



Violence between the Bodo's and Bengali – Speaking Muslim's in Western Assam (2012-2014): The Causes

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Abstract: The Bodos and the Bengali-speaking Muslims had experienced a series of ethnic violence during the period 2012 to 2014. The recurring violence had led to mass displacement of people belonging to both the communities. The victims of the violence living in the relief camps were deprived of basic human right to life and livelihood. The present paper will not deal with violence or conflict between the two communities but tries to analyse the major factors behind the violence between the Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims in Western Assam. As per ACHR report, more than 400,000 people were displaced and they took shelter in 300 relief camps. It had led to a humanitarian crisis with no basic facilities such as adequate food, medicine, doctors, drinking water, clothes, sanitation and hygiene and inadequate housing.

Keywords: Ethnic violence, Immigration, Infiltration, Land alienation, Line system, Deprivation.

Introduction

Assam is a land of diversity where various ethnic groups reside together. Assam is enriched with different cultures and natural resources, as well as its natural beauty. Around 30 ethnic groups are residing in Assam. Being diverse in ethnic terms, Assam has experienced a series of acts of ethnic violence at different periods in the post-colonial period. The demand for autonomy by different ethnic groups—sometimes for separate statehood and sometimes for complete independence from India—is the most active political discourse in Assam. The state identity movement is sometimes related to language issues such as Assamese-Bengali, Bodo-Assamese, Karbi-Assamese, etc. Sometimes it is related to ethnicity, such as Assamese-Bodo, Bodo-Adivasis, Bodo-Bengali-speaking Muslims, Rabha-Garo, Bihari- Adivasis, Nepali-Khasi, etc.

Despite being Bodos, a minority in their homeland consisting of 29% of the population in the BTAD areas, 30 out of the 46 council seats were reserved for them. The creation of BTC gave only powers to the Bodo community, against the interests of the majority of the people. On the other hand, the perception of large-scale immigration from Bangladesh, particularly after 1971, had generated a fear psychosis among the Bodo community that their ancestral land would be taken away by the immigrants. As per the ACHR report, the Muslim population of Assam rose by 77.42% between 1971 and 1991, whereas the Hindu

population grew by about 41.89% during the same period. Due to the rapid growth of immigrants, it has been raising pressure on land, shrinking opportunities for them. The changing demographic pattern and loss of land and livelihood had created tension in the Bodo community.

Ethnic violence between Bodo and Bengali-speaking Muslims has a long history. It is not a product of sudden antagonism. The origin of the violence between the two is rooted in the past history of Assam. A series of ethnic violence between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims broke out in different parts of Western Assam during 2012 to 2014 due to various factors that affected both communities. Such factors include demographic factors, the growth of political consciousness among the Bodo community, language issues, economic deprivation, failure of implementation of the illegal migrants (determination by tribunals), the IMDT Act (1983), the emergence of militant groups, etc. We analyse all these in brief below.

Demographic Factors

The main cause of the violence is linked to the questions of immigration, infiltration, and borders. Assam has a history of immigration from different parts of the region. People of different religious faiths and language groups have settled in the region for centuries. Different migrant groups at different periods of time had come to Assam and changed the society of Assam. They constituted a separate class of identity, a new identity for the larger population of the state. The British occupied Assam after the defeat of the Burmese King in the first Anglo-Burmese war by signing the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Thus, Assam, once a frontier for the British Administration, came under its direct control. When the British conquered Assam, they treated it as an extension of the erstwhile Eastern Bengal and not as an independent province. Till 1874, it remained under the control of Eastern Bengal Province and was considered a Bengal land frontier. This inclusion in the colonial administration made immigration a new issue in the region. The British colonial administration opened up the door to immigrants in the region. Gradually, the British Administration started to encourage a policy of immigration in the region. The discovery of the tea plantation in 1823 helped the British use the area for vast cultivation. It also encouraged importing the Muslim peasantry from the overpopulated East Bengal and labour from other parts of India into this new economic system. Beside tea plants, oil was another natural resource that the British wanted to exploit. Moreover, it was British colonial rule that helped to the growth of community consciousness among the Assamese people for the first time by imposing Bengali as the official language of the province. The British colonial administration used the Bengali middle class to run the administration of the region, and this was another source of clash between the native Assamese people and the immigrant peasants (Iqbal, 2018).

