Bodoland Movement, Ethnic Conflict.

Introduction:

The Bodos, who number around 1.4 million populations in Assam according to the 2011 census, are important part of the culturally diverse state, Assam. Historians claim the Bodos (another name for Kacharis) as the autochthons of Assam (Endle, 1911). According to Edward Albert Gait, the Bodos are the earliest known inhabitants of Brahmaputra Valley (Gait, 1906). According to Rai Bahadur K.L. Barua, the Bodos constituted the population of the Assam valley during the time of Kurukshetra war or even earlier (Barua, 1966).

The Bodos are from Tibeto-Burman family, an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group migrating from South West China. Sidney Endle remarks that the Bodos are alike the Mongolian stock the based on their features and general appearances (Endle, 1997). Their language has been derived from the Assam Burmese branch of Tibeto Burman sub-family. There are various communities in North East India who belong to the same linguistic family. They are Dimasa, Rabha, Kachari, Deori, Lalung, Tiwa, Mech, Saraniya, Mishing, Garo, Sonowal, Chutiya, Moran, Hajong, Tippera, Mahalia, Koch or Rajbangshi etc., who comprise the greater Bodo race.

Methodology:

The study is a historical one. The work is primarily based on secondary sources which include literary texts like related books, journals, and published materials on internet. However, little information has been collected from field work too.

Historical Background of the Bodos:

The ancient literature of India refers to the Bodo kings who ruled Assam from time immemorial. In the age of Mahabharata, Assam was known as Pragjyotishpur. According to Mahabharata, 'Mairang' as Aryanised into 'Mahiranga Danava' ruled the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisa (Dutta cited in Mosahari, 2011). 'Mairang' is a Bodo word (Das cited in Mosahari, 2011), meaning paddy or rice. The name of the king was 'Mairong-dao' (dao means hero), and the original Bodo name was Sanskritised into 'Mahiranga Danava'. King Mahiranga was a Kirata or Mongolian, and belonged to the great Bodo race. Hence, the people belonging to this race who inhabited the country were called Kiratas and Mlechhas, as they were Mongolian immigrants. After him, many other Bodo kings ruled the kingdom of Pragjyotisa or Kamrup (according to Kalika-Purana and Vishnu-Purana, Pragjyotishpur came to be known as Kamrup) (Mosahari, 2011), but with names of different dynasties.

When the Mughals invaded Kamrupa, they were defeated by the Bodo kings. With a view of wielding the Bodo kingdoms into Tai Ahom nation, the Ahoms led by Sukapha first made friendship with the Bodo kings of Bodousa of Moran dynasty and Thakumpha of Boro or Borahi dynasty but, later on, fought with them and defeated them, but treated them as equals.

Before the treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the Ahoms ruled over Assam for merely 600 years and successfully established a well-integrated administrative system in Assam (Basumatary, (2012). However, in the 18th century, problems arose within the kingdom when it lost power to rebels of the Moamoria rebellion (revolt by the Moamarias or Matakas who were the adherents of the Moamara Sattra). Though the Ahoms were able to recapture power, they were encircled with problems, which led to the Burmese invansion of Assam in the 19th century (Baruah, 1993). As such, the Ahoms seeked help from East India Company. In 1824, the First Anglo-Burmese War broke out and the Burmese were defeated, and the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed which led to the renouncing of power by the Burmese. Thus, the British became the soul masters of Brahmaputra Valley, and started consolidating their power in whole of Assam. However, Tularam Senapati, a Bodo chief was ruling in the hills of North Cachar, but he too was pressured to give up Central Cachar in 1834. With his death, the entire kingdom was lost to the British in 1854 (Sonowal, 2013). Subsequently, the whole lands of the Bodos were occupied by the Britishers and the Bodos became the subjects of the Britishers.

