

Ethnic and Counter-Ethnic Mobilization: A Study of Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam

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Northeast India for long has witnessed ethnic mobilizations for greater autonomy. The Government of India's attempt to meet such demands with statehood and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) did not end such demands. Formation of ADC under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India in a multi-ethnic society like in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) of Assam have proliferated ethnic mobilization. BTC has only 33.5% ST population with the Bodos as the dominant tribe. Therefore, introducing BTC for empowering the Bodos led to the question of marginalization and counter-ethnic mobilization of other communities. It also led to the strengthening of "Non-Bodo" as a collective identity. The paper analysed counter-ethnic mobilization as a consequences of the formation of ADCs in a multi-ethnic society. It discusses the factors for such mobilization i.e., incidences of violence, insecurity, and questions of deprivation. It also discusses the consequences of the mobilization in strengthening of "Non-Bodo" identity.

Keywords: Ethnic groups, Inter-ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Mobilization, Bodos, Autonomous District Council

Introduction

Northeast India, which is the home of multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic groups, from time to time has witnessed mobilization among groups based on their ethnic identity for greater autonomy. Government of India has tried to meet such demands by providing greater autonomy either in the form of statehood or through the Autonomous District Council (ADC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. ADCs with executive, administrative, and legislative powers within their jurisdiction attempted to ensure autonomy for the region's various ethnic groups. However, such mechanisms did not put an end to ethnic demands; rather, in a multi-ethnic society, ADCs have proliferated new militant groups based on ethnic identity and ethnic clashes. In fact, the creation of "territorially defined autonomy" in the form of an ADC for a particular ethnic or linguistic group in a multi-ethnic

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territorial region like “Assam has aggravated the marginalization of a large section of people living in this area” (Singh 2008:1110-1111). The formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003, in an area that is characterized by multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural groups, has also opened Pandora’s Box (Singh 2008:1111). BTC was formed in the western part of Assam, comprising four districts—Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri districts (the area together is known as the Bodoland Territorial Region)¹. The Bodoland Territorial Region comprises only 33.5% of the ST population of the area, and the rest is non-tribal. Although the Bodos are the largest tribal group among the ST population of BTR, they comprise only 27% of the total population of BTR. Therefore, introducing such arrangements to empower a single ethnic group i.e., the Bodos has only worsened ethnic and political relations between the Bodos and other communities that share the same space (Barbora 2005:212). In the post-BTC formation, ethnic tension and counter-ethnic mobilization have become an inalienable part of the present-day BTR scenario. Therefore, the present paper analysed the consequences of the formation of ADCs in a multi-ethnic society in the form of counter-ethnic mobilization. It also discusses the factors for such mobilization i.e., incidences of violence, apprehension about security of life, and questions of deprivation. It also discusses the consequences of such mobilization in strengthening of “Non-Bodo” identity as a collective identity.

Methodology

Considering the analytical nature of the objective, the study relied on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data are gathered from newspapers, online blogs, and articles, as well as civil society organizations’ memorandums and press releases. Primary data were gathered from two districts out of the four district of BTC.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Profile of BTR as per Census of India, 2011

Districts	Population	Sex ratio	Literacy rate
Kokrajhar	887,142	959	65.22%
Udalguri	831,668	973	65.41%
Baksa	950,075	974	69.25%
Chirang	482,162	969	63.55%

Source: District Census Handbook, Kokrajhar, 2014; District Census Handbook, Chirang, 2014; District Census Handbook, Udalguri, 2014; District Census Handbook, Baksa 2014

As per the 2011 Census of India, among the four districts, Baksa has the highest population i.e., 9,50,075; and Chirang has the lowest population (482162). Table 1 show that among the four districts, Baksha has the highest sex ratio (974), followed by Udalguri (973) and Chirang (969); and Kokrajhar has the lowest sex ratio (959). It also shows that Chirang has the lowest literacy rate i.e., 63.55%. Among these four districts, Kokrajhar is not only head-quarter of BTR, but also the hub of the ethnic

mobilisation. Moreover, among the remaining three districts, Chirang has been the most backward district in terms of literacy rate and sex ratio. Considering these aspects, for the present study Kokrajhar and Chirang districts are chosen for primary data collection.

To ensure an inclusive understanding for the present study, data are collected from both rural and urban areas of the Kokrajhar and Chirang districts. The researcher while selecting the areas ensured that the area is resided by at least five ethnic groups, including the Bodos. To identify areas having mix population, the researcher had discussion with few key-informants¹ of both Kokrajhar and Chirang districts. During the discussion regarding the selection of rural areas with the key-informants, it is found that there is no village having mix population. Generally, in a typical village in Assam the residents belong to one or maximum two ethnic groups. Therefore, to avoid the complication one Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) has been selected from each of the district under the study. Village Council Development Committees are the grass-root level non-statutory local governing bodies in the BTC administration equivalent to Gaon Panchayats. The number of villages under one VCDC varies, usually each VCDC have under its jurisdiction 5 to 12 villages. Therefore, in each district one VCDC and one Municipal Board/Town Committee are chosen based on mix population.

The urban areas of Kokrajhar district cover four town areas i.e., Kokrajhar town, Gossaigaon, Padmabil and Salaikati. Among these towns, Kokrajhar town, having mix population, was selected for data collection. As per 1991 Census, Kokrajhar (Municipal Board) has 8.24 sq. km area divided into 10 wards. Similarly for the study in the rural areas, Bhatipara VCDC under Kokrajhar district has been selected for data collection because of its mix population. It has 5 villages under its jurisdiction namely, Joypur (5439 population and 885 households), Bhatipara (1443 population and 287 households), Diabari (330 population and 78 households), Mokrapara (2768 population and 633 households), and Narabari (1941 population and 368 households). Data are collected from all these villages under the Bhatipara VCDC.

Chirang district has three town areas viz., Kajalgaon, Basugaon, and Bijni. For the study Basugaon town has been selected for the study as it has mixed population, whereas in Kajalgaon town and Bijni town maximum of the residents belongs to the Bodo group and the Hindu-Bengali group respectively. Basugaon Town Committee has 13849 populations. For the study in rural area, Bhawanipur VCDC has been selected for data collection. It has nine villages under its jurisdiction namely, Kaliagaon (1217 population and 253 households); Joypur (387 population and 72 households); Manikpur (954 population and 187 households); Bhabanipur (1009 population and 212 households); Shikapara Part 1 (454 population and 107 households); Paschim Gumurgaon (758 population and 148 households); Polangsuguri (1445 population and 183 households); Tulsijhora (624 population and 132 households); and Shikapara Part 2 (401 population and 84 households).³ Therefore, the area of the present study includes, Kokrajhar town (urban area), Basugaon town (urban area), Bhatipara VCDC (rural area) and Bhawanipur VCDC (rural area).