Tea plantations were the main aim of the British colonial administration in the region. Adivasis were brought as a labour force to work in the tea gardens, and East Bengal Muslim peasants were brought to use the land for cultivation and to grow more food. All types of immigrants gradually made Assam their homeland, causing grave concern and unrest within the native communities in the region. Studying the genesis of the conflict between the immigrants and the natives, Guha observes that landless immigrants from overpopulated East Bengal, of whom 85 percent were Muslim, found land in Assam's water-logged, jungle-infested, riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, they came by rail, streamers, and boats up the Brahmaputra to reclaim these material areas. All they wanted was land. From their riverine base, they further pressed forward in all directions in search of more living space, to areas held by the autochthones. It was then that an open clash of interests began to take place (Guha, 2006).

The continuous immigration encouraged the British Colonial Administration to introduce the 'Line System' in 1920, which can be seen as a colonial tool of racial division. In fact, it was a tool to divide the Bengali-Muslim population from the indigenous population, including tribal and backward classes. It was a source of tension between the administration and the people of the plains and between the people of the plains and the hills in Assam. In Assam, the Line System was associated with the immigration of land-hungry peasants from the district of Mymensingh in East Bengal. It is noted that the immigrant population mainly belonged to the Muslim community, which settled in the wastelands of Assam by cleaning the forest and starting cultivation. The large-scale immigration resulted in an uncontrolled growth of population in the first three decades of the 20th century (Kar, 2013).

The Line System was a device introduced by the colonial government to control the immigrant settlers from Bengal to the wasteland of Assam. It led to a division between India and the Indian community on the basis of religion and culture. In this perspective, the colonial government became successful with their policy of divide and rule to sow the seeds of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims as well as Bengali and Assamese since the beginning of the 20th century, another significant wave of immigration has entered the province. Millions of land-hungry Muslim peasants migrated to Assam. The immigration issues remained continuous even after the creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as a result of partition (Kar, 2013).

- **Community –wise Growth of Population in Assam and India**

Year	Assam		All India	
	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim
1951-1961	33.71	38.35	20.29	25.61
1961-1971	37.17	30.99	23.72	30.85
1971-1991	41.89	77.41	48.38	55.04
1991-2001	-	29.30	19.90	29.30
2001-2011	10.90	29.59	16.80	24.60

Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282647096 MIGRATION AND POPULATION GROWTH IN ASSAM A DISTRICT LEVEL STUDY](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282647096_MIGRATION_AND_POPULATION_GROWTH_IN_ASSAM_A_DISTRICT_LEVEL_STUDY)

The decadal growth rate for both Hindus and Muslims for the period 1951-1961 and 1961-1971 was higher than their respective All India growth rate, indicating migration of both communities into Assam. Muslim population of Assam has shown a rise of 77.41% in 1991 and it was only 30.99% in 1971. Hindu population has risen by nearly 41.89% during this period. The growth of Muslim population has been emphasised in the previous paragraph to indicate the large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh to Assam.

A fresh, continuous and large-scale immigration started after the creation of Bangladesh. The maximum immigration mainly economic migration from East Pakistan took place in 1971. This demographic changes generated the feeling of linguistic, cultural and political insecurity among the indigenous people of the Assam, which created apprehension among many Assamese that they would become minority in their own land and consequently to the subordination of their language and culture, loss of control over their economy and politics, and finally, the loss of their identity and individuality.

Conflict over Land

Conflict over land is related to demographic factors. Land is an inseparable part of the tribal people. It is the main source of life and livelihood. The majority of the tribe's livelihood depends on land and agriculture. Land cannot be separated from tribes, especially from Bodos. In the last six decades of independence, the population of Assam has increased from 80.03 lakhs in 1951 to 311.7 lakhs in 2011. It was the apprehension of the Bodo Community that they might be marginalised or dispossessed of their land within their homeland. The alienation of land from Bodos to non-Bodo immigrants may be an economic factor behind enhanced violence (Saikia, 2016).