With the passage of time, the Bodos lost their significance in the region. In the early 20th century, the Britishers encouraged immigration from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in order to undertake development and cultivation of wastelands. The colonial administration also brought multitude of landless for tea plantation, road construction, oil mines and coalmines. The huge influx of immigrants had shaken the fabric of tribal economy, culture and society. The massive increase in immigrant population had put tremendous pressure on tribal land because they proceeded to settle in the reserved forests under belts and blocks areas which were indicated for the tribal people. The tribals were evicted

from their own lands and as such were under exertion for livelihood and other essential resources. There arose a period of darkness for the Bodo people. However, Gopinath Bordoloi (first Chief Minister of Assam) undertook various measures to free the protected land from encroachers. He gave emphasis on Line System to prevent alienation of Tribal lands. On November 1939, CM Bordoloi passed “The Land Resolution” that guaranteed the protection to tribals. On the contrary things seemed to be disappointing after Syed Sadullah became the chief minister of Assam. The level of damage was out of imagination. The motive of the Britishers “grow more food” was subverted to “grow more muslims” as more and more muslim migrants from East Bengal were welcomed. The limit of damage was something that has never been before (Pegu, 2004). The resolution passed by Bordoloi ministry was not executed. Saadullah formulated a policy known as the “Land Development Scheme” and settled all the landless Muslim Immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley. By then, the Muslim League became precipitant and demanded the opening up of grazing reserves furthermore and discontinuance of the Line System. In 1946, when the Congress came to power again, the “Assam Land Revenue Regulations, 1886, was amended and reserved tribal belts were created in different regions. Ten tribal belts and 23 tribal blocks were constituted to check encroachment of tribal land. But because of some manipulative officials, most of the provisions were subverted and hence, continued pressure kept mounting on land held by the indigenous people because of immigration from East Pakistan (Sarma, 2017).

The areas inhabited by the Bodos had already been over crowded by the migrants. Even the Assamese speaking non-Mongoloids were not worried about the predicament of the Bodos. They were interested in transforming the Bodos into Hindus and Assamese speakers (Pegu, 2004). However, it was Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who guided the Bodos in finding the route towards self consciousness. They came to a position to become concerned about their identity and existence.

The Status of Bodos after Independence

In the post colonial period, the tribals had to be dependent on the Hindus, upper ruling class. They were bereaved from the advantages of industrialization which created a deep sense of discontent. Moreover, the imposition of Assamese language as the official language of the state made the Bodos feel unsafe and insecure about their culture and political identity. In 1967, a political organisation named as Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) came into existence. The PTCA demanded ‘Udayachal’, a union territory in 1973. The All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) formed in 1967 also started to raise voice. But because of the internal conflict within PTCA, and their electoral alliances with the then Assam Government, the PTCA failed to lead the Bodo sentiments. As such, ABSU accomplished support from the Bodo mass in 1987 and converted the demand from union territory to separate state Bodoland. From 1987 onwards, the movement was governed by ABSU under Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma. At the sametime, Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) was formed with a view to unite all the Bodos regardless of age and political connection.

On October 3, 1986 an insurgent group of the Bodos known as Boro Security Force (Br.S.F.) was formed under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary which aimed to free the Bodo people from the suppression of the Indian Government by creating a Sovereign Boroland (Bodoland) in the areas of north of the Brahmaputra river (Mosahari, 20011). The organisation started creating chaos and destruction by opting the path of extensive violence. However, the ABSU did not support the demand of

the Bd.S.F., as they promulgated that the Bodos only desired for a separate state within India. Later on, Bd.S.F. was renamed as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in November 25, 1994.

Bodoland Movement

The Bodoland movement was the result of the growth of ethnonationalism in the Bodo community. When the ABSU realized that the Government of Assam did not care the grievances and problems of the Bodos, it raised 92 demands and submitted memorandum to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. As the Government did not respond to the demands, it started a mass movement on 2nd March, 1987 for a separate state by holding mass rallies in all district headquarters and important places of Assam. The BPAC, along with the ABSU, jointly launched agitation. A huge rally was organised at Judge's field on 12th June 1987, in Guwahati where the slogan "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty" was coined. At the sametime, the statement of the then Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta "we will shed every drop of blood to prevent fragmentation of Assam" added fuel to fire. It was reacted through mass participation to the agitation (Barpujari, 1998). Since then, mass rallies, demonstrations, roads and rail blockades, prolonged bandhs, submission of memorandum, destruction of public properties, and disruption of communication and supply of essential goods became the features of the movement. The NDFB also started to create unrest in the state. As such, the state authority promulgated section 144 CrPC to prevent public meetings and organization (Deka, 2014).

Creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council

The intensity of the Bodoland agitation brought miseries in the region. However, after prolonged series of talks held among Government of India, Government of Assam and the leaders of ABSU and BPAC, the Memorandum of Settlement popularly known as Bodo Accord was signed by signatories such as Mr. Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary, the then President of ABSU, Mr. Subhas Basumatary, Chairman of BPAC, Mr. K.S. Rao, the Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Sri Hiteswar Saikia, the then Chief Minister of Assam and Sri Rajesh Pilot, the then Union Minister of the State for Home Affairs, with an agreement for the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) on 20th February 1993. Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary was appointed as the Chief of the Interim Council of the BAC under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution (Mosahari, 2011). The objective of the accord was to provide maximum autonomy within the framework of the Constitution to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement.

Creation of Bodoland Territorial Council

The creation of BAC could not fulfil the aspirations of the Bodos as it failed to demarcate a clear-cut boundary, and various clauses of the Accord were not fulfilled. Hence, the ABSU disowned the accorded BAC and decided to restart their movement. There arose issue of transfer of tribal land patta to illegal immigrants by the government. The Bodos, by now, started to feel insecure about their identity and survival. As a result, a massive ethnic conflict took place in the western part of the northern bank of Brahmaputra Valley. The ABSU revolutionaries undertook violence directly or indirectly in agitation.

The region witnessed violence in its top height. Inter-ethnic clashes between Bodo and Bengali speaking Muslims on July 1994 resulted in deaths of over hundred (officially 68) and internal displacement of 70,000 people (Barpujari, 1998). In the month of May 1996, three beheaded bodies were recovered

dressed in *Dokhowna* (traditional dress of Bodo women) girls near an Adivasi dominated village in Kokrajhar district, resulting in Bodo-Santhal ethnic riot. This riot caused loss of huge number of lives and properties of both the communities. It also led to the displacement of 42,214 families (OKDISCD, 2008).

On 18 June, 1996, the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) came into existence as another insurgent outfit with the demand of a separate state of Bodoland within Indian territory. They indulged in violent and unlawful activities like bombing, extortion, destruction of railway tracks and other Government properties. The ideological differences between different Bodo insurgent groups led to the internal killings of both the militant outfits and causing murder of Swmbla Basumatary, the then President of ABSU, Bineswar Brahma, the then President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha and many other prominent Bodo figures in 1996 (Banarjee and Roy, 2010).

In the same year, a delegation team of ABSU met H.D. Dev Gowda, the then Prime Minister and submitted a memorandum demanding a separate state of Bodoland. They also met Ram Vilas Paswan, the then Union Railway Minister and requested him to extend his support in solving the Bodoland issue (Mosahari, 2011).

With the passage of time, when no positive response was given by the Government, the Bodo extremists stroke up into violent activities. Several bridges on Highways and on railway tracts were blown. A powerful bomb-blast was made in the Brahmaputra Passenger Mail. Extreme violence ulcerated the north valley of Brahmaputra in Assam. The Bodo militants began an ethnic cleansing campaign in the valley. Large number of people were killed, and many were homeless (Nath, 2003). According to United Nations' High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) and Human Rights Feature (HRF) report March 16, 2001, there were two lakhs internally displaced people living in 78 relief camps in Kokrajhar district.

In the year 1997, many Gorkhas settled in the BAC area were killed by the NDFB militants as a kind of reprisal against non-Bodos (Baruah, 1999). They were shot down when they failed to pay the demanded ransom. Apart from this, in Nalbari (presently Baksa), many women were killed in the attacks of bullets as a result of inter-ethnic clash in Baraliapar village (Choudhury, 2020).