From the selected area of study, data are collected from two categories of respondents. The first group of respondents comprising 160 households are chosen

from the four areas of the study i.e., Kokrajhar town, Basugaon town, Bhatipara Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) and Bhawanipur Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) to analyse specifically the “Non-Bodo” identity. 40 households were chosen from each of the four areas of study. Convenient sampling technique has been adopted to select the 160 households, as not many were willing to give interviews considering the subject of the research being politically sensitive. However, while choosing the respondents the researcher ensures the representation of different ethnic groups in the sample. In these 160 households, the researcher purposively chose the head of the households as respondents and data were collected through face-to-face interview method using structured interview schedule. The second category of respondents consist of seven respondents. Among the seven, four are members and leaders in civil society organizations; one is a former Rajya Sabha member and president of a political party; another one is a present Member of Council Legislative Assembly; and the remaining one respondent is a retired academician. The four respondents, who are the members and leaders of the civil society organizations, basically belong to three organizations active in the present counter-ethnic mobilization in BTR, namely Non-Bodo Suraksha Samiti/ *O Boro Suraksha Samiti* (one respondent), *Sanmilito Janagoshthiya Aikya Mancha* (one respondent), and All BTAD Minority Students’ Union (two respondents). This second group of respondents are chosen through a purposive sampling technique based on the designation of the respondents. The researcher made a prior appointment with the respondents to interview them and data are collected using face-to-face interview and telephonic interview method. The interview schedule for these groups of respondents is semi-structured because while some questions are common for all the respondents, some questions were specific to the organizations with which they are associated. Members of civil society organisations are interviewed to learn about the factors that led to the formation of their organization, as well as their organizations’ objectives and position on counter-ethnic mobilization. The academician and the leader of the political party are interviewed to get their insights about the issues of BTC, thereby identifying the conditions that led to the mobilization. The second group of respondents consisting seven respondents are chosen to have an insightful understanding of the process and factors of counter-ethnic mobilization in the post-BTC formation. Although both the interview schedules are prepared in English, the schedules are translated into Assamese language for the convenience of the respondents during the interview. The data collected through interviews, specifically for the second group of respondent, is saved in the form of voice records and telephone call records with the prior consent of the respondents and was transcribed later on. The transcribed data is then used by analyzing the contents and paraphrasing the respondents’ opinions. While the interviews are conducted in the Assamese language, the responses are translated into English during transcription. To ensure that the meaning of the contents would not be deformed, simple English sentences are mostly used during translation. The first groups of respondents i.e., 160 households were interviewed from 7th February 2017 to 11th July 2017. The second group of respondents were interviewed from July 3, 2019 to July 15, 2019.⁴

Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule and BTC

The provision of the ADC under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was initiated during the Interim Government of India⁵ with the formation of the North East Frontiers (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly. The initiative for such provisions came in the face of the growing aspiration for political autonomy of the ethnic groups in Northeast India since the 1920s. To meet such demands, the North East Frontiers (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas sub-committee recommended the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) for the hill tribes of Northeast India to safeguard their tribal land rights and customary practices. Accordingly, the provision of the Sixth Schedule that provided for the formation of ADCs came into effect along with the Constitution of India on January 25, 1950 (Barbora 2005: 202).

Currently, ten ADCs operate in Northeast India under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, three in Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram; and one in Tripura. Assam has Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, North Cachar Hills Council, and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). Although the provision of ADC was incorporated in the 1950s, the study area of the paper, i.e., BTC, was formed only in 2003. At the time of the incorporation of the provision of ADC into the Constitution of India, it was only meant for the hill tribes of Northeast India. The plain tribes of Assam were excluded from the provisions on the presumption that they would gradually socially and culturally assimilate with the non-tribals. Contrary to such a presumption, the Bodos, the largest plain tribes of Assam, started their mobilization for a separate identity and greater political autonomy. BTC was formed primarily in response to the long-running Bodoland movement, an ethnic mobilization for the homeland that began in the 1980s.

The Bodos and the Bodoland movement

The presumption that the plain tribes would gradually assimilate with the non-tribals of Assamese society received a setback when the plain tribal groups like the Bodos began mobilizing to protect their identity. Among the plain tribes of Assam, the Bodos are the largest group who made a significant mark in Assam's political history with their movement for the homeland.

Sydney Endle (1911), S.K. Chatterjee (1974), and Grierson (1903) used the term "Bodo" to refer to a large number of tribes who belong to the Indo-Mongoloids group, migrated from the Chino-Tibetan region, and settled in the Brahmaputra valley.

However, at present, the term "Bodos" refers to the largest plain tribes of Assam, settled in the northern areas of the Brahmaputra valley, mainly in the four districts of Assam, viz., Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. They speak a language of Tibeto-Burman origin. In the course of time, the Bodos converted to Hinduism and Christianity. However, the converted Hindu-Bodos continued to follow their indigenous religion known as *Bathou Dharam* (Choudhury 2007: 2).

The process of assimilation of the Bodos into the Assamese mainstream received a setback with the launch of the *Brahma Movement* in the late 19th century. The socio-religious reforms associated with the movement led to the emergence of Bodo-educated youth who played a major role in the articulation of the Bodos as a separate

identity (Choudhury 2007: 61). In 1933, the Bodos were politically organized under the All Assam Plain Tribal League (Barbora 2005: 203). The major impetus for the ethnic mobilization of the plains tribes of Assam came after independence with the sense of “betrayal” due to their exclusion from the purview of the Sixth Schedule (Barbora 2005: 204). The mobilization took the form of the Bodoland movement, which stood for demanding a separate state for the Bodos in the late 1980s. However, the consolidated form of identity assertion of the Bodos was initiated by a few Bodo elites in 1952 with the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), a literary organization to promote the Bodo language, culture, and identity (Barbora 2005: 203). BSS played a major role in the Bodo medium movement of the 1960s, the movement to make the Bodo language a medium of instruction in government schools (Barbora 2005: 204). The Plain Tribal Councils of Assam (PTCA) in the late 1960s, under the leadership of the Bodos, raised the demand for a separate Union Territory for the Bodos in consolidation with other plains tribes of Assam. PTCA received cooperation from the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), formed in February 1967. Nevertheless, following the failure of PTCA in forming a separate state for the Bodos at the time of the reorganization of Assam (1971), ABSU withdrew its support from PTCA in 1979. In 1984 further split of PTCA made it weak. Meanwhile, a section of the Bodo youths took an active part in the Assam movement (1979-1985), an anti-immigrant movement, as allies of the All Assam Student Union (AASU). However, the state government after the Assam Accord (1985) did not show any interest in the grievances of the Bodos (Basumatary 2014: 6). Therefore, ABSU began the Bodoland movement in March 1987 with “three major political issues: (1) formation of a separate state named ‘Bodoland’ on the north bank of the Brahmaputra; (2) establishment of autonomous district councils in the tribal dominant areas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra; and (3) incorporation of the Bodo-Kacharis of Karbi-Anglong in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution” (George 1994: 880). With the emergence of the Bodo Security Force (Bd.S.F.), a militant organization, the Bodoland movement in the early 1990s became very violent. Finally, the violence ended with the signing of the Bodo Accord in 1993 with the establishment of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) “to provide maximum autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution to the Bodos for their social, economic, educational, ethnic, and cultural advancement” (Das 1994: 422). However, due to disagreement over the territorial boundary of BAC between the state government and the movement leaders; disagreement over the election to the council; and the opposition from various sections of the Bodos; the BAC could not succeed (Singh 2008: 1104). The failure of the Bodo Accord (1993) was followed by the second phase of the Bodoland movement. The second phase became much more violent with the new armed organization i.e., the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT). The earlier Bd.SF was renamed as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and raised the demand for a sovereign Bodoland outside the Indian union. Finally, after several talks, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed on February 10, 2003, between the Central government, the State government, and Hagrama Mahilary, the then BLT leader, which ensured the autonomy of the Bodos with a politico-administrative arrangement under the

Sixth Schedule. On December 7, 2003, the BTC started functioning with the former BLT leader, Hagrama Mohilary, as the chief of the interim government of the council. Unlike other tribal councils, the BTC's territorial boundary comprises four districts and is endowed with executive, legislative, financial, and developmental powers.

