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Ethnic conflict in North East India: A case of Assam with special reference to B.T.A.D.

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Abstract

Ethnic conflict has become a matter of great concern in present political analysis. Since 1950s ethnic politics has been influencing the northeast and the state of Assam. As we know that Assam is one of the most ethnically rich and diverse states of northeast India. It is a home to variety of tribes, each with a distinct socio-cultural history. However, such a demographically and racially diverse state has not remained free from ethnically induced tensions. It has and still is witnessing a host of ethnic movements and conflicts, each trying to assert the identity of the tribe in question and some of even to the extent of challenging the foundation of Indian state. And the ethnic movement in BTAD has become a very crucial issue for the state of India. As a result the non Bodo people are facing lots of problem in BTAD area. Even are not able to enjoy the democratic rights in the area. So, this issue becomes one of the burning issues in North East India.

Key Words: Ethnic conflict, Separatist movement, North East India, BTAD.

Introduction: Ethnic conflict has occupied a considerable length of history of different nations both developed and developing. In Indian context Ethnicity not only remains an important part of the reality but it also happens to be the source of a series of major problems. Ethnic conflict in India in recent history has religious, economic and sociological and political character. The story of north eastern state is hardly different from that.

The international Encyclopedia of the Social Science describes an ethnic group as a distinct category of population in a large society whose culture is usually different from the society own. The members of such a group feel themselves, or think that they are bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture. Today, ethnicity has become an important tool not only for the mobilization but also in the struggle for preserving one's political authority, territory, natural and material resources.

The history of human civilization witnessed worst conflicts of identity issues which often turned into violence. Ethnic conflict in BTAD is going to become an important issue in last few years. The conflict between Bodos and Non Bodos has brought a sharp division among the people in BTAD area. The most important reason of ethnic conflict in BTAD is political gain. Again the soft demand of ethnic assertion which is converted to hard demand is also another important reason of conflict in BTAD. Availability of illegal arms among the Bodo militant groups also another important cause which lead to conflict. Again the faulty model of BTC is also another important reason of conflict in BTAD. According to memorandum of settlement act 2003, if there is 50% or more than 50% of

people live in some area, it cannot be included in the BTC area. But in practice, without giving importance on the accord, lots of Non Bodo area has been included in the region. So, through this papers an attempt has been made to discuss about some of the real facts which trigger inhuman situation in BTAD area.

Historical background: The region (Assam) is an extremely diverse in terms of ethnic linguistic and cultural composition. These diverse communities have had different historical and political experiences and as a result many of the communities still perceive them as unique entities. The state (Assam) has passed through different forms of cultural experiences and stages of socio-economic condition. The state of Assam made up primarily of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys have had wide ranging cultural exchanges with the rest of the Indian sub-continent for centuries, as a result for which an unique identity had emerged on the basis of 'Unity in Diversity'. But the colonial rule of the British created dissatisfaction among the newly emerged middle class section of the society who become more conscious for protection their distinct identity. The rise of nationalism during the colonial period and the emergence of several identity issues during the post-colonial period make the whole region (Assam) a sensitive area. A separate ideology had developed among the various ethnic groups which in course of time turned into violent form in several occasion.

Historically, the Bodo have been sharing a common homeland with the Asamiya and other tribal groups on the northern bank of Brahmaputra River in lower Assam. The Bodo constitute no more than by of the total population of Assam though they are the single largest tribal group in the state.

Relatively, they are more advanced group than other tribal groups of Assam. Since early sixties, they have been trying to revive their culture and distinct identity on the plank of ethnicity. Earlier the plains tribal council of Assam and the Bodo Sahiya Sabha were premier representative bodies of the Bodo.

The first demand for a separate state for the "plains a tribal of Assam- then the proposed name was Udayachal was made by the plains tribal council of Assam in 1967. It was in 1967, during the first AGP government that younger Bodo leaders began successfully to mobilize large number of Bodos in support of a demand for a separate state. Since 1987 the demand has been made for a separate state to be called "Bodoland" on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. And in order to catch the attention of the govt. and to full fill their demand they sometimes resorted to violent means. Initially a section of young blood formed the Bodo Security Force for radical outfit. Later it turned as National Democratic Front of Bodoland. Again few ex-ABSU members developed another platform as Bodo Liberation Tigers Force for getting autonomy of Bodoland. To control the perennial agitation of Bodo people, in 1993 a memorandum of settlement was signed between the State govt., ABSU and Central Govt. to create the Bodoland Autonomous Council. But this settlement could not meet the aspiration of all the Bodos labeling it puppet autonomy and therefore these militant groups intensified their movement in drastic manner. These militant group in order to pressurize the govt. started heinous activities like extortion, killing of innocent people by bombing and kidnapping and even ethnic cleansing. At present though a section of militant group (BLT) came back to the democratic process but others has been struggling for the liberation of Bodoland. More over the emergence of new faction of militancy is a cause of concern for establishing peace. Therefore whatever may be the process, democratic or undemocratic, but their ultimate aim is same.

Crisis of democracy in BTAD: Generally, democracy can be understood as majority rule or opinion of the majority people. As we know that some of the important features of democracy are Equality, Rights, Justice, freedom of expression etc. But, in Baksa districts all these rights are being

curtailed from the Non-Bodo communities in the name of preserving identity. They have lost all the rights and even they have been threatening regularly to leave this area. One type of autocratic rule has been prevailing in the area. Hence, because of this identity politics the non Bodo communities of Baksa districts are facing a lot of problems in B.T.A.D area.

