

# Bodo Insurgency in Assam: New Accord and New Problems

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## Abstract

*Assam, one of the seven states of the northeastern region of India, has long remained one of the most volatile and sensitive regions in the country because of the problems of insurgency, ethnic conflict, pressure of migration, underdevelopment etc. Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam started an armed struggle for a separate state in the mid-1980s. This armed struggle led to ethnic cleansing of the non-Bodos along the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Accord was signed in 1993 and the Bodoland movement became more violent during the later part of the 1990s. In February 2003, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Accord was signed to end the one-and-a-half decade long Bodo movement. The success of this new Accord will solely depend upon proper implementation of its changes and the cooperation between the Bodo and non-Bodo communities. The non-Bodos within the proposed BTC area are opposing the new Accord, as under the modified Sixth Schedule of the Constitution it provides special facilities to 25 per cent of the Bodos at the cost of 75 per cent non-Bodos within the proposed BTC area. This new Accord under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution may give birth to some new ethnic problems in Assam.*

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## Introduction

On February 10, 2003, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) finally signed an Accord with the Centre and the Government of Assam to pave the way for the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) vested with substantial powers of local governance. This was the first time in the history of the armed struggle of the Bodo tribals in Assam for a separate homestate that the central government, through a Memo random of Settlement (MOS), gave constitutional recognition to a virtual Bodo homeland in Assam. It was celebration time for different Bodo organisations including the BLT

as they considered this Accord the most sought after opportunity to fulfill their long-standing demands.

The Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS), a federation of 18 non-Bodo organisations from the proposed BTC area, strongly opposed the BTC Accord. They threatened to start a democratic struggle against the BTC Accord. While the BTC leaders expressed the hope that the Accord would bridge the gap between the 'traditional divide' of the Assamese and the Bodos, the SJSS leaders' decision to oppose every clause of the BTC Accord signals a troubled future for the newly signed Accord.

The Bodo Accord signed on February 10, 2003 is the second Accord to tackle the problem of Bodo insurgency which was started by the All-Bodo Student Union (ABSU) in 1987 with the demand for a separate state for the Bodos in Assam. This paper aims to carry out an analysis of the Bodo movement and the Bodo Accords in general and tries to examine the problems and constraints in the implementation of the latest Bodo Accord. The paper also argues that co-operation among all sections of people amongst both Bodos and non-Bodos alone would make the latest Bodo Accord a success.

## **Background**

Bodos (also known as 'Kacharis') are the largest group of Assam's plains tribes. The All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU), the most influential organisation campaigning for a separate Bodo homeland, defined the term 'Bodo' as those who speak or are supposed to have one spoken language belonging to the Bodo group.<sup>1</sup> Bodos are the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India and they migrated from South-West China to North-East India through Tibet and Bhutan centuries ago. Historically, under colonial rule and also after independence, major sections of Bodos merged into the Assamese population. Fifty three per cent of the total population of Assam identified themselves as 'Bodos' during the 1991 census operation.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s the plains tribal people of Assam formed the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and launched in 1967 a popular movement with the demand for a new state for all the plains tribes of Assam to be called 'Udayachal' on the north bank of Brahmaputra. But the PTCA gave up agitation for a separate homeland after it joined the Janata government

in 1978-79.<sup>3</sup> In the mean time an anti-alien movement in Assam under the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) began in 1979 which lasted for six years which was opposed by ABSU. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government, which was formed by ex-AASU leaders after signing the 'Assam Accord' in 1985, did not try Upendra Nath Brahma to think about some alternatives. When the ABSU under Upendra Nath Brahma [ABSU (UB)] failed to bring in the other plains tribes for a new movement, it decided to move ahead on its own and they gave up the earlier vague demand for a 'tribal homeland' in favour of a full-fledged state of 'Bodoland' for the plains tribals.<sup>3</sup>