Post-BTC formation: counter-ethnic mobilization

The population composition of BTR, in comparison to the other ADCs in Assam, is heterogeneous. In BTR, the ST population is only 33.5%, much lower in comparison to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (56.3%) and North Cachar Hills Council (71.8%). The Bodos have the highest proportion of the ST population in BTR. The other tribal groups in BTR are the Rabhas, Saranias, Mishings, and Garos. Non-tribal groups of BTR include Assamese-speaking, Bengali-speaking, Nepali-speaking, and a few Hindi-speaking people. The Koch Rajbongshis, and tea-tribes and ex-tea tribes, comprising Santhals, Oraons, and Mundas are also the inhabitants of the area.⁶ Therefore, in such a multi-ethnic area, the creation of an administrative set-up based on ethnic identity is likely to have serious socio-political consequences, including inter-ethnic tensions (Chaube 2012: 94). Moreover, scholars like Prabhakara (2003) apprehended that in an 'ethnic mix' populated area, the formation of BTC created apprehension among the other communities about "...The Bodo hegemony in areas, which they view, equally, as their home" (Prabhakara, 2003). He further opines, "The setting up of the BTC without clarifying these issues and removing these apprehensions, is likely to be the most problematic aspects of the functioning of the BTC" (Prabhakara, 2003). Therefore, such a policy of the government of India is viewed as a partial policy creating an "ethno-political contention" (Dutta 2018: 68).

The process of accommodating the interests of one ethnic community through the Sixth Schedule has led to the "exclusion and alienation of others" (Roy 2017: 80). Eventually, the creation of BTC led to the counter-ethnic mobilization of various communities living in the BTR. Such a process of counter-ethnic mobilization can be understood in the present context of BTR, plagued with issues of ethnic clashes and questions of deprivation. The present study identified three major factors of the counter-ethnic mobilization in BTR, namely, ethnic violence, apprehension about security of life, and the question of 'deprivation'.

Incidences of violence

Since the early 1990s, the western part of Assam, which is at present known as BTR, has witnessed ethnic conflicts, destruction of life and property, and displacement of people. From 1993-94, the Bodo-Muslim conflict in the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts of Assam led to the displacement of around 23,400 people, thereby compelling them to take refuge in the relief camps (Prakash 2007: 702). In 1995, the active Bodo militants of that time, the BrSF, attacked other communities such as Bengali, Nepali, and Assamese-speaking people. On October 9, 1995, Bodo militants killed eight Bengali people in front of the office of the *Samagra Assam Bengali Yuva Chatra Parishad* (SABYCP) in Kalaigaon village, the then Darrang district (now in Udalguri district, BTR), in retaliation for the protest conducted by the SABYCP at a rally by

the then BAC chief, Prem Singh Brahma. Again, on October 15th, BrSF killed eight people, of which six were Nepali, and the remaining two belongs to the Assamese and Bengali group, in retaliation for the settlement of the “non-Bodos” in the then BAC area (Baruah 1999: 195). Moreover, there were several instances of attacks on Santhals by the Bodo militants from 1996 to 1998 onwards, causing the death and destruction of houses of both the Bodos and the Santhals. These clashes made 1.29 lakh people homeless and to end up in 65 refugee camps. The consequences of such frequent conflicts and violence on the Muslims and the Santhals, along with other local groups like the Koch Rajbongshis, the Bengalis and the Nepalis, the Hindi and the Assamese-speaking, caused constant terror among the people (Mahanta 2013: 52). The frequency and nature of violence have made Baruah (1999: 196) view such attacks as having “an ethnic cleansing function”. Many Bodo militants and ordinary Bodos also lost their lives and became homeless due to the counter-attack by the Santhali and the Bengali militant groups and also due to the action of the government of India forces to combat violence. Therefore, the period from the late 1990s to the early 2000s witnessed the highest level of violent activity during the entire phase of the Bodoland movement (Basumatary 2014: 23).

The post-BTC formation witnessed more episodes of violence in 2008, 2012, and 2014. In 2008, the Bodo-Muslim conflict continued for two months from August-October in Udalguri and Darrang districts (adjacent to Udalguri district of BTR). A few sporadic incidences of violence also took place in Chirang and Baksa districts, causing the deaths of around 100 people and making one lakh people homeless. Majority of the victims in this conflict were the Bengali-Muslims (Saha 2014). A more devastating Bodo-Muslim conflict broke out on July 19, 2012, in the districts of Kokrajhar, Dhubri, and Chirang (Saha 2014).

The grounds of the 2012 conflict arose when an ex-BLT cadre in *Badlangmari* village, Kokrajhar district, removed a signboard from an area reserved for the construction of a mosque. Protesting such action, the All BTAD Minority Students’ Union (ABMSU) declared a *bandh* on May 29, 2012, which turned violent (Pathak 2012: 19). Moreover, the two incidents that served as an immediate cause of violence took place in Kokrajhar district. The first incident took place on July 6, 2012, when some gunmen shot dead two Muslims. The second was on July 19, at *Anthihara* village, where the two leaders of ABMSU were killed. In retaliation, on July 20, 2012, four ex-BLT Bodo people were mob lynched in *Joyapore* village in the same district. Following these incidences, a series of killings and conflicts occurred, causing the deaths of around 100 people and compelling around 4 lakh people to move to 286 relief camps (Talukdar 2012; Saha 2014). The frequent attacks on the Bengali-Muslims, the Santhals, and other “non-Bodo” groups were perceived as a planned strategy to drive the other communities out of BTR so that the demand for the Bodoland state would be secured. The number of displaced victims in this particular inter-ethnic conflict that took place in 2008 and 2012 incidents was the highest since 1947 (Chodhury 2014). Mishra (2012, 38) argues, “The creation of a particular ethnic homeland without ensuring the constitutional rights of the other communities living in the region was the beginning of the conflict lines, leading to repeated clashes

between the Bodos and other communities, especially the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims”.

On May 1, 2014, just after the 2014 Lok Sabha election, attacks on the Bengali-Muslims were repeated and continued for two days. The immediate cause that led to the violent incident was the participation of Sanmilita Jangosthiya Aikya Mancha, a conglomeration of “Non-Bodo” in electoral politics. SJAM supported an independent candidate, Naba Kumar Sarania (also known as Hira Sarania), for the seat of Kokrajhar Lok Sabha Constituency, which resulted in Sarania’s win in the election. At an election rally held on April 22, 2014, Chandan Brahma, the then-candidate of the Bodoland People’s Front political party for Kokrajhar Lok Sabha Constituency, stated that “if the BPF candidate does not win in the Lok Sabha election, there would be an *earthquake* in the area (devastating impact in the area)”. After BPF lost in the election on April 30, 2014, Parmila Rani Brahma, another prominent member of BPF and an MLA, accused the Bengali-Muslims of the consequences of the election. Immediately the next day, on May 1, 2014, the attack on the Bengali-Muslims broke out in Baksa and Kokrajhar districts (Chodhury, 2014). The attack was, therefore, viewed as retaliation against the “Non-Bodos” for voting the one whom the “Non-Bodos” wanted. The attacks created terror among people. Around 50,000 people fled from their villages, fearing more attacks (Hindustan Times, May 5, 2014). In December 2014, another conflict broke out between the militant groups of the Bodos and the Adivasis in Sonitpur, Chirang, Udalguri, and Kokrajhar districts. In the attack and counter-attack of the militant organizations of both the communities, 82 people were killed and 5 thousand people were displaced (Sherawat, 2014).