In BTAD, the demand for a separate state of Bodoland has led to greater insecurity amongst the non-Bodos. In the name of identity preservation the Bodo political leaders are doing a type of hegemonic rule in BTAD. In all aspects the Non-Bodo communities are being deprived, even they cannot do their daily duties properly in BTAD area. If we look about the arrangement of the BTC, we found that it has been done in such a manner that there are very few options for the non Bodos in the electoral process and democratic deficit do exist. Reservation of seats has not only curtailed the rights of non Bodos, but also paves the way to establish autocratic rule in Bodoland. So, political security is completely deteriorated in the BTAD area for non Bodos.

Conflict- Induced Displaced in BTAD: If we look back the history of Bodoland both major and minor clashes between the Bodos and non Bodos took place, which severely harmed both the communities. Beside, since the last decade of 20th century six major clashes rocked Bodoland. The following chart represents the casualties and number of persons displaced.

Table: 2. Chronology of Bodoland violence since 1993

Sl. No.	Year	Area	Casualties	No. of persons displaced
1	1993	Bongaigaon	61	18,000
2	1994	Barpeta	113	Not available
3	1996	Kokrajhar & Bongaigaon	198	200,000
4	1998	Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar	186	80,000
5	2008	Udalguri & Darrang	70	100,000
6	2012	Kokrajhar, Chirrang, Dhubri etc	114	450,000

Source: Computed from different sources such as newspaper, journals etc. The chief source is the article entitled "A timeline of Bodo-Muslim Violence in Assam" at: http://www.firstpost.com/india/a-timeline-of-bodo-muslim-violence-in-assam-391475.html?utm_source

This ruthless violence in Bodoland rendered a large number of persons homeless; lose of property, kith and kin etc. Geeta Bharali (2009) in her Article viz. Development Induced Displacement and Human Security in Assam claims that in the year 1993, Bodo Muslim Clash as many as 3568 families comprising 18,000 people were render homeless in Kokrajhar district. Like that in the year 1996, about 42,214 families comprising 2, 02,684 persons were forced to shelter in 61 camps. Again in 1998, thousands of Santhal families' displaced. In the year 2008, the Udalguri area violence displaces a large number of people. At present violence in Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Chirang more than 450,000 people were displaced and Governments are tried to return all the people home. As per the report of government of Assam, since 1993 to 7th December, 2012; the total numbers of casualties reached 667 and 5776 cases are registered. So from time to time for these displacements, disruptive activities by the extremist; common people are suffering, which ultimately is hampering a lot in the process of national development. Due to these kind of violence a huge amount of public money have been expensing in the name of security. Even the magnitude of this violence is very destructive. Nevertheless, People have been suffering from fear psychosis. Apart from this major cases there are number of minor cases in which the Bodo extremist group are engaging in killing, looting the non- Bodo communities severally. One of the most striking

examples was the killing of a Non Bodo leader Manaj Das. He has been killed by the Bodo extremist due to protest against some of the discriminatory policy taken by the BTAD administration and the destructive activities by the Bodo extremist group. As a result of violence in Bodoland, human security has become the main cause of concern for all the communities. Common people had to suffer a lot for a longer time even after the violence. Pertinently to say, the Bodo- non Bodo clash was exclusively concerned with preservation of culture or identity for a community obstructing the life security of others. But it is the fact that identity, culture is meaningless without life security.

Suggestion towards reducing such conflict: After going through this discussion it can be said that to address the needs and demands of the various ethnic groups has been a major challenge for the state authority. In order to meet the demands made by various ethnic groups, the government from time to time has signed various accords, memorandum of settlement etc. But seldom has it led to peace and development. The Bodo Accord, 2003 is a glaring example in this regard. This accord is does little to accommodate minorities in BTAD and people have become more apprehensive about their security and future.

So, finding solutions to the conflict in BTAD is never going to be easy but the first step must be that contending parties must shun the use of violence to achieve its goals. The government as well as civil society must address the root cause of the problem. Mutual respect and acceptance of diversity is the key solution for the dilemma. The Bodo Accord gives preferential treatment to the Bodos and this need to be addressed properly. Proportional representation may give some respite to the non-bodos in BTAD but it is unlikely to solve the problems of poverty, development and corruption and so forth. The BPF and the state administration have been unable to handle the complex problems of minorities in Bodoland in an effective manner.

Conclusion: The demand for Bodoland was basically one of the ethnic cultural recognition and political autonomy set in sub regionalist terms. The focus of ethnic identity was sharper than in the previous Udayachal movement of the seventies which had demanded a homeland for all the plains tribes in Assam. But it has to be noted that ethnic movements do not arise merely due to the existence of relations of domination and subordination between culturally divergent groups, but due to a host of circumstances especially the events occurring in its immediate vicinity and within the community itself.

But it is very important to note here that to reduce ethnic conflict effort should be made to bring in positive peace that is enduring and welfares in nature. The groups as well as people at large must be made to realize that all problems can be solved through peaceful talks. The ultimate aim of all human being is peace and it human and it cannot be made a lasting one through use of gun.

To conclude, it can be said that to bring peace in BTAD there is need to be taken some of the important steps. For instance, the Non Bodo community should get equal rights in BTAD. Apart from that the problem of Bodo militancy should be resolved. And it has to be noted that peace in Bodoland has been achieved more through negative means rather than through positive ones. So, there is an urgent need to settle the conflict by addressing the diverse need of all the communities living in the Bodoland. The need of the hour in peace building, only then peace can be durable and stable in the long run. Prevention of reoccurrence of conflict is just the first step forward. So, in order to achieve durable peace in Bodoland the government needs to address the root causes of the conflict. There is also an urgent need to seize the illegal arms possessed by various militant groups. Furthermore, in order to achieve permanent peace in the region, the Bodo movement leaders must

adopt a more accommodative spirit and recognize that plurality of opinions and diversity of people only reflects the strength of any society.

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