The ABSU's (UB) section launched its movement in March, 1987 on the basis of the 92-point charter of demands which it submitted to the Assam government. The last demand in the 92-point charter related to the establishment of a separate state for the 'plains tribes' of Assam on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The original charter of demands was soon to be reduced to three 'political' demands: (a) the creation of a separate state of 'Bodoland' (b) the setting up of district councils in the tribal areas on the south bank of Brahmaputra; and (c) the inclusion of the Bodo-Kacharis of Karbi Anglong in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But the ABSU (UB)'s claim to represent the entire Bodo population was contested by PTCA and also by the faction of the ABSU led by Gangadhar Ramchiary.<sup>3</sup> The ABSU (UB)'s demand for a separate 'Bodoland' gradually alienated the Bodos from the Assamese mainstream.

### **Causes and Hurdles**

Bodos feel that they have been neglected, exploited, alienated and discriminated against for decades. The growth of literacy and education among the plains tribes was negligible and the Bodo inhabited districts of Kokrajhar, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Kamrup are among the least developed. The Bodo-inhabited areas have been neglected by the successive Congress governments and the AGP governments also did not try to address the problems of the Bodo people and the Bodo areas.<sup>4</sup>

The Bodo peasants were migratory cultivators shifting from one place to another in search of fertile land which was one of the causes that the British government during the colonial era did not grant permanent land rights to them. But gradually, many Bodo peasants lost their land because of the tremendous growth of population and the merciless grip of the

moneylenders.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that over 50 per cent of the landholdings have passed from the Bodos non-Bodo hands over the last decade.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, today it is estimated that 60 to 70 per cent of the Bodos in the region are? Again, in 1986, the new AGP government dissolved all encroachments made after January 1, 1980 as illegal in accordance with the Assam Accord to protect the forests. But this led to eviction of many Bodo peasants giving a political fillip to the Bodo movement.

The Bodos and other tribals resented the campaign of assimilation and felt they had no chance of preserving their own cultural heritage in that atmosphere<sup>7</sup>, dominated by majority Assamese culture.

The Sarat Chandar Sinha government's (1973) opposition to the demand of Bodos to use the Roman script in place of the Assamese script for their language and AASU's demand for an end to the policy of reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST) candidates and scholarships for SC/ST students during the anti-alien movement, made the Bodos lose their faith completely in the majority Assamese community.<sup>8</sup>

Bodo leaders strongly opposed Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, which promised safeguards to protect the cultural identity of 'the Assamese people'. Though the leaders of the Assam Movement meant composite indigenous population of Assam by the term 'Assamese people', the Bodo leaders feared that the clause might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture on Bodos.<sup>9</sup> The Bodo leadership was also surprised that the Rajiv Gandhi government at the Centre patronised the Bodo movement during the rule of the first AGP government.<sup>10</sup>

The movement for a separate Bodo homeland began in 1987 in a democratic manner with the slogan, 'Divide Assam 50-50'. Very soon, the ABSU (UB) opted for violent tactics and it began to attack PTCA supporters and non-Bodo government officials. Apart from hitting out at those sections of the Bodos, which were opposed to the division of Assam, the ABSU (UB) issued 'quit notices' to the non-Bodo population to create a homogeneous Bodo population area. Hundreds of civilians from both and non-Bodo communities and hundreds of security personnel had been killed by the Bodo militants. Bodo militants began an ethnic cleansing campaign in the proposed Bodoland area through targeted violence, extortions, kidnappings, etc. They attacked school buildings, bazaars, public buildings, railway stations, roads, bridges etc., to pressurise the central as well as state

governments.<sup>11</sup> And the state's response to this violent movement was the use of force through the army and other paramilitary forces.<sup>12</sup>

Sanjib Baruah identifies three significant hurdles to creating a Bodo homeland:

