

# Peace Accords in Assam: Transitioning Counter Insurgency from Armed Operations to Dialogue-Based Approaches

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## Abstract

Assam is a state comprised of multi-ethnic group with each ethnic group having their own hope and aspirations. In this scenario it is the responsibility of the government that each ethnic group is provide equal opportunities, facilities, proper distribution of the resources and so on. But it is observed that the state could not facilitate the needs, protect ethnic groups from social, economically, political and cultural deprivation. During 1980s Assam witnessed the rise of insurgent movements driven by the desire to protect ethnic identities and seek autonomy and from 1980s itself the signing of accord could be seen in Assam. In response, both central and state governments launched various counter-insurgency measures leading to signing of ceasefire agreement or the Peace Accord which was sometimes not successful. Over time, peace processes, dialogues, negotiations emerged as a key strategy to foster stability and address the demands of different insurgent groups. However, in a very short span from 2020, Assam has seen several peace accords signed with groups such as the Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, and Adivasi communities. This study tries to understand the transition in addressing insurgency from armed to dialogue based approaches and additionally the study also tries to examine whether these peace accords represent lasting solution for peace in the region or if they serve primarily as political tools offering limited infrastructural and financial incentives to temporarily suppress demands.

**Keywords:** Peace- Process, Insurgency, Peace Accord, Assam

## Introduction

Assam, a north-eastern state in India, is characterized by its diverse ethnic mosaic. This diversity, while culturally rich, has generated overlapping aspirations and challenges rooted in socio-economic, political, and cultural inequalities faced by various ethnic groups. The persistent marginalization and deprivation have often escalated into demands for autonomy and self-determination, leading to complex insurgent movements since the late 20th century.

Since 2020, Assam has witnessed a series of transformative peace accords signed between the Government of India, the Assam government, and various ethnic insurgent groups, marking a strategic shift from counter-insurgency to dialogue-driven conflict resolution. These tripartite Memoranda of Settlement (MoS) address longstanding ethnic aspirations for autonomy, cultural preservation, and socio-economic development amid the state's multi-ethnic diversity. Key accords include the Bodo Peace Accord (January 27, 2020), Karbi Anglong Agreement (September 4, 2021), Adivasi Peace

Accords (September 14, 2022), Dimasa Peace Accord (April 27, 2023), and ULFA Peace Accord (December 29, 2023, with pro-talks faction). The Bodo Accord resolved decades of conflict by enhancing Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) autonomy, rehabilitating 1,615 cadres, and allocating Rs 1,500 crore for infrastructure like universities and medical institutes. Karbi pact empowered the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council with greater legislative powers and a Rs 1,000 crore package, following over 1,000 cadres abjuring arms. Adivasi agreements with eight outfits established a Tribal Welfare Council, Rs 1,000 crore for tea garden development, and cadre resettlement to uplift marginalized communities. Dimasa deal focused on Dima Hasao's North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council with similar funding for ethnic uplift.

### **Objective of the study**

The present study tries to understand the transition in addressing insurgency from armed to dialogue based approaches, assessing the peace accord effectiveness and additionally the study also tries to examine whether these peace accords represent lasting solution for peace in the region or if they serve primarily as political tools offering limited infrastructural and financial incentives to temporarily suppress demands.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a purely secondary research methodology, relying exclusively on existing published and archival data sources. The study's focuses on the peace accords signed from the year 2020 in the State of Assam.

### **Ethnic Diversity and Aspirations in Assam**

Assam's socio-political landscape is shaped by multiple ethnic communities such as the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas, Adivasis, Assamese-speaking groups, and several others. Each community carries unique cultural identities and distinct socio-political aspirations. Historically, these ethnic groups have sought equitable opportunities in access to resources, political representation, economic development, cultural preservation, and safeguarding their social status. Despite constitutional safeguards, including Scheduled Tribe recognition and autonomous councils, many communities perceive systemic neglect. Government programs have frequently failed to deliver the promised equitable resource distribution and social welfare. This perceived disregard fuels ethnic tensions, social alienation, and political agitation.

### **The Rise of Insurgency and Ethnic Mobilization in the 1980s**

The 1980s witnessed the intensification of insurgent movements in Assam as ethnic groups articulated their demands through armed struggle. These insurgencies primarily arose from grievances related to political marginalization, economic exclusion, cultural erosion, and land rights. Groups like the Bodo insurgents demanded the creation of a separate administrative territory to protect and promote their ethnic identity. Similarly, other ethnic groups-initiated movements aimed at autonomy or greater political control of their homeland regions. The growth of these insurgencies threatened regional stability and demanded significant governmental attention.

