

TRIBAL MOVEMENT IN NORTH-EAST INDIA-A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BODO MOVEMENT OF ASSAM AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-POLITICAL UPBRINGING

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Abstract

North-East of India has been typified by its ethnic diversity as well as its ongoing socio-political instability, based in questions of identity, independence, and marginality. The Bodo Movement in Assam is one of the most intense, enduring and transformative tribal movements that have ever occurred in this region. The present review examines critically the historical background, social-cultural reasons and politics that influenced the Bodo people in demanding a separate Bodoland. It follows the development of this movement since its initial non-violent mobilizations to armed rebellion and subsequent organized negotiations that led to the establishment of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and subsequently Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The review evaluates the wider socio-political consequences of the movement especially on political empowerment, inter-ethnic relations and cultural revivalism and governance of the region. Even though the peace agreements constitute important milestones towards institutionalization of the Bodo aspirations, faults like inter-community conflicts, internal fractionalization, and shortcoming of implementation still linger. The findings highlight the need of inclusive governance, developmental equity and continued dialogue as a key to long-term stability and integration in the region.

Keywords: Bodo Movement, Bodoland, North-East India, Tribal Movements, Autonomy, BTC, BTR, Identity Politics, Insurgency, Socio-Political Impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

North-East of India is a collage of ethnic groups, most of which are indigenous tribes with different languages, traditions and socio-political backgrounds[1]. Although the Indian Constitution offers some protection to the tribal people, there has been an increased sense of marginalization among most of the tribes around the region since the independence era which has been attributed mainly to a mix of political apathy, non-economic development, loss of traditional rights and the perceived loss of cultural identity[2]. These have led to a succession of tribal movements in other states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam, all of which seek a different level of autonomy, self-government or even independence.



Figure 1: Bodo Movement of Assam[3]

The Bodo Movement of Assam has become one of the most conspicuous and the longest tribal struggles. Being one of the most numerous plains-based tribal communities in the area[4], the Bodos have been facing the challenge of socio-economic marginalization and identity-related discrimination in the past[5]. The movement that started as the peaceful request of recognition and protection of the Bodo language and culture slowly transformed into the demand of a separate state and went through the phases of militancy and subsequent political negotiations.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the sociopolitical and historical elements that contributed to the Assamese Bodo Movement's formation.

- To examine the movement's various stages, including as nonviolent demonstrations, armed insurgencies, and peace agreements.
- To identify commonalities and distinctive characteristics by contrasting the Bodo Movement with other tribal movements in northeastern India.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

North-East part of India consists of a huge number of tribal societies which have their unique language, culture and historical background. This is an ethnically mixed area that has been left at the margins of mainstream Indian governance and policy making. Being geographically isolated and under colonial administrative setup, these tribal groups always enjoyed high level of social-cultural autonomy even under the British rule[6]. But the Indian state tried to integrate after the independence, which was seen by many tribal communities as an invasion of the traditional lifestyle. Alienation was caused by the imposition of a centralized administrative system, and migration to other parts of India, and what was seen as neglect in issues of infrastructure, education and employment.

In this regard, self-determination, cultural protection, economic fairness and political autonomy have commonly been the hallmarks of tribal movements in the North-East. These movements have been both non-violent and violent in the decades[7]. The Naga movement under the Naga National Council (NNC) and subsequently under the NSCN factions is among the oldest secessionist's movements in the independent India. Potent insurgency started by the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the 1960s finally led to the creation of the state of Mizoram in 1986 in a peace agreement. Likewise, the Kukis, Karbis, Dimasas and Bodos have been voicing identity-related grievances by organizing political and militant forums.