- While the demand is animated by the memory of ancient Bodo kingdoms, and of the distant past when Bodo culture may have flourished uncontaminated by Assamese culture, the population that today can be identified as Bodos, is only 1.1 million, or 11.5 per cent of the [total] population on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, where the Bodos want their homeland to be.
- Even though there are Bodo majority villages and areas where the Bodo population is more concentrated, together they do not constitute a contiguous area that could be easily turned into a territory called Bodoland.
- The Bodo demand has occurred in the context of a resurgent Assamese sub-nationalism that resents Assam's past divisions at the behest of New Delhi and opposes any further territorial division of Assam. Even though, constitutionally speaking, India's weak federalism would permit it, no government in New Delhi now would be foolhardy enough to expect that Assam could be split with the ease of the 1960s and early 1970s without the consent of the Assam state assembly.

### **1993 Accord**

On February 20, 1993, the All-Bodo Students Union and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) signed Bodo Accord with the central and the state governments to end the violent Bodoland movement. The Accord made a commitment to forming an elected Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) comprising "contiguous geographical areas between river Sankosh and Mazbat/river Pasnoi". The Accord left the question of its precise territorial jurisdiction open and provided that the government will "scrutinise the list of villages submitted by Bodo activists having 50 per cent and more 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"<sup>13</sup>.

The state assembly passed the BAC Act in the same year, which provided for a General Council to be constituted by 40 elected members including 30 seats reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. The Act also provided for functional autonomy to the BAC over a total 37 subjects.<sup>14</sup>

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 whatsoever limited autonomy was provided by the Act mainly because of insufficient financial powers and overwhelming domination of the state government over most of the transferred subjects. 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 in Barpeta in 1994.<sup>14</sup> 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 Tigers (BLT) was formed for an armed struggle for the creation of a separate state of Bodoland. Again, some Bodo youth formed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) to create a sovereign Bodoland through an armed struggle.

The Bodo militant outfits began an ethnic cleansing campaign in the proposed Bodoland area. A large number of people including women and children were killed and thousands rendered homeless in ethnic violence in lower Assam by these militant organisations. But these ethnic killings were not one-sided, as there were also revenge killings of Bodos by Santhals and Bengalis.

Due to its organisational strength and armed struggle, the BLT gradually became the *de facto* guardian organisation of the Bodo movement. And in July 1999, it declared unilateral ceasefire in response to the central government's appeal for talks.

### **New Bodo Accord**

On February 10, 2003, the central government, the BLT and the state government signed a new Bodo Accord for creation of a 'Bodoland Territorial Council' (BTC) under modified provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

The BTC was to comprise four new districts, viz., Kokrajhar, Baska, Siring and Udalguri, to be created by reorganising the existing ones. Initially, the BTC would comprise 3,082 villages where the Bodos are in majority. The BTC would have legislative, executive, administrative and financial powers with respect to the subjects transferred to it. The Council will have 40 elected and six nominated members. Out of the total 46 members, 30 will be from Scheduled Tribes, five will be non-tribals, five from the general category and six would be nominated by the government from among unrepresented sections.<sup>15</sup>

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 purposes 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.<sup>15</sup> However, laws made by the Council in all the areas under its control must have the assent of the Governor of Assam. And again, the Governor can dissolve a council on the recommendation of a committee appointed by him for the purpose of reporting on its functioning.

But the most crucial issue of 93 additional villages demanded by BTC could not be solved during the Accord talk. It was decided during the talk that a tripartite committee would be formed to resolve the issue within three months of signing the Accord. The committee will have representatives of the centre, the state government and the BLT. All villages where the Bodos account for at least 50 per cent of the total population will come under the new Council.<sup>15</sup>

### **After the Accord**

A new Accord or a new territory also means new problems. The new BTC authority will face some immediate problems/issues and only well calculated and well thought out steps and policies can solve these new problems. If these issues or problems cannot be addressed properly within a short period of time, the BTC would also have a premature death like the BAC.