The continuous clashes among the communities in the area are led by multiple factors. Firstly, the debate over the jurisdiction of the BAC accord that only villages having a 50% or above Bodo population would be included under it (Deka 2012) made the Bodo extremists conscious. They realized that a “homogenous Bodoland” is the requirement for fulfilling their demand for a separate state. Therefore, the Muslims and the Adivasis target was visualized as “the promise of changing the demographic facts on the ground” (Baruah 1999: 196). Secondly, one of the major causes of violence in Bodoland and Assam has been the result of the “valorization of the *son of the soil* doctrine, a doctrine that is the result of powerfully territorialized (ethnic) identities, and the enduring but highly selective reaffirmation of natural geo-cultural links between ethnic groups and territory” (Deka 2014). Further, the Bodos perceive the Bengali-Muslims’ reliance on the land economy as a major threat to the tribal land (Sharma 2017: 57). Therefore, the Bodo activists and their militant groups have been suspicious of the right to settlement of all these communities, which have settled in the lands covered by Tribal Belts and Blocks and in some reserved forest areas (Baruah 1999: 195). In this regard, the Bengali-Muslims are viewed as “illegal immigrants”. Thirdly, there has been suspicion that these “immigrant communities” following their ethnic line would not vote for candidates supported by the Bodo activists but rather would vote for candidates other than the Bodos (Baruah 1999: 195). Fourthly, compared to the other communities, the Bengali-Muslims are more organized and are, therefore, perceived as a major threat to the Bodoland demand (Sharma 2017: 57). As a result, with each incident of violence in the BTR, people

become more ethnically politicised and polarised on political issues (Dutta 2018: 69).

Apprehension about security of life

To end the violent phase of the Bodoland movement, the government of India began discussion in the early part of 2000 to provide for an alternative arrangement that would give the Bodos greater autonomy. Therefore, in March 2000, the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT), one of the two Bodo militant groups⁷, declared a cease-fire. Finally, in February 2002, with the consent of the government of Assam, it was agreed to have an Autonomous District Council, i.e., BTC under the Sixth Schedule (Prakash 2007: 714).

Meanwhile, the incidence of violence and ethnic conflict of the 1990s was very much in the minds of ordinary people. Therefore, the signing of the BTC Accord in 2003 has created “fear psychosis” among the other communities (Mahanta 2013: 54). The fear was of the “resumption of sectarian violence” after the formation of BTC (Prabhakara, 2003). Such fear psychosis led to the emergence of opposition from the leading organization *Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti* (SJSS), an umbrella of 18 “non-Bodo” organizations. Phani Medhi, the convenor of the Samiti, clearly opposed the inclusion of the areas into the proposed BTC where the other communities are the majority. SJSS argued that the formation of BTC would “totally marginalized the non-Bodo population” in the area. The organization specifically made apprehensions about the security of life of the “non-Bodo” population (Prakash 2007: 715). The SJSS continued their democratic way of protest, i.e., rail/road blockades, during the ongoing discussion. Despite its opposition, BTC was formed with an amendment to the Sixth Schedule in 2003.

During an interview with the author, the chief advisor of All Koch Rajbongshis Students’ Union (AKRASU) and Sanmilita Janagoshthya Aikya Mancha (SJAM) highlighted the reason for the inability to obstruct the formation of BTC. He mentioned that although common people were aware of their political deprivation in the 2003 Accord, there was a lack of unity among the other communities (H. Barman, personal communication, July 7, 2019). Thus, in the absence of strong cohesion amongst the other communities, the mobilization against the BTC formation was weak at that time.

The apprehension created as a result of the long period of violence became a major reason for increasing mobilization among the communities. The All BTAD Minority Student’s Union (ABMSU), formed in 2005, emerged as a result of the apprehension of threat to life. The District President of ABMSU, during an interview with the author, narrates the situation leading to the formation of ABMSU. He narrates:

The reason for the formation of ABMSU lay in 1993, i.e., before the formation of BTC, when there was a movement for a separate state on the northern side of the present BTC. This part of the state, being separate and far from Guwahati and inhabited by the people of low economic status, was neglected for a long time by those in power in the state government. Such negligence has led to a movement in the area. During the time of the

movement (Bodoland movement), we (minority) had the All Assam Minority Student Union, but the organization did not give much importance to the downtrodden and poverty-ridden minority people in this part of Assam. In 1993, when there was an attack on the minority by the Bodos, AAMSU did not extend the required help to these people. As a result, these minority people were displaced from their village, and many people were unable to return to their homes and are still living in the refugee camps today. In 2003, when the Accord was signed, people among us (minority) realized the necessity for our organization to make demand and provide protection for our rights. In such a situation, in 2005, ABMSU was formed (A.J. Mondal, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

Therefore, the discussion regarding the formation of BTC and the frequent ethnic violence in the Bodoland area has naturally created terror among the other communities about the security of their lives and property. Therefore, currently, threats to life have become another major basis of counter-ethnic mobilization in the BTR.

Question of ‘deprivation’

The formation of the BTC, along with fear life, also created apprehension among the organizations of other communities about the question of ‘deprivation’ and protection of their rights under the proposed BTC. The SJSS was making repeated appeals not to provide any form of political autonomy to the Bodos in an area inhabited by other community people. The Samiti’s argument was that any form of autonomy in a heterogeneous populated area would allow the Bodos to oppress the other community and, thereby, turn the other community people into “second class citizens” (Prakash 2007: 717).

Addressing the concerns of the opposing organizations, the Assam government issued recommendations on September 24, 2002, to incorporate the provisions for “the protection of the political, land, language, and trade rights of the non-Bodos in the proposed territory” (The Telegraph, 27 September 2002). These recommendations were incorporated as a special provision for the other communities living in the BTR in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2003. The Act under paragraph 2 (1) states, “the Bodoland Territorial Council shall consist of not more than forty-six (46) members, of whom forty (40) shall be elected on the basis of adult suffrage, of whom thirty (30) shall be Scheduled Tribes, five non-tribal communities, five open for all communities, and the remaining six shall be nominated by the Governor having same rights and privileges as other”. To protect the land rights of the other communities, the Act under paragraph 3B states that the law-making power of the BTC shall not “(a) 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 (b) disallow any citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by any other way of transfer if such citizen is otherwise eligible for such acquisition of land within the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (now BTR).” To ensure that the Bodo language is not imposed on the other communities, the Act stated that in the educational institutions in BTR, the language and medium of instruction will not be changed (Memorandum of settlement, 2003). It also stated that the Bodo language would be the official language of the BTC along with the

Assamese and English (Action Aid India 2016: 15). However, gradually the question of deprivation at different levels and in different aspects under the BTC administration has arisen.

Deprivation in the political sphere

The political provision available in the BTC Accord (2003) is not sufficient to provide political rights to the other communities. It is observed that the seats for the BTC council are reserved for STs in those areas where the Bodos are in the minority, and it is kept open for all in those areas where the majority are the Bodos. Therefore, in both ways, it reduces the chances of the other communities getting elected. This caused unequal representation of the other communities in the Legislative Assembly of the BTC, which made its composition “a Big farce” (Mahanta 2013: 54).

The Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2003 also allowed the other communities to contest 10 seats in the Council (5 seats are reserved for the non-tribals and another 5 seats are open for all). Nevertheless, such political provisions are considered insufficient for the ethnic groups that have a population of 66.5% in BTR. In an interview with the author, a chief advisor and an ex-president of O Boro Suraksha Samiti described the increasing discrimination against non-Bodos in the political sphere. He opines,

They (the government) have reserved 30 seats for 8 lakh people (Bodos), which is extreme discrimination. If they (the government) have any concern about us (other communities), then why don't they reserve 20 seats for us (non-Bodos)? As the non-Bodos are the majority, it should be divided in the ratio of 70:30 between the non-Bodos and Bodos. They have even deprived the other tribals of the area. The centre and state governments formed BTC because of the fear of militancy, depriving 22 lakh other communities of their rights (R. Ahmed, personal communication, July 10, 2019).