The fear of losing land and identities associated with land was one of the root causes of conflict with indigenous Bodo tribals. Article 13 of the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries states that governments shall respect the special importance for the culture and spiritual values of the peoples concerned of their relationship with the land or territories, or both as applicable, which they occupy or otherwise use, and in particular the collective aspects of this relationship. In India, the need to protect tribal land has been recognised since the British period. In order to protect Adivasis, the British government enacted the Chotonagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, which banned the sale and purchase of land belonging to the tribals and vested the power with the Deputy Commissioner to take decisions about its ownership on the plea of its rightful owner (Rights A. C., 2012). After the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD) in Assam, land issues had become an enduring and unresolved issue in this region under the provisions of the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution. Due to this formation, the claim to an exclusive homeland for the indigenous community became a reality, which resulted in the self-assertion of exclusive land rights and control over land. As a result, a number of communities have been experiencing systematic discrimination in acquiring land rights in their native homeland. This land conflict arose from two legal provisions. The first one is the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886. Chapter X of the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886, which provides for the creation of tribal blocks under Section 161 and the prohibition of the transfer, exchange, lease, agreement, or settlement of any land in any area or areas constituted into belts or blocks to the non-tribals. To protect land alienation in the tribal belt and block, the act made a number of special provisions for the settlement of government land in the protected belts and blocks. The second legal provision is the Constitution Amendment Act 2003 (44 of 2003), by which the provisions of the sixth schedule of the constitution are applicable to BTAD areas. This Constitutional Amendment Act added a new section 3-B to the main schedule, in which several powers were given to the Bodoland Territorial Council to make laws. Since then, the Bodoland Territorial Council has been given the power to make laws in many areas, including land and revenues. But the provisions of the section specifically mention that nothing in such laws shall:

- Extinguish or modify the existing rights and privileges of any citizen in respect of his land at the date of commencement of this Act; and
- Disallow any citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement, or any other way of transfer if such citizen is otherwise eligible for such acquisition of land within BTAD areas.

In fact, certain acts and policies followed by the BTC administration have created tensions among the non-tribal population of the BTAD region that have resulted in decadal socio-political ethnic violence between Bodos and non-Bodos. On January 12, the executive council of BTC unanimously passed a rule to prohibit land transfer from a tribal to a non-tribal people, which declared that, as per the provisions of the Bodoland Territorial Council Act, 2003, no tribal could sell his or 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, including in the Tribal Belt and Blocks. Surprisingly, the executive council meeting has neglected the provision that the specific prior approval of selling land from a non-tribal to a non-tribal is under the provisions of Chapter X of the Assam Land and Regulation 1886. As the said decision tried

to establish the existing land rights of the protected classes in the BTC areas, neglecting the socio-political conditions of the non-tribal, it led to a growth of anxiety and deprivation among them. The BTC chief Hagrama Mohilary also declared that, as per the clauses of the MoS of the BTC accord, the general people were not allowed to buy land in tribal belts or blocks, and the general people could buy or transfer land only from general people who had been before the BTC accord. This inequity in policymaking and rules with respect to land administration has created uncertainty about land settlement in the BTAD areas, mainly among the people who do not belong to the Bodo community. Inequitable land access and land disputes are the major causes of the conflict between Bodos and non-Bodos, especially with the Bengali-speaking Muslim community (Kalita, 2019).