These movements are based on old fears of cultural assimilation, economic exploitation and political invisibility[8]. Whereas certain tribes wanted to be independent, others wanted to enjoy more autonomy in the Indian Union by becoming states, receiving special provisions or be included in the sixth schedule of the Constitution. Success of such movements can be directly linked to the formation of separate states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. The Bodo movement especially was a product of this wider movement of tribal assertion[9]. It is a change of

the culturally driven identity movement to a more territorial and political driven identity movement. The general historical background of the demand of Bodoland asserts that the demand of Bodoland is not a unique case but a part of the historical struggle of the tribal communities of the North-East in the struggle to be recognized, granted rights, and represented in the Indian federal system.

3. EMERGENCE OF THE BODO MOVEMENT

One of the earliest settlers in the valley of Brahmaputra is the Bodos, an indigenous tribe mainly occupying the northern plains of Assam[10]. The Bodos have been politically marginalized, economically deprived and culturally subordinated in the post-independence era despite their numerical importance. The fear of being lost in the identity because of the high migration, land alienation and being treated like step-mother by the state led to a socio-political awakening that later on culminated in a demand of a separate state.



Figure 2: Emergence of the Bodo Movement[11]

The demand of a separate homeland first came up as the Udayachal under the leadership of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1960s which was a wider demand of the plain tribal communities as a separate state. But, when this movement lost its momentum because of the absence of a popular base and political variances, the Bodo leadership refocused the demand more precisely to a Bodo-centric state named as Bodoland. This was a shift to more narrow tribal representation to ethnic nationalism based on a Bodo identity.

3.1. Early Mobilization

The first stage of the movement could be described as the period of political mobilization and cultural revival. One of the earliest platforms to raise the demand of separate tribal state was the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) that was formed in 1967. Although the vision of the PTCA of an Indian nation of the future, Udayachal, encompassed all the tribes in the plains, divisions within and among different tribal groups resulted in weakening the PTCA[12]. The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) with the dynamic leadership of Upendranath Brahma was instrumental in reviving the Bodo movement in the 1980s. Contrary to the previous political movements, ABSU focused on a powerful feeling of ethnic nationalism and mobilized the youth and intellectuals around the issues of cultural maintenance, language, land rights, and political independence. The group had insisted on a state of Bodoland in the Indian Constitution and had carried out mass non-violence movements including strikes, demonstrations and mobilization programs[13]. It is also during this phase that Bodo language and literature were promoted. The need of application of Devanagari script to Bodo and its use in school education helped to enhance ethnic awareness and reinforcement of the cultural foundation of the movement.

3.2. Shift to Militancy

The feeling of being ignored by the state regarding peaceful protests, political marginalization, and the constant delays in the response to Bodo demands finally resulted in the radicalization of the movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s[14]. This was where the armed struggle entered the field as a method of attaining political goals. Two major militant groups came into being:

- **The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB):** The NDFB was established in 1986 and initially it demanded full sovereignty and an independent Bodoland. It employed violent means, such as the assaults on security agencies, extortion, and the armed conflict with other groups.
- **The Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT):** The BLT was formed in 1996 and was more moderate in comparison to the NDFB and mainly aimed at statehood in the Indian Union.

The two groups blamed the Indian state of ignoring the rights of the Bodo and started a chain of insurgency, counter-insurgency and civilian agitations[15]. There were also massive ethnic conflicts with other non-Bodo groups, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslim, Adivasis and other settlers in the proposed Bodoland area as a result of the violence. The transition of the democratic protests to militancy changed the character of the Bodo movement drastically. It gained the Bodo a national and international interest but also led to a high human rights abuse, displacement and polarization of communities in Assam.

4. PHASES OF THE MOVEMENT

The Bodo Movement has gone through several different stages, each of which was marked by a change in strategy, leaders and reaction of the Indian state. The movement was transformed, initially through peaceful agitations, to an armed insurgency and finally through negotiated political settlements, depending on internal processes and pressures as well as external influences[16].

4.1. Peaceful Agitations (1980s)

The movement was launched by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) under Upendranath Brahma and started with non-violent demonstrations requesting a separate Bodoland to be included in the Indian Constitution[17]. They were mass rallies, strikes, and cultural statements such as the popularization of the Bodo language. Nevertheless, the absence of response on the part of the state eventually resulted in frustration and radicalization.