One District President of ABMSU, during the interview with the author, made the same argument that since the majority, i.e., 30 seats are reserved for the STs; the other communities are unable to come into power in BTC. He further opined that because of such provisions, in fact, “they (the STs) retain the power with them and continue corruption instead of development” (J. Islam, personal communication, July 3, 2019). A retired academician, during an interview with the author, explained that the minimum reservation provided under the BTC Accord (2003) to the other communities in the political sphere is not sufficient for them to participate in decision-making (H.C. Ray, personal communication, July 4, 2019).

Such political deprivation of other communities in the BTC can be observed from the data about the elected representatives to the BTC Legislative Assembly. On December 7, 2004, in the interim council of BTC, of the 12 executive members, only two were not Bodos, namely, Badan Hasda (Adivasi) and Niren Roy. In the first BTC Legislative Assembly election (2005), of the 5 open seats, 3 seats were won by Rabindra Brahma, Munshing Brahma, and Makhan Swargayari, all of whom belong to the Bodo community. Two seats were won by Keshab Chandra Deka and Kalilur

Rahman, who are from other communities. Moreover, in the same Legislative Assembly (2005), among the fourteen executive members in the Council, only two members, i.e., Shyam Sundhi and Lakiram Tudu, were non-tribal and not Bodos (Daimary 2015: 164). In the BTC Legislative Assembly election of 2010, out of the 5 open seats, three members—Rahindra Brahma, Makhan Swargiyari, and Moon Singh Brahma are Bodos, and the remaining two members—Khalilur Rahman and Jagadish Sarkar are from other communities. In the same Legislative Assembly (2010), among the fourteen executive members, none were from other communities (Daimary 2015: 165). This shows that until 2014, the representation of other communities as council members and executive members was insignificant. However, major changes came in 2014 with the participation of SJAM, a conglomeration of other communities' organizations, in the electoral politics of BTR. In the 2015 election, immediate change was observed as all the 5 open seats were won by the other communities' representatives, namely, Muminur Islam, Maheneswar Roy, Gautam Das, Ghanasyam Das, and Jagadish Sarkar.⁸ However, among the fourteen executive members, only two members, i.e., Jagadish Sarkar and Shyam Sundhi, are from groups other than the Bodos (Daimary 2015: 166). For three consecutive terms since the formation of BTC, the Bodo People's Front under the leadership of the chief, Hagrama Mahilary, has remained in power. Overall, it shows that until 2010, the majority of the open seats were won by the Bodo representatives in the BTC Legislative Assembly elections.

The data about the representatives in the BTC Legislative Assembly explains that, for so long, there has not been a single executive member in BTC belonging to the minority group. This justifies the statement of an All BTAD Minority Students' Union (ABMSU) leader of Kokrajhar district, that the minorities in BTC are only used as vote banks. He says,

When the interim government was allowed to form, it led to huge corruption, and later on, the BPF party siphoned a lot of funds. So, with the use of political and money power, the 5 open constituencies were also acquired by the Bodos...Therefore, now we feel that we are politically banned in BTAD (now BTR) (A.J. Mondal, personal communication, July 3, 2019)

The statement reflects one significant consequence of BTC's formation; i.e., when the majority of the resources are directed to only one community, it leaves scope for extending their control over other resources in the area. The ABMSU leader observed,

Other communities as a whole do not have much participation in the sphere of politics. Only a few people participate in the political meetings for the sake of some benefit, like threads, blankets, houses, and roof sheets. Highly-educated and well-known personalities or professors, in spite, of political ambition, do not participate because of the lack of opportunity under the present system. That is also why many non-Bodos do not participate as a whole (A.J. Mondal, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

The discussion shows that the present arrangement in BTR leaves only a limited

opportunity for other communities to participate in the political sphere of BTR. Such limited opportunities for political participation have widespread impact on the other aspects of the lives of the other communities in BTR.

Deprivation of land rights

As per the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2003, under section 3B, the BTC can make any laws on the subject of land and revenue. Further, to protect the land rights of the non-tribals settled in BTR before 2003, the act made a provision that nothing in the laws formulated by BTC shall—“(a) extinguish or modify the existing rights and privileges of any citizen in respect of his/her land at the date of commencement of this Act; and (b) disallow any citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by any other way of transfer if such citizen is otherwise eligible for such acquisition of land within the BTAD (now BTR)” (Sixth schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2003). Despite such provisions, a bill passed by the BTC Legislative Assembly on January 12, 2018, raised concerns among other communities about the limitation of land rights. The controversial bill stated, “No person can sell land in the BTC area to a non-tribal person without the permission of the BTC authority” (Singh 2018). The bill on land transfer immediately received opposition from different organizations for being biased towards non-tribals. Organizations like Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Asomiya Yuva Manch (AYM), All-Assam Gorkha Students’ Union (AAGSU) and Assam Santhali Students’ Union (ASSU) opposed the bill for its’ “anti-non-tribal stand” (Singh 2018). Identifying the discrimination faced by minorities in land acquisition at different levels, an ABMSU leader, during the interview with the author, says,

Before the formation of BTAD (now BTR), the procedure for the registration of land ownership was not lengthy. Now it has become a long and tedious process. Moreover, in the BTC Secretariat, if we (people from the minority category) have to go, then we will face discrimination. Our people used to face discrimination while going there to seek permission. Apart from that, according to the provision, non-Bodos cannot buy land from the Bodos but they can buy non-Bodos’ land. We want all the communities to have equal rights. But it is not there. Sometimes they also encroach the land of Adivasis in the interior places. We have different examples whereby the Adivasis were evicted from their land and later on pressured to sell it for a much lesser amount of money (J. Islam, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

Discrimination in employment

As per the Sixth Schedule Provision, BTC is eligible to make appointments at the level of Group C service for the departments under its control, except for the post in which the Assam Public Service Commission makes recruitment. One of the leaders of the other communities’ organizations, during an interview with the author, alleged that in all the Group C positions in the BTC secretariat and Chirang district Deputy Commissioner’s Office, only the Bodo candidates are recruited. An ABMSU leader identifying the level of discrimination, during an interview with the author, says,

“After the formation of BTAD (now BTR), in comparison with the Bodo people, our community people (minority people) did not get any employment and are deprived of it...a few from our community (minority people) who are the supporters of the Bodo leaders only get the benefits” (J. Islam, personal communication, July 3, 2019). Thus, in providing employment opportunities, BTC is accused of depriving the other communities of employment opportunities. A leader of the ABMSU, during an interview with the researcher, opined that such discrimination in the sphere of employment has been one of the major reasons for the ABMSU’s demand for a review of the BTC Accord.

According to an ex-MP, the major basis for such an emerging question of deprivation is the ongoing “corruption and nepotism of leaders”.⁹ The ex-MP observed that the BTC’s executive members use their political clout in the state government to secure employment. Moreover, since the number of executive members from the Bodos is higher, the number of the Bodos getting employment is also high. Thus, “only a few sections of the Bodos, favoured by nepotism, benefited” (U.G. Brahma, personal communication, July 15, 2019). As a result, the root causes of all rising issues of deprivation, particularly those related to employment opportunities, are elite rule; growing corruption; and nepotism. It can be said that the continuous violence and ethnic clashes have created an atmosphere of insecurity. Moreover, the functioning of the BTC has led to the question of deprivation among the other communities.