Language Issues

The growth and development of Bodo language and literature and the educational progress among the Bodo community in the post-independence period had its close link with the Constitutional developments and the Government's policy. Article 350A of the Constitution of India provides facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at primary level of education to the children belonging to linguistic minority section of the society. Beside this, the Government in conformity of provisions of the Constitution had adopted policies for development of all irrespective of caste and creed and had included provisions of reservation for backward sections of the society. The educated Bodo middle class community realised that for development of status of the tribe the main pre-condition was the spreading of education through the mother tongue. In this respect, the demand for the introduction of tribal language as a medium of instruction among the Plain Tribes of Assam was first raised by the members of the plain tribes in 1947. To preserve and protect the Bodo language, to safeguard their distinct identity, the spread of education and all rounds development of the community, On 16th November, 1952, a literary organisation named Bodo Sahitya Sabha was established at Basugaon. The main responsibility of the organisation was to make Bodo literature adopting Bodo dialects used in Assam, Bengal, North Cachar and Tripura. However, the script was used in their literature Assamese scripts. The script issue had an important impact on the growth of Bodo language and development of education among the Bodo community. Actually, Bodo inherit had no script of their own. In course of regeneration of Bodo language in the pre-independence period, the contributors had used Roman, Bengali and Assamese script simultaneously. After post-independence period, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had decided to use Assamese script for the Bodo language. Gradually the Bodo community started to feel the need of a single and a common script for the smooth functioning of Bodo language and literature. As a result of reaction to the Official Language Movement (1960) and Medium Movement (1972), the Bodo community had preferred to adopt Roman script as their common script. But the political condition of that time did not allow to continue Roman script, the leaders of the Movement had picked up to use Devanagari script instead of Assamese script. Although there were many successes and failure of their movement towards the final adoption of a single script till 2000. But the Bodo language had achieved significant progress through Devanagari script. The main importance of the script movement was the unity that resulted growth of political consciousness, a new enthusiasm in literature and development of education through Bodo language. On 2nd May 1985, the state government recognized the Bodo language as an official language of the state to be operational in the Bodo dominated Kokrajhar district and Udalgiri Sub-division of Darang district. On 22nd December, 2003, the literary developments of the Bodo language and literature led to the inclusion of the Bodo language in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution of India by the 92nd Amendment Act of 2003. One of the major contributions of the development of the Bodo language had led to the unification of the Bodo people who were scattered in different parts of Assam. Before post-independence period, the Bodo people were divided on the basis of regional differences, language, religion etc. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha in fact for the first time provided one common platform covering the whole community from within and outside the state removing all barriers. The growth of the sense of oneness and the spread of education helped in the rise of consciousness among the Bodo people for their socio-political rights. It led to the birth of organizations, like the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), the

Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and others. The process of social mobility and intellectual movements among the Bodo people generated new ideas and thoughts (Sarma, 2018).

Growth of Political Consciousness among the Bodos

In the beginning of the post-colonial period, the plain tribes of Assam did not obtain any self-rule in the form of autonomy or an autonomous district council like the hill tribes enjoyed in the region. The imposition of Assamese language and the language movement of the 1960s and 1972s was a dominant hegemonic attempt to undermine the minority language groups and their identity in the region. Because of the domination of the Assamese language, in the late 1960s, the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra valley, especially the Bodos, started to agitate for their identity and demanded autonomy to overcome miserable socio-economic and cultural conditions. The socio-economic exploitation or Asamiya domination over their culture, language, continuous socio-economic constraints, and political mobilisation create a sense of sub-nationalism among the Bodos (Kalita, 2017).

The genesis of the Brahma Movement led by Kalicharan Brahma and the emergence of the middle class among the Bodos made them conscious, both politically and socially. With the introduction of universal adult franchises in Bodo-dominated areas, certain political institutions gave the newly educated Bodo elites a chance to participate in the political process. But there were a few roles and positions that were also controlled by the high-caste Asamiya elite class. That is why their hopes and aspirations were not fulfilled. As a result, the newly mobilised and educated Bodo people lost their trust in the existing political institutions and tried to control the system on their own, which led to the emergence of the mass movement in the late 1980s. This also resulted in frustration among the Bodo youths, which led to the formation of several militant groups such as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFD) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) (Kalita, 2017).

Another aspect of the consciousness of separate ethnic identity among the Bodos took significant form due to the emergence of the educated middle class and continuous socio-economic and political issues. Bodos felt that they were deprived of their land rights and faced the problems of economic neglect and linguistic, cultural, and political identity as distinct ones. They claimed that the large-scale influx of outsiders and Asamiyas alienated and had a hegemonic attitude towards them was the main cause of their degraded condition. Despite being the largest plain tribe in the state, the Bodo's felt insecure and discriminated against because they had no chance to preserve their cultural identity in the realm of Assamese dominance (Kalita, 2017).

Apart from that, the Bodo intelligentsia of the early decades of the 20th century was also more concerned with bringing about an intellectual awakening among the members of the Bodo community. The first man who was responsible for Bodo awakening is Baba Kalicharan Brahma. In fact, he was the first Bodo personality to realize the need for reforming Bodo society. He strongly advocated for the spread of western education among the people of this community (Daimary, 2013).

The formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha after independence on November 16, 1952, which was considered an offshoot of the Bodo Club, was a significant achievement of the Bodo intellectuals. Its establishment generated a new era in the history of Bodo literature. In fact with the establishment of the Sahitya Sabha, the Bodo's consciousness of nationality transformed into a movement for their distinct linguistic identity. The organisation formulated programmes that were mainly guided by their desire for a separate identity or sometimes in response to challenges faced by the Assamese counter. In the post-independence period. Bodo's desire for a separate linguistic identity was accompanied by Bodo intellectuals' fear for Assamese dominance. For example, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha demanded the introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction in the schools of Bodo-dominated areas during the period of the Assamese Language Movement in 1960. As a result, Bodo was introduced as the medium

of instruction in the Bodo majority areas in 1963. Beside this, the Sahitya Sabha supported the Assamese language movement of 1972, demanding and agitating for Roman scripts for the Bode medium schools. The Bodo intellectuals had continued their language movement. After much agitation, Bodo was declared one of the major Indian languages to be taught in the colleges under Gauhati University. In 1985, the state government recognised Bodo as an official language of the state. Then another milestone of achievement was that Bodo was included in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution on February 10, 2003, under the provision of the Bodoland Territorial Council Accord (Daimary, 2013).

Failure of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983

Illegal immigration issues have been resulting in demographic and social transformation and creating tensions and conflicts between the immigrants and the natives in Assam since the British period. Assam shares 267 kilometers of the international border. Large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh is a major issue in Assam, which has led to a series of ethnic conflicts in the past. Beside this, the British colonial government encouraged the immigration of people from Bengal to the river basin of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam to generate more revenue. In this respect, the year 1947 was considered a watershed of history while two countries came into existence, India and East Pakistan. It led to intensive violence between Hindus and Muslims and the large-scale immigration into India from East Pakistan in search of economic opportunities. It was clearly revealed in the census report that Assam had registered an overall population growth of about 35–36 percent, which was above the national average, indicating the growth of the population through immigration. On the other hand, the 1971 Bangladesh War between East and West Pakistan gave birth to Bangladesh, which led to another fresh migration of people from Bangladesh to India. During this time, about 10 million people entered India. Illegal immigration continued even after this, and the issue became the central issue of state politics in Assam. This immigration issue had created a fear of loss of identity among the Assamese people and a threat to national security. The Assamese people forced the government to take significant steps to identify and deport the infiltrators. In 1960, the Union government introduced the Prevention of Infiltration in India by Pakistani Nationals (PIP). The main objective of the scheme was to deny entry to any new immigrant from East Pakistan, check the existing settlements of migrants, and deport any new migrant. After the creation of Bangladesh, the scheme was renamed the Prevention of Infiltration of Foreigners (PIF). But the scheme was not implemented continuously, and it could not deliver the kinds of results that were expected from it. In response to the criticism, the Union government created the Foreigner's Tribunals in 1964. The tribunal had authorised it to take up the case of a person and decide if he was a foreigner or not. It was created for the people who were served 'Quit India' notice by the police officials. Such people could apply to the tribunals and get the chance of a fair hearing. These tribunals also failed, like the previous PIF scheme, because of excessive delays in identifying and deporting the illegal migrants. The failure of this scheme led to anti-foreigner agitation in the state of Assam in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Due to continuous agitations and protests, the Union government took extraordinary steps. The Indira Gandhi government enacted the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983. The Act was applicable to the whole country but was applied only in the state of Assam on October 15, 1983. The other states of India followed the Foreigners Act of 1946. The aim of the Illegal Migrants Act was the same as the previous government's scheme—expulsion of foreigners and protection of Indian citizens. Section 3(c) of the Act defines illegal migrants. According to the section, any person is an illegal migrant if he fulfills the following conditions:

- Has entered India after 25th March 1971.
- The person is foreigner.
- Has entered India without a valid passport and other legal documents.

Section 2 of the Act contained a list of individuals for whom the Act was not applicable:

- Any individual who has been deported from India before the commencement of this Act, or any such individual who has been deported under any other law in force;
- Any individual who was detected to be a foreigner during his entry of the international borders of India;
- Any foreigner who entered India with a valid passport and visa but is residing in India even after the expiration of his visa.