The first challenge before the BTC would be to instil confidence in the minds of the non-Bodos living within the BTC area. The state government's

agreement to constitute BTC generated considerable resentment in the lower Assam area. Different non-Bodo organisations opposed the formation of the BTC and 18 non-Bodo organisations together formed the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) to oppose the proposed Accord. They launched a series of agitations and have been organising strong agitational programmes with the support of non-Bodos within the BTC area even after the Accord was signed. Some of the organisations under SJSS like the Adivashi Students Association even threatened to adopt violent means to force the government to cancel the BTC Accord. The main argument of these non-Bodo organisations against the BTC is that Bodos constitute only 25 per cent of total population in proposed BTC area and this quarter of population should not be given the right to rule over the other three fourths of the total population.<sup>16</sup>

The Accord signed between the central and the state governments and the BLT includes details of the steps to be taken for the protection of the rights of the non-Bodos. As per the MoS, the creation of the BTC would not take away the rights and privileges enjoyed by any citizen of India with respect to his land at the commencement of BTC, nor bar any citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by way of transfer. Such citizens are eligible for bonafide acquisition of land within the BTC area. As per Clause 4.4 of the MoS, the language and medium of instruction in educational institutions will not be changed without the approval of the state government. It further stated that Bodo language would be the official language of the BTC subject to the condition that Assamese and English would also continue to be used for official purposes. Moreover, the BTC would be the only tribal council in the country to have reservations of seats for non-tribals.<sup>17</sup>

Now, the challenge before the BLT and ABSU leaders is to win the confidence of the non-Bodos. The non-Bodos do not believe in the assurances given by the two organisations as both BLT and ABSU were involved in ethnic cleansing of non-Bodos during the armed Bodo struggle. Now, it is the responsibility of the ABSU and BLT leaders to turn their assurances into reality so that the non-Bodos feel secure and come forward to cooperate with them. The crux of the success of the BTC lies only in the cooperation between the two communities.

The next problem is the NDFB, an old rival of the BLT, which has been fighting an armed struggle for a separate and sovereign Bodo nation.



The NDFB neither welcomed nor rejected the Accord. But it termed the accord as an “insult to the Bodo nation” and “a faulty pact that had the backing of a ‘handful of opportunists and Bodo people with leanings towards Delhi’”. It criticised that the BTC has more provisions and guarantees for all-round security of the non-Bodos than the Bodo people themselves.<sup>18</sup> This observation of the NDFB may have a big negative impact on the non-Bodos staying within the BTC area. The ABSU has been repeatedly requesting the NDFB to end the gun culture and to start a dialogue with the government. But the outfit’s hawkish stand on the new Accord indicates that it has other ideas.<sup>19</sup> Here the big question arises – what can be its other ideas? If this organisation continues its armed campaign against the non-Bodos, then surely the BTC Accord would run into rough weather.

If the concerns of the non-Bodo organisations regarding BTC are not addressed properly by the BTC authorities and the government very soon, then some of these organisations might form militant outfits to challenge the BTC. As reported in the press, Adivasis, Bengalis and the Koch-Rajbongshis are preparing to form separate armed outfits for the security of their respective communities. The press reports also indicated that the cadres of Koch-Rajbongshi’s outfit K.L.O. are getting training under NDFB and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).<sup>19</sup> If these reports are true, and if concrete steps are not taken right now to stop this process, the BTC would soon be a battleground for different armed outfits.

The BLT had declared that they would surrender their arms within one week after the interim BTC is formed. The BLT cadres have a lot of foreign-made sophisticated arms with them and the government agencies do not have any idea how much or what kinds of arms the BLT cadres possess. Like the surrendered ULFA, BLT also may not surrender all their arms and may keep some arms with them to meet any kind of threat from its rival organisations (like NDFB) in future. If this happens, it will again be a serious law and order problem in Assam if they use these arms against the society and civilians. Now the governments should take utmost care so that the BLT cadres surrender all the arms they possess.