### **Counter-Insurgency Measures by the State and Centre**

To curb insurgencies, the Assam government in tandem with the central government implemented

various counter-insurgency policies. These included military operations, deployment of security forces, intelligence efforts, and legal mechanisms aimed at repressing insurgent activities. While these measures temporarily checked violence, they also led to human rights controversies, increased resentment among the local populations, and failed to address the root causes of insurgency such as identity, rights, and deprivation. The cycle of conflict and repression persisted, making peace elusive.

### **Emergence of Peace Processes and Dialogue**

Since the 1980s, Assam has endured extensive counter-insurgency campaigns orchestrated by both state and central governments, targeting militant outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), Dima Haram Daogah (DHD), Dimasa National Liberation Army (DNLA), Karbi Longri North Cachar Liberation Front (KLNLF), Karbi People's Liberation Tiger (KPLT), and Birsa Commando Force (BCF).

**Toll on Civilians-** These operations unleashed widespread violence, social upheaval, and profound human suffering among non-combatants. Families were shattered where the mothers lost sons, wives their husbands, and sons their fathers, while innocent civilians faced extrajudicial killings, torture, and displacement justified as necessary to dismantle insurgent networks. Rural and remote areas bore the brunt, fostering an atmosphere of pervasive fear, curtailed mobility, and stagnant development, where basic prosperity and communal harmony remained elusive.

**Limitations of Military-** This Approach Despite tactical successes like forced surrenders, the strategy failed to deliver enduring stability or meet governmental expectations. It often radicalized communities, deepened grievances, and perpetuated cycles of retaliation, as insurgent remnants regrouped, sustaining low-intensity conflict and eroding public trust in state institutions.

**Shift to Negotiation: Led Strategy-** A pivotal policy pivot ensued with prioritizing dialogue, high-level delegations, neutral mediators, and confidence-building measures over kinetic operations. This multifaceted, unique approach encompassing ceasefire agreements, tripartite talks, and inclusive platforms significantly aimed to humanize conflict resolution, halt bloodshed, and address root causes like ethnic autonomy, resource allocation, and political representation.

**Outcomes of Peace Processes-** These negotiations have yielded tangible successes: major factions of ULFA, NDFB, and others have disarmed, signed accords, and reintegrated into mainstream society. Governments have conceded partial demands via middle-path compromises such as autonomous councils, enhanced reservations, and development packages benefiting ethnic groups while promoting regional stability, economic revival, and reduced violence, though challenges from splinter groups persist.

Recognizing the limitations of pure security measures, both state and central governments shifted focus towards dialogue and peace negotiations in the late 1990s and especially since the early 2000s. Peace processes aimed at political accommodation, granting autonomy, economic development packages, and cultural safeguards became the preferred method. Peace accords were signed with key insurgent groups such as the Bodo Peace Accord (2003 and the reaffirmed version in 2020), Karbi Peace Accord 2021, accords involving Adivasi groups in September 2022 and the Dimasa Peace Accord April 2023. These agreements generally promised: Autonomous councils or regional councils with administrative autonomy Special economic packages and infrastructural development Political representation guarantees Protection and promotion of ethnic identities and languages Rehabilitation of ex-insurgents Mechanisms for grievances redressal and conflict resolution.

### **Assessing Peace Accord Effectiveness: Political and Practical Dimensions**

While these accords mark a positive development in dialogue-based conflict resolution, their effectiveness has been mixed in practice. Critical questions revolve around:

#### **Governmental Response to Ethnic Demands**

The extent to which the ethnic groups' core demands are genuinely addressed varies. Some communities have witnessed increased political representation and development initiatives, while others perceive inadequate fulfilment of commitments. Resource allocation, implementation delays, and bureaucratic inefficiencies undermine trust. For instance, in the case of the Bodo Accord, the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) granted administrative autonomy, but discontent with governance, resource control, and leadership dominance keeps some insurgent elements outside the peace umbrella.

#### **Political Will and Commitment**

The implementation of accords depends heavily on the political will across state and central governments. Frequent changes in political leadership, shifting electoral priorities, and competing interests often weaken sustained engagement with peace process obligations. Additionally, broader political challenges related to Assam's ethnic politics, including opposition from other communities and nationalistic pressures, occasionally complicate peacebuilding efforts.

#### **Socioeconomic Infrastructure and Development**

Economic development, infrastructure improvement, and welfare schemes are essential to underpin peace with real benefits. However, insufficient funding, corruption, and administrative hurdles often delay or dilute these efforts. Without tangible improvements in living standards, peace remains vulnerable.

#### **Addressing Cultural and Social Dimensions**

Peacebuilding also necessitates respect for cultural identities, languages, and traditions. While accords mention protection mechanisms, actual social integration, educational reforms emphasizing ethnic languages, and cultural promotion require ongoing commitment beyond signed documents.