The Act became meaningless because it failed to identify and deport illegal immigrants effectively. It was more on paper than on the ground. It was noticed that out of thirty tribunals provided in the original Act, only sixteen were finally approved. Out of sixteen, only five were operational by 1998. One of the main reasons for the Act's failure was that it gave a third person the power to report illegal migrants against whom he had some information, but this power was limited. The provision of the Act states that both the person who is complaining and the accused against whom the complaint is lodged should reside at the same police station. The burden to prove guilty was on the state government. Beside this, it was noticed that each time a person was reported under this Act they changed their location and became untraceable. The Act did not give the state police the power to search and seize (Rishikesh, 2021).

Economic Factors

A systematic and non-stop exploitation and domination of non-tribal people had led to the deprivation of the native Bodo community in the BTAD areas. The plain tribal people had been exploited by the non-tribals in respect of land, education, culture, employment opportunities, etc. The non-tribal people, especially staff, officers, and administrators, dominated and exploited the native tribal people in their own land. There was no effective policy on behalf of the state government to control such exploitation. The Bodos and the other Plain Tribes of BTAD areas felt that for a long time they had been exploited by non-tribals. They had been subjugated socially and exploited economically since the British conquered Assam. They had been kept away from the affairs of state administration, depriving them of job opportunities, and the posts under the reserved quota had been kept backlogged. The exploitation in this case was very crucial. It is important to note that the land was alienated from tribal to non-tribal. Land alienation was first found when the state government imported Muslim peasants from erstwhile East Bengal and encouraged them to settle down in the tribal areas of the state. The Muslim peasants were imported to generate more revenue and to grow more food by the British Government (Mushahary, 2004).

The Role of Militancy in the BTAD areas

The militant groups from both the community—Bodos and Muslims—had led to frequent violence in the BTAD areas. A militant group was found in Assam in the late 1970s. The United Liberation Front of Assam came into existence on April 7, 1979. The militant groups had emerged from the so-called Assamese community. Its main aim was to free Assam from India's domination through national armed struggle and form a sovereign, independent Assam. While the Assam agitation was going on, the ULFA also raised the same demand, which gained its popularity and mass support, but after the Assam agitation, it rolled away from the leadership of the signatories to the Assam Accord. All the leaders of Assam agitations, especially from AASU, formed Assam Gana Parishad, a regional political party, after the accord was signed. For the first time in the history of Assam state politics, a non-Congress and the newly formed regional party won the election with an absolute majority, with 64 seats out of 126. AGP formed the government in 1985, and it continued until 1990. During the AGP rule, the ULFA made numerous attacks that it considered its enemies. When the AGP was failing to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of Assamese people in the detection, detention, and deportation of illegal Bangladeshis, their support shifted to ULFA.

When destructive activities of the ULFA, like abduction for ransom, murder, and targeted attacks against non-Assamese, increased, a section of educated Bodo youth under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary formed an extremist organisation named the Bodo Security Force (BSF) on October 3, 1986, at Odal Khasibari village in Darrang district. The prime aim of the militant group was to form a separate sovereign Bodo state in the northern part of the Brahmaputra River through armed struggle. But the ABSU did not support the demand of the BSF on the ground that the Bodo people only wanted a separate state within India, and the demand for a sovereign state did not have backing and the support of the common masses. Despite ideological differences, BSF merged with the NDFD in 1994. After the formation of the NDFB, ABSU launched the Bodoland movement in 1987. The Bodoland movement started with gentle democratic means. But the Bodoland movement gradually turned into a violent movement. Bodo activists who had participated in the mass rallies while returning home were halted on the roads and assaulted by the Assamese goons. As a result, ABSU activists formed the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) to protect Assamese goons. With the rise of its rebel power, they started separate attacks on Assam police to snatch guns and weapons. They slowly intensified abducting rich people, particularly businessmen, contractors, and the government's officials' near and dear ones, for ransom in the Bodo-dominated district. After four years of rigorous, violent agitation, the ABSU and its volunteer force halted the agitation and opted for political negotiation. The political negotiations between ABSU leaders and the state government started in 1992. After a series of talks that led to a final agreement on February 20, 1993, the BAC accord was signed between ABSU leaders and the Government of Assam. However, the BAC accord had not satisfied the Bodo community, and the NDFB rejected the accord and continued its armed struggle. The situation in the newly created BAC accord was supposed to be peaceful, but in vain; it had never been peace. To continue the armed struggle, the NDFB continued to demand donations targeting people from non-Bodo communities for ransom. On October 7 in Amteka, massive violence broke out. The NDFB, along with locals, uprooted all 13 Muslim villages in Amteka Forestland. The violence had erupted in different revenue-settling Muslim villages such as Patabari, Digaldong, Bengtol, Amguri, etc. A large section of Muslim villagers surrounded by Bodo villages, even without being attacked, had fled from their homes due to fear of getting attacked. The NDFB initiated the attack against Muslim villagers, which resulted in ethnic violence between Bodo and Muslims, and it was the first ethnic violence between Bodo and Muslims. Thus, the Muslims and other non-Bodos continued to carry the perception in mind that the NDFB had always initiated ethnic violence in BTAD areas against the non-Bodo communities. On the other hand, Bodo people allege that the NDFB had not taken action against the Muslim settlers in Amteka forestland; rather, the common Bodo people were disturbed by the Muslim settlers. In fact, the Bodo had already known that the Muslim settlers did not fall under a protected class, and they were not entitled to be given settlement in any protected tribal belts and blocks. Once again in July 1994, the NDFB militant groups shot down several numbers of Muslim settlers in the forest land of Barpeta district (Islary, 2019).