Ethnic mobilization in the form of organizations

The atmosphere of insecurity, created by frequent episodes of violence, and apprehension of being deprived of rights among the other communities in BTR, has created a sense of collective fear among them. S.K. Kaufman (2001) has observed that the “collective fear and myth” held by ethnic groups always results in mobilization (as quoted in Dutta 2018: 70). Kaufman’s observation proved to be valid in the context of BTR. The accumulated grievances among the other communities for a long time, whether they are reality or myth, have ultimately led to a new wave of counter-ethnic mobilization in the form of multiple new organizations by the other communities opposing the BTC Accord. For Mahanta (2013, 54), such mobilization resulted from an “institutionalized and organized form of discrimination”. Several organizations that headed the counter-ethnic mobilization formed and aimed to protect their groups from violence and deprivation in BTR. The first concrete sign of such counter collective mobilization was observed during the discussion over the Bodo Accord (2003) with the emergence of Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti. The mobilization became more intense with the emerging organizations in the post-BTC formation.

The All BTAD Minority Students’ Union, an organization of the minority community in BTR, was formed considering the threat to the life of the minority and due to the negligence of the existing minority organizations like the All Assam Minority Students’ Union towards the minority community of BTR in 2005. ABMSU after the 2012 and 2014 attacks, considering the discrimination, raised a strong alarm for a review of the BTC Accord. It demanded a reservation for the minorities in employment and educational institutes (medical and engineering colleges). It also demanded to

“reserve at least three seats for the minorities in those constituencies (of the Legislative Assembly of BTC) where they are in an absolute majority” (Deka 2014).

The process of counter-ethnic mobilization among the other communities became more intense and explicit with the formation of *O Boro Suraksha Samiti* or Non-Bodo Suraksha Samiti (NBSS) on November 6, 2011, with its headquarters in Bijni town under Chirang District to protect the “identity, land, and language-cultural identity” of the ‘non-Bodos’. The organization, as the name suggests, is the conglomeration of different communities’ organization (except for the Bodos), i.e., Rabhas, Hazongs, Adivasis, Nepalis, Muslims, Koch Rajbongshis, Hindi-speakers, Assamese-Hindus, Sarania, and Modahi.¹⁰ One of the founding members of the NBSS, while narrating the circumstances of the formation of the organization to the author, says,

During the time of BAC in 1993, all the communities wanted peace in the region. For that purpose, the intellectuals of our society have appealed to the BAC leaders so that there are no more killings in the region. In 1993, the BAC Accord assured equal development, equal rights, and equal status. The time after that period witnessed peace for a while. But the Bodo leaders were unsatisfied with the arrangement upgraded to BTC, which hurt the sentiments of the 25 lakh non-Bodo people residing in BTAD (now BTR). After the formation of BTC, the initial assurance by the Bodo leaders for equal development, equal rights, and equal status to non-Bodos, gradually started vanishing in BTAD. It is observed that different communities, i.e., non-Bodos, have been deprived of employment opportunities and benefits of government schemes. So, even for the right to live, we (other communities) have to struggle. In further dissatisfaction with us, the Bodos started demanding a separate state, which is impossible. Assam is already divided several times. If we had to divide Assam further, there would be no Assam. That is why we thought of organizing ourselves... . But our organization was never against the Bodo community. It is the harassment and deprivation caused by the authorities of BTC that has compelled us to form the non-Bodo organization. People like us living in BTAD, who are concerned about the security of life and property, came together to form the organization (R. Ahmed, personal communication, July 10, 2019).

The major grounds for the formation of NBSS are—deprivation of rights; employment opportunities; benefits from government schemes; security of life and property of other communities; and to oppose the demand for a separate Bodoland state. NBSS submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam on August 12, 2013, stating the following demands—(1) no separate state or union territory for the Bodos under any circumstance; (2) immediate exclusion of non-Bodo villages having a “Non-Bodo” population of 50% or more from the BTAD and to make arrangements to hold Panchayat elections; (3) ST status for the Koch Rajbongshis, Adivasis, Tai Ahom, Moran, Matak and Chutia; (4) no reservation on 4 Lok Sabha and 46 Assembly seats as demanded by the NDFB; (5) protection of the basic rights like land, language, political, economic, and cultural for the non-Bodo people living in BTAD (now BTR) as per the provision of Bodo Accord; (6) to stop killing, kidnapping, and extortion of the non-Bodos by the NDFB and also other organizations; (7) to make an arrangement for a round table conference including all the ethnic groups living in the BTAD area

along with NDFB; (8) to seize the illegal arms of ex-BLT, surrendered NDFB and other organization; and (9) to make sure of keeping the designated NDFB cadres in the designated camp.

NBSS maintains that it will have no objection to Bodoland state formation if the state is formed after curving out the “non-Bodo” area.¹¹ It has been using several democratic means, like submitting memorandums, organizing general meetings, rail/road blockades, *dharnas*, etc., to fulfil its demand. NBSS, along with its students’ wing, *O Boro Yuva Chatra Mancha*, and other organisations representing “non-Bodo” communities such as All Koch Rajbongshis Students’ Union, All Assam Students’ Union, All Minority Students’ Union, Bengali Youth Students’ Federation, All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association, and All Gorkha Students’ Union, provided strong impetus in the “struggle of non-Bodo” (Mahanta 2013: 54).

In this counter mobilization, a turning point came just before the 2014 Lok Sabha election, with the formation of Sanmilita Janagoshthiya Aikya Mancha (SJAM), an umbrella of 21 organizations formed on November 22, 2013. The present chief advisor and an ex-president of SJAM, during interview with the author, held that the main demand of the organization is to review the BTC Accord, incorporating the following provisions—(1) the villages having 50% of the non-Bodo population should be curved out of BTAD (now BTR); (2) land rights of others should be protected, especially of the Koch Rajbongshi, Nepali, and Adivasis, as they are declared by the Assam Land and Revenue Act, 1886 as a protected class; (3) employment opportunities should be equally available; and (4) equal political rights should be given. SJAM reiterated the following demands in its memorandum to the Honourable Minister of Home Affairs on August 6, 2014—(1) safety and security of life, livelihood, and property of all people living in BTR; (2) review of the BTC Accord and the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act 2003, and exclusion of Non-Bodo dominated villages from BTR areas; (3) tribal status for the Koch Rajbongshi and the Adivasi peoples of Assam; (4) to solve the long-standing issue of ‘D’ voter (Dubious voter or Doubtful voter) and updating of NRC based on March 25, 1971; (5) adequate compensation and enhancement of rehabilitation grants to the victims of the riots; (6) prosecution and punishment of all the culprits involved in the violence in BTR areas, and also other areas (referred to Dhubri district, adjacent to BTR).¹²

BTAD Citizen’s Rights Forum, another active organization in the mobilization, demanded—(1) to ensure land, and residential rights and other legal and constitutional rights to the “non-Bodos” in BTR as per the provision of the BTC Accord; (2) to immediately seize all arms in BTR to ensure peace and security of all; (3) to check on the movement of all the terrorist forces and arms deals happening in BTR; (4) to stop any form of extortion from the other communities; and (5) to establish a permanent cell on National Human Rights Commissions in BTR. Therefore, it basically stood for the protection and deprivation of the “Non-Bodos”. It specifically demanded to review the BTC Accord after consultation with the representatives of all the communities living in BTR (Haloi 2017: 338-339).