### **Insight acquired in Assam's Peace-Building Journey**

The decades-long experience in Assam offers critical understanding for conflict resolution in multi-ethnic contexts:

- **Dialogue Must Be Inclusive:** Successful peace processes involve not only armed groups but also civil society, traditional institutions, and other stakeholders representing the ethnic mosaic to prevent exclusion-induced frustrations. So, it is important to take into account that all the stakeholders are the part of the process making it inclusive leading to positive direction.
- **Autonomy with Accountability:** Granting political autonomies such as autonomous councils be it passed by State Assembly Act or with the Parliament Act, it should be coupled with transparent governance mechanisms to foster legitimacy and reduce intra-ethnic factionalism.
- **Comprehensive Approach:** Peace cannot be achieved solely via political or military means. There are various aspects which includes Socioeconomic development, cultural preservation, reconciliation, and justice are equally important pillars and maintaining these aspects will only lead to sustainable peace.
- **Continuous Engagement:** Peace accords should be treated as living documents requiring periodic

review, dialogue adjustments, and renewed political commitment.

- Grassroots Participation: Encouraging localization of peace efforts using traditional tribal social institutions and family systems can strengthen community ownership of peace.

### **Unresolved Challenges and Enduring Structural Gaps**

While some aspects are addressed, but there are still unaddressed or underemphasized issues.

- Temporary Political Tools: At times, peace accords are perceived as political instruments to quell unrest temporarily without long-term commitment to development or justice and these many a times have led to the dissatisfaction among ethnic group especially the signatories representing the community.
- Unequal Progress: Some ethnic groups advance faster, fostering new tensions and feelings of neglect among others. When an accord is signed it a particular ethnic group and they tend to enjoy more privileges and resources the other community residing in the same region feel neglected and undermined for instance when an accord was signed with the Bodo the other ethnic group such as Koch Rasbongshi felt inferiority and demanded for the separate Autonomous council for their community.
- Implementation Barriers: The success of the accord primarily depends upon the implementation of the clauses still there are significant clauses of different accord be it for Bodo, Karbi or Dimasa, for instance giving more financial autonomy to the council, rehabilitation of the insurgent cadres and various infrastructural development initiatives which are not yet implemented and demands have been made by the ethnic groups continuously even after signing of the Accord. Additionally, the allegations of Corruption, administrative capacity issues, and overlapping jurisdictions obstruct the translation of agreements into reality.
- Limited Conflict Transformation: Structural socio-political inequalities remain largely unchanged, risking relapse into conflict and these sometimes lead into the cold conflicts among the ethnic groups and a sense of resentment.

### **Government Policies on Implementation Challenges**

Government policies emphasize joint monitoring committees, special development packages, and cadre rehabilitation across accords, with political will demonstrated through high-level signings by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Policies promote Sixth Schedule enhancements, welfare councils, and infrastructure to address ethnic demands, yet face criticism for incomplete execution, as seen in the Assam Accord's Clause 6 delays. Persistent issues involve corruption risks, inter-ethnic tensions, funding delays, and governance gaps, requiring transparent oversight and community engagement for sustainability. These accords collectively represent a remarkable implementation in flagship cases like Bodo accord, but holistic success demands addressing unfulfilled clauses through sustained policy reforms.

### **Conclusion**

Assam's complex ethnic tapestry demands nuanced, multi-layered peace-building strategies that go beyond peace accords as mere agreements. Genuine political will, equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and sustained socioeconomic development are vital. Future peace initiatives could be strengthened by integrating approaches such as capacity-building of autonomous councils, conflict-

sensitive development programs, preservation and promotion of ethnic cultural heritage, and facilitation of inter-ethnic dialogue platforms. Ultimately, Assam's peace prospects depend on transforming historical grievances into partnerships for regional harmony, recognizing each ethnic group's aspirations as legitimate, and institutionalizing dialogue and cooperation beyond ceasefire agreements.

The peace initiatives in Assam since 2020 reflect a critical effort by both the central and state governments to address decades-old ethnic conflicts through dialogue and negotiated settlements. These accords represent more than just ceasefire agreements; they are intended to provide structural solutions by recognizing ethnic identities, granting political autonomy through autonomous councils, and enabling development via financial packages. However, whether these accords constitute a lasting peace solution or function primarily as political tools to temporarily suppress dissent remains a pivotal question.

The sustainability of peace in Assam depends on the extent to which the government sincerely addresses the ethnic groups' core demands ranging from constitutional safeguards, political representation, cultural recognition, to socio-economic development. The success of these peace accords depends substantially on the political will demonstrated by the authorities to implement their clauses transparently and comprehensively.

While the recent peace accords mark a substantial step forward in Assam's peace processes by fostering a framework for political accommodation and development, they alone do not guarantee an enduring peace. These agreements must be complemented by sustained political commitment, capacity building, and conflict transformation efforts to address underlying grievances and prevent resurgence of conflict. Thus, the journey toward lasting peace is an evolving process requiring persistent effort beyond signed agreements.

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