Following a series of attacks against Muslim villagers in several regions of the remote village, the impacts later spread to the nearest Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts. Several thousands of Muslims were displaced, and several numbers of relief camps were established to give shelter to displaced people in different parts of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, and Kokrajhar districts. A few sections of Bodo villagers also had to take shelter in the relief camps as a result of the counter-insurgency of the Muslim settlers. After the October 1993 and July 1994 ethnic violence, a section of radical Muslim youths decided to arm themselves, which led to the formation of the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) in 1996. Another militant group, the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), came into existence in the same year, within a few months. The MULTA had started propaganda to establish a separate Islamic homeland that would be based on Islamic values and morals. It had developed links with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland— Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and ULFA to train its cadres. Many of the ULFA cadres had worked as agents for MULTA. Both militant groups had very close links with each other. Apart from that, the MULTA had special links with Islamic Jihadi groups in Bangladesh, such as the Harkat-ul-Jihad-Al-Islami (HUJI-B), Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) based in Bangladesh,

the Director General of Forces of Intelligence (DGFI), and the Bangladeshi Intelligence Agency (BIA). With a very close link with these agencies, the MULTA gradually established a strong base in Dhobi, Nagaon, Morigaon, and Darang districts. The MULTA had used the corridor of the international border in Golokganj of Dhubri district to infiltrate from Bangladesh after training their cadre in the land of Bangladesh. The MULTA had also used this corridor to trade arms with several local militant groups in Assam, including the whole of the northeast. From the beginning of its establishment, the MULTA had continued its link with ISI and had allegedly created communal disturbances in Assam (Islary, 2019).

Apart from the militant groups belonging to the Muslim and Bodo communities, Adivasis also formed about a half dozen militant groups after the Bodo-Adavasis conflict of 1996, such as Adavasi Cobra Military of Assam (ACMA), Birsa Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi People's Army (APA), All Adavasi National Liberation Army (AANLA), and Santhal Tiger Force (STF). A section of youths belonging to the Rajbanshi community had also established the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) in 1995, which aimed to create a separate Kamatapur state. Similarly, a section of Bengali youths formed the National Liberation Front of Bengalis (NLFB) (Islary, 2019).

The establishment of a number of militant groups had led to insecurity and instability in law and order in Assam, including the BTAD areas. Each of the communities living in the BTAD areas had at least one militant group, and the dominant communities, like Bodo, Muslims, Adivasis, etc., had more than one militant group. The destructive activities of these militant groups had brought down the stability of the governance of BTAD areas (Islary, 2019).

• Conclusion

Ethnic violence in BTAD areas of western Assam can be thus attributed to several factors: land alienation, heavy and continuous influx of immigrants, fight over space, homeland and fight over natural resources, issues of majority and minority population, insurgency issues, It is noted that peace can be restored in the region only through the restoration of land rights and people's cultural identity, socio-political autonomy, poverty alleviation programs, and spreading education and development. The problems of the native people of the region have been continuously ignored by successive governments.

Moreover, there is a lack of strong and committed leadership in the region, because of which human resources could not be effectively and productively utilised for the well-being of the native communities in the region.

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