The discussed organizations have been in alliance with each other in their attempt to counter the mobilization for the up-gradation of BTC into the separate Bodoland state. It shows that there are three main reasons for the opposition of these

organizations, i.e., insecurity, deprivation, and the issue of the separate state of the Bodos. The members of different organizations, during the interview with the author, and thinkers like Haloi (2017), described their mobilization and conglomeration of their organizations as the “Movement of the Non-Bodos”, the movement to stop discrimination faced by the “Non-Bodos” in employment and economic opportunities, political participation, and against the atrocities of the Bodo militancy.

“Non-Bodo”: a collective Identity

The process of counter ethnic mobilization in BTR led to the strengthening of *O-Bodo* or “Non-Bodo” a collective identity to refer to the communities other than the Bodos. The term *Harsha*, a Bodo word, synonym to the term “Non-Bodo” is also commonly used among the Bodo people to refer to all communities other than the Bodos.¹³ An academician during interview with the researcher maintained that the term ‘Harsha’ previously was used “for addressing each other and it was not a conflicting terminology”. However, in the present context, the term “Non-Bodo” is seen to be more a conflicting term. One of the founders of O Boro Suraksha Samiti argued that although the present Bodo leaders blamed the organization for creating the “Non-Bodo” term, it was, in fact, in use among the Bodos since long time (R. Ahmed, personal communication, July 10, 2019).¹⁴ The academician further says, “When we say Bodo it refers to those who speak Bodo and ‘Non-Bodo’ as those who do not speak Bodo or do not use it as a mother-tongue” (H.C. Ray, personal communication, July 4, 2019) Therefore, considering mother-tongue as one of the significant determinants of “Non-Bodo” identity the 160 respondents in the study were asked their views about the mother tongue of the “Non-Bodo” people. In the study regarding the mother tongue of “Non-Bodos”, maximum respondents (135 respondents) considers that Non-Bodos speaks Assamese, Rajbongshi¹⁵ and Bengali as their mother tongue. Some respondents (16 respondents) viewed that the “Non-Bodos” speaks only Assamese and Bengali as their mother tongue. Few respondents (5 respondents) viewed that the “non-Bodos” speaks only Assamese and another few (4 respondents) consider that the non-Bodos speaks both Assamese and Rajbongshi as mother tongue. Therefore, the respondents identified three dominant mother tongues of “Non-Bodos” i.e., Assamese, Bengali and Rajbongshi. Along with these mentioned dominant mother tongues, respondents also identified some other mother tongue of the “Non-Bodos”. Majority of the respondents consider Hindi (80.6%) and Santhali (80%) speaker as “Non-Bodos”, few of the people also identify Nepali (28%), Garo (7.5%) and Rabha (8.8%) speaker as “Non-Bodos”. Therefore, the study found that maximum of the respondents viewed that people who speak Assamese, Bengali, Rajbongshi, Santhali and Hindi as Non-Bodo people. Few of the respondents also consider that the people who speak Rabha, Nepali and Garo are Non-Bodo people.

In spite of an idea, about who comprises of the “Non-Bodos”, a section of the Bodo leaders and activist consider such identity as unconstitutional (Dutta, 2018:72). In the present study, the researcher observed that the Bodo leaders¹⁶ during the interviews with the researcher frequently use the term “Non-Bodos” in between their narratives about the issue of deprivation or impact of BTC on other communities.

However, when specifically asked question about the identity of “Non-Bodos”, they consider it to be “an illegitimate word with no existence”. They viewed that since “Non-Bodo” have no specific religion, language, and culture, therefore “Non-Bodo does not exist as a community”, and “it exists only as a slogan”. They believed that the major reason for the emergence of such term is to take an “anti-Bodo” stand. The use of “non-Bodo” instead of “non-ST” signifies that it is a strategy to exclude only the Bodos from the rest of the communities in BTR, including the ST population. They viewed that “Non-Bodo” a general term has been intentionally chosen to show it as a majority conglomeration in order to exert pressure on minority in BTR i.e., the Bodos. On the other hand, the founder and present chief advisor of SJAM held that the term “Non-Bodo” is the result of the development of sentiments of the other community people (H. Barman, personal communication, July 7, 2019). “Sentiment” as a basis of “Non-Bodo” identity, is also reflected in the narrative of the founder and present Chief advisor of NBSS, who narrated the reason for the use of the term “non-Bodo” as a name for their organization. It is also significant to know his view in this regard as their organization claims to represent “Non-Bodos”. He says,

The term (Non-Bodo) is used against another term i.e., Bodoland. Our question is that why did they use the term Bodoland by depriving and harassing 22lakh people. Therefore, the Bodo should be blamed for the creation of the term Bodo and non-Bodo and not our organization. It is they who compelled us and showed us the path. It is because they have hurt the sentiment of 22 lakhs people, when they (Bodos) used the term Bodoland for the area. When they use the term ‘Bodoland’ we use the term ‘Non-Bodo’. We stand against the issue of Bodoland but not against Bodo community (R. Ahmed, personal communication, July 10, 2019).

Therefore, although the term has no specific religious and cultural identity, it emerged and strengthened based on sentiment, which is the result of deprivation and violence in BTR.

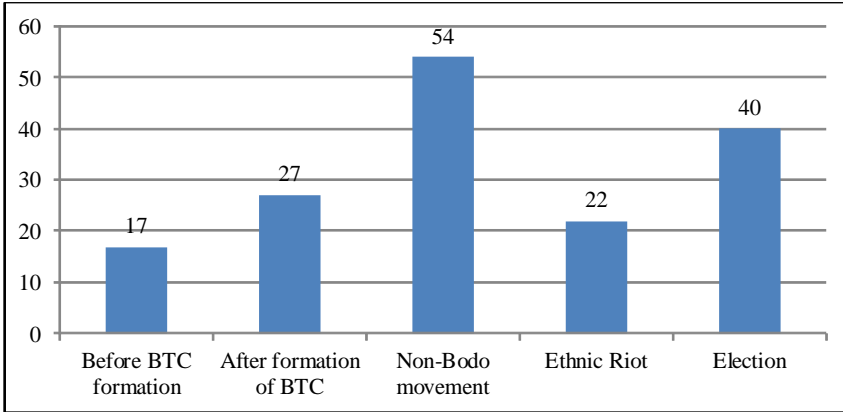
Strengthening of “Non-Bodo” Identity into the Consciousness of the People

The study also tried to find out the evolution of “Non-Bodo” as a collective identity into the consciousness of the people of BTR. For the purpose, the data are collected from the first group of respondents i.e., 160 respondents. The respondents were enquired about the period as to when they have first heard the term “Non-Bodos” or “O-Bodo”. In the study, most of the respondents were unable to recollect the exact year but were able to relate the period in association with certain socio-historical and political events. The responses are categorized into five categories—(1) Before the formation of BTC (i.e., before 2003), (2) After the Formation of BTC (i.e., after 2003), (3) Non-Bodo Movement/Struggle (i.e., 2011 onwards), (4) Ethnic Riots (especially 2012) and (5) Election (i.e., both 2014 Lok Sabha and 2015 BTC election).

Figure 1 shows that maximum of the respondents i.e., 54 (33.8%) heard the term from the Non-Bodos movement. There is also significant number of respondents who referred to other events. These include elections in BTR (40 respondents), after the formation of BTC (27 respondents) and ethnic riots (22 respondents) and before

the formation of BTC (17 respondents). Thus, it shows that although the awareness of the term “Non-Bodo” and the identity became popular among the people since the “struggle/movement of Non-Bodo” i.e., the year 2011 onwards. The formation and strengthening of the collective identity in the form of “Non-Bodo” was going on much before the year 2011. When Bodoland movement was going on, simultaneously with it the gradual formation of “Non-Bodo” identity was also going on.