Rehabilitation of the BLT cadres also may turn out to be a tough job for the BTC authorities. The BTC authorities will have to provide self-employment schemes for rehabilitation of the BLT cadres as all of them cannot be absorbed in government jobs. According to the Accord

provisions, the state government will provide financial support for rehabilitation of the BLT cadres, but financial support in such cases will be limited to the provisions of the schemes prepared and funded by the central government.

This is a very important issue. If these cadres cannot be engaged properly, then, frustration may lead them to return to terrorist activities. Not only the BLT cadres, but thousands of unemployed youth are expecting a lot from BTC. Frustration due to huge unemployment among the Bodo youths was one of the causes of insurgency among the Bodos. So, the central and the state governments and the BLT authority should consider this issue carefully and employment generation at different levels through different schemes should be given priority. And most importantly, non-Bodos within the BTC should also not be discriminated against and they should also be provided equal opportunities in this regard.

People living in the relief camps who were victims of the armed Bodo movement are also an immediate concern. At present, the number of people living in dehumanised 54 government-run relief camps in Kokrajhar district is 1,79,872 comprising 6,089 Bodo and 33,255 non-Bodo families.<sup>20</sup> Some of them are living in these camps since the early 1990s and most of them since 1996. These people are hoping to go back to the places where they once lived although these families lost virtually everything they had during the movement. Now it will be the immediate duty of the proposed BTC authority to take care of these families and rehabilitate them in their original places.

The failure of the 1993 Bodo Accord was attributed to rampant corruption and to poor utilisation of funds meant for the BAC.<sup>21</sup> According to the new Accord provisions, the central government would provide Rs 100 crore per year assistance to the Council for the next five years. It will also provide necessary one-time financial assistance required for development of administrative infrastructure in the BTC. Besides, the state government will also provide an amount, to be decided every year on population ratio basis, as grant-in-aid to the BTC for executing development work.<sup>22</sup> The financial assistance of this magnitude can usher in a new era of development in the BTC area. But the first and foremost condition for this to happen is proper and timely utilisation of funds to be released by the central and state governments. So, the BTC authority must be careful so that corruption and poor utilisation of funds do not derail the process

of development in BTC.

### **Sixth Schedule and the Future of Assam**

The BTC Accord was signed under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The Schedule deals with provisions regarding administration of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. It provides for autonomous districts and autonomous regions within districts for specific Scheduled Tribes (STs). This kind of provisions where STs are a clear majority is a good idea for their quick and sustainable economic development. But Bodos constitute not more than 25 per cent of the total population in the proposed BTC area (and not more than 6 per cent of total population of Assam). This means that the BTC Accord gives the Bodos a special status under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution at the cost of 75 per cent of non-Bodo population in the proposed BTC area.

This special provision for Bodos can give birth to more ethnic conflicts in Assam in the near future. Assam has several plains tribal groups like Rabhas, Mishings, Tiwas, etc., with significant population in different districts. Koch-Rajbongshis, Adivasis, etc., are also demanding the ST (plains) status. These ethnic groups may also demand special provisions in future under the Sixth Schedule like the BTC. And it would not be easy nor possible for the government to extend the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to all these ethnic groups. But at the same time, after signing the BTC Accord, the government has no other option for these groups if they raise such demands. So, this problem is predicted to get worse in the coming years.

### **Conclusion**

It was decided when the Accord was being negotiated that a committee comprising one member each from BLT, the state and the central governments would be constituted which would take appropriate decisions on the 93 additional villages demanded by the BLT, within 90 days of signing the Accord. But the committee has not yet been constituted even after six months of the Accord. This delay and negligence can only aggravate the existing problems. All the concerned parties must be equally interested in achieving the goal of the Accord. The cooperation between Bodos and non-Bodos alone can make BTC a success; both the communities must realise this. The ABSU and the BLT have both assured the non-Bodos that

they would have equal rights and liberties within the BTC. Now the new BTC authorities will have to ensure that provisions of the Bodo Accord relating to the protection of political, land, language and property rights of the non-Bodos are implemented to win the confidence of non-Bodos, who are opposed to the BTC Accord.

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