In May 1998, another extreme violent riot occurred between the Bodos and Santhals. NDFB attacked the Adivasi villages in Sapakata and as a result of which the Adivasi miscreants killed three Bodo people in September 15, 1998. By this time, kokrajhar became the hub of violence (Deka, 2014). Under such tense situation, negotiation was held between the ABSU-BPAC, the Central Government and the State. When both the Governments did not seem to bring solution to Bodo problems, the ABSU started the movement again for homeland and organized events like Bandhs, rally, hunger strike in Assam. Now, as the NDFB and BLT had different ideological views for the creation of Bodoland, the Bodo youths as well as the mass supported the BLT as the latter was struggling for the creation of Bodoland within India. They believed that the armed struggle by the BLT was the only alternative to achieve their goal. Therefore, the movement leaped to extreme violence under the complete control of the BLT (Mosahari, 2011).

However, in the year 1999, the BLT declared ceasefire. Hence, in order to prevent clashes between different communities and stop the violence in Assam, the Governments held a meeting involving both tribal and non-tribal organisations of Assam on 6th and 7th December, 2001. The Bodo Council demanded the extension of the sixth schedule for the solution of the Bodo problems. On December 30, the State Government declared that by January, 2002, the extension of the sixth schedule to the BAC with protection to non-tribal groups would be done. But, the encompassing of 93 additional villages and reservation of 10 seats for the non-Bodos in the Council became an obstacle for the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). Therefore, the creation of BTC was paused as the State Government could not convince the All Party Meet to include 93 more villages along with 3070 villages (Deka, 2014).

However, after seven years of cogent arms struggle of the BLT, a series of talks were held between the Government of India, State Government and the BLT. The series of talks came to a climax on February 10, 2003 with an accord through the signing of a Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) in New Delhi by the signatories like Mr. Hagrama Mohilary, the BLT Chairman, Mr. R.C.A. Jain, secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India, Mr. P.K. Dutta, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Sri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam and Shri L.K. Advani, Honourable Deputy Prime Minister of India. As a result, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was created under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution within the state of Assam with jurisdiction over four new districts namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The formation of BTC with the signing of the accord committed to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area. This has provided broader context towards empowerment and advancement of their community (Mosahari, 2011).

In spite of these provisions, violence did not seem to come to an end in the region. The violence grounded to the question of ‘insider’ vs. ‘outsiders’ sparked out in 2008. The riot between the Bodos and Bengali Speaking Muslims killed 100 and displaced 2,00,000 people. The BTC failed to provide security to non-Bodos as same scenario was visible in the year 2012. The riots of July and August 2012 left around 96 dead and more than 4,00,000 were displaced.

On May 1, 2014, three persons were gunned down in Baksa district and two children were injured. A reporter of Dainik Janashadharan, Dhananjay Nath was fired at and was injured in Kokrajhar. In Gossaigaon, eight people were killed and three persons were seriously injured in the firing. On May 2, miscreants attacked the village named Kanke Khagrabari comprising of 65 families. The village existed near Narayanguri village opposite to Beki river. When shooting, arsoning and killing started, some people jumped into the Beki river but the miscreants fired there too. Even women and children were not spared. Hence, the area was surrounded with grief and pain. It is believed that the cause of the violence was voting for a non-Bodo candidate in the Loksabha elections 2014.

Creation of Bodoland Territorial Region

The problems in the Bodoland region which had been continuing for several years seem to come to pause with the signing of the Bodoland Territorial Region Agreement on 27th January 2020 by the Government of India, Government of Assam, ABSU President Pramod Boro (now the CEM of BTR),

the then CEM of BTC, Hagrama Mohilary and the NDFB factions. With the signing of this accord, the area under the BTC jurisdiction officially came to be known as Bodoland Territorial Region. On the first anniversary of the accord, Union Home Minister, Amit Shah said that a number of projects have been initiated for the Bodo region and efforts are being made promptly for their development. Hereof, the region hopes to shine with all round economic and sustainable peace and development.

Conclusion

The Bodoland region has been an epicentrum of ethnic violence in the Indian map of ethnic-conflict. The feeling of discrimination and a deep sense of insecurity led to such violence in the region. The problem of insurgency and ethnic conflicts has led to the internal displacement and migration of the many communities from the region. Even after the BAC and BTC accords, violence did not come to a full stop in the region. Conflicts between various ethnic communities brought gloominess and darkness in the region. The violent ethno-mobilisation and conflicts have greatly damaged the economic and social lives of the people of the Bodoland region. However, with the signing of the BTR Accord, the region looks forward to irradiate with peace and development.

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