Figure 1 Events during which the term “Non-Bodo” First Heard



Before the Formation of BTC

In the study, 17 (10.9%) respondents held that they have heard the term “Non-Bodos” even ‘before the formation of BTC’ i.e., before the year 2003. Respondents held that even before the formation of the BTC, “Non-Bodos” as a term exists. Most of them held that they heard it since the Bodoland movement of 1987 i.e., since the time when the Bodos became politically aware. There are also respondents among them who pointed out the use of the similar term to “Non-Bodos” i.e., Harsha. They held that the term Harsha which is equivalent to “Non-Bodos”, is used by the Bodos, which is used to refer the other communities much before the Bodoland movement. However, they held that although it is not a new term, the term became more popular after the formation of BTC and Non-Bodo organizations.

After the Formation of BTC

Twenty seven (16.9%) respondents in the study held that they have heard the term only after the formation of BTC and the BTC Accord i.e., after the year 2003. These respondents held that earlier to this period, all people were referred to as Assamese. After the formation of BTC “a new word non-Bodo” is formed, similar to the way the term “non-Karbi” formed after the formation of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. One of the respondents however, pointed out that although the term “Non-Bodo” has become popular, it is not a commonly used term among the public. This means that in everyday interaction among common people the term is not in use. Another respondent held that “Non-Bodo” is basically a political term.

Non-Bodo Movement

Maximum of the respondents in the study i.e., 54 (33.8%) respondents consider that they have heard the term since the Non-Bodo movement i.e., since the year 2011 onwards. They held that such a non-Bodo identity is “a recent construction”. Earlier words like Bengali, Muslim and Assamese words were used to refer the communities other than the Bodos. The respondents held that they heard the word when gradually the other communities realized and started protesting against the impartial development, deprivation from equal opportunity. They viewed that it was such realization, which led to an *Andolan* (movement). Specifically, they viewed that with the formation of O Bodo Suraksha Samiti/Non Bodo Suraksha Samiti, the word became popular among the people. Among these respondents, few (2 respondents) also perceived that this movement is led by basically Koch Rajbongshi. While some of the respondent held that the word became popular due to the “politics” of ruling party or government at the state, some of the respondents perceive it as a strategy to dominate the Bodos by the other communities.

Riots

As already discussed, there were several incidences of violence and ethnic conflicts during Bodoland movement and post-BTC formation. Such incidences of conflict and violence serve as another landmark event in the strengthening of the Non-Bodo identity. 22 (13.8%) respondents held that they heard the term for the first time, specifically after 2012 ethnic conflict between the Bodo and the Muslim. Among them few (2) respondents held that whenever there was riot or violence the “Non-Bodos” issue used to reappear.

Elections

A significant number of respondents i.e., 40 (25%) held that they have heard the term during elections. Specifically, when Naba Kumar (Hira) Sarania participated as a candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha election in the Kokrajhar constituency with the support of the “Non-Bodos” organizations, the term Bodo and “Non-Bodo” is used frequently. Some of the respondents held that the popularity of the term, which emerged in 2014 Lok Sabha election, continued in the next year’s election to BTC i.e., in the year 2015. Few of the respondents held that although they used to hear frequently the term “Non-Bodos” in the last two elections (2014 Lok Sabha and 2015 BTC election), now the popularity of the term has declined.

Thus, these are certain landmark events that have strengthened the “Non-Bodo” identity into the consciousness of the people of BTR. In the present day political scenario of BTR along with ethnic mobilization among the other communities, the term “Non-Bodos” has become an inalienable aspect in the political sphere.

Conclusion

Ethnic mobilization has become an inalienable part of the politics of Northeast India. The formation of BTR, specifically in a heterogeneously populated area, instead of bringing an end to such demands created conditions for a counter-ethnic mobilization. Frequent episodes of violence; apprehension about security of life; and deprivation

of other communities in politics, from land rights and employment opportunities are the major basis of the counter-ethnic mobilization in BTR. From the analysis of the BTR scenario it is observed that the provision of ADC in a multi-ethnic society, while empowering one ethnic community, has led to the marginalization of other communities. Such a situation not only puts a strain on inter-ethnic relationships, but also strengthened the “Non-Bodo” as a collective identity over the period of time. Therefore, in a multi-ethnic society, such provision of autonomy for empowering ethnic groups can only be beneficial if it proves to be an inclusive one. Otherwise it will further cause stress on inter-ethnic relationship.

Notes

- ¹ The MoS signed on February 10, 2003 between the Government of India and Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) leaders named the jurisdiction of the Bodoland Territorial Council as the Bodoland Territorial Areas District. However, on January 27, 2020, the Bodo Peace Accord 2020 renamed the Bodoland Territorial Areas District into the Bodoland Territorial Region and entrusted some more powers to it. Accordingly, the Governor of Assam on September 28, 2020 accorded approval to rename BTAD as BTR.
- ² The key informants who helped in identifying the areas of study includes, teachers, activist and social workers. These informants are, Supriya Brahma, a retired teacher and a political activist of Dhaligaon village under Chirang District; Shivaji Baruah, a social worker of Kashipara village under Kokrajhar district; Rupjit Das, a social worker and political activist of Kokrajhar town; Shibu Paul, a villager of Polangsuguri village under Chirang district; Shibajee Ray, a shopkeeper and political activist of Khasipara village under Kokrajhar district; and Wazedur Rahman, a PWD officer of Kokrajhar Town.
- ³ The population data of the villages under Bhatipara VCDC, Kokrajhar district and Bhawanipur VCDC, Chirang district are collected from the Mission Antodaya Baseline Survey 2018, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. Available at: <https://missionantyodaya.nic.in/ma2018/preloginRankingOfGp2018.html>.
- ⁴ The primary dataset for the present study are collected during the Ph.D. research work of the author from Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- ⁵ Interim Government was formed in India on September 2, 1946 and continued until August 15, 1947 to assist the transition of power from the British India to Independent India and Pakistan.
- ⁶ The information was gathered from the website: <http://bodoland.gov.in/btcataglance.html>.
- ⁷ National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was another active militant organization during that phase of the Bodoland movement.
- ⁸ The information is available at the following website: http://www.secassam.in/pdf/Statis_btc_report_2015.pdf.
- ⁹ U.G. Brahma, ex-MP of Rajya Sabha shared his opinion during an interview with the author on July 15, 2019.

- ¹⁰ Rafiq Ahmad, the founding member and the present advisor of O Boro Suraksha Samiti, gave the basic details about the organization during the interview with the author on July 10, 2019.
- ¹¹ Rafiq Ahmed, the founding member of NBSS, provided this information about the demands and objectives of NBSS, during an interview with the author on July 10, 2019.
- ¹² The details of the memorandum of SJAM were gathered during the interview with Hiteshwar Barman, ex-president and chief advisor of SJAM on July 7, 2019.
- ¹³ H.C. Ray, an academician; H. Barman, R. Ahmed, A.J Mondal, and J. Islam, leaders of civil society organizations forwarded the information during personal interviews with the researcher.
- ¹⁴ R. Ahmed, a founding member of NBSS, forwarded the information during interview with the author.
- ¹⁵ Rajbongshi is a mother tongue of Koch Rajbongshi community, which is until now considered as a dialect of Assamese language in Assam.
- ¹⁶ The Bodo leaders who expressed their views about Non-Bodos during interview with the author in the study include ex- MP, and present MCLA of BTC. The interviews were conducted on July 15 and July 9, 2019 respectively.

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