Figure 3: All Bodo Students Union (ABSU)[18]

4.2. Armed Insurgency (1990s)

The militant groups were on the rise in the 1990s, including the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). Whereas the NDFB wanted complete independence, the BLT wished to have autonomy in India[19]. The region was disturbed by violent conflicts, ethnic violence, and anti-insurgency campaigns and lost civilian confidence and further divided social groups.

4.3. Political Negotiation and Peace Accords

Having realized the price of war, the two parties resorted to negotiation leading to three agreements:

- **First Bodo Accord (1993):** The First Bodo Accord established the Bodoland Autonomous Council, which was not strong in its legal basis, thus causing resentment[20].
- **Second Bodo Accord (2003):** The Second Accord created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) using the powers of the Sixth Schedule and this provided a considerable amount of administrative autonomy.
- **Third Bodo Accord (2020):** Third Accord constituted the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), which brought together multiple Bodo groups. It increased autonomy, comprised a 1500 crore development package, and was meant to hold on to the Bodo culture and language.



Figure 4: Third Bodo Accord (2020)[21]

These stages capture the movement path, which was a shift of the civil agitation to the armed struggle, and ultimately to the institutional integration. Although the peace accords could not resolve all the underlying problems, they represented a shift towards governance and a significant change in the social-political context of Assam[22].

5. SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE BODO MOVEMENT

The Bodo Movement despite being an ethnic claim has affected the socio-political life of Assam in a multi-dimensional and profound manner. Its effects extend much further than administrative change, as they affect the formation of identities, the relationships between communities, and the local and national political engagement[23].

1) Politics Empowerment

Political empowerment of the Bodo community is one of the most prominent results of the movement. The creation of autonomous governance structures in the form of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and subsequently Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) gave the Bodos the institutional means to manage their own business[24]. These institutions provided major control over matters of education, land utilization, culture and local infrastructure where the community dictated its development priorities. Moreover, the movement has led to improvement in political representation of Bodo leaders in state and national legislatures. A number of politicians of the Bodo have also since played important roles in the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Indian Parliament in the form of ministerial portfolios[25]. This political presence has been reflected in increased bargaining power within the federal systems and an increased role in determining the future of the region.

2) Social Upheaval

In spite of these achievements, the movement has also led to spells of social turmoil and communal conflict. Ethnic polarization has been a major problem particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s when militant groups confronted non-Bodo groups[26]. These tussles mostly became violent leading to wide displacement especially of Bengali Muslims, Adivasis and Santhal who lived in the Bodo dominated regions. Incidences of violence like the ethnic riots in Kokrajhar and Baksa

left wounds on inter-community relations, which created mistrust and communal division. The feeling of non-Bodos being left out in the BTR decision-making processes has remained a cause of controversy even during the postaccord period. Therefore, although the Bodo Movement attained autonomy of one community, it also established new problems of dealing with the multi-ethnic mosaic in the region.

3) Cultural Renaissance

In the political and social upheavals, the movement also led to cultural revival among the Bodo people. Special emphasis on preservation of language was especially important[27]. The Bodo language got the status in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and was taught at schools where specific educational institutions were established to encourage the use of this language. Literature and art developed with state-sponsored projects and the Bodo autonomous councils. Festivals, folklore and traditional crafts were revived, mostly with the support of cultural programs by the BTC and then BTR administrations[28]. This cultural revival was significant in rebuilding of community pride, strengthening of ethnic identity and passing of heritage to the younger generations.

6. CHALLENGES IN THE POST-ACCORD ERA

Although the Bodo peace accords are landmark, especially the 2003 and 2020 agreements, the postaccord era has shown a set of old and new challenges. Such difficulties point to the tricky nature of managing autonomy in a politically vibrant and ethnically diverse state such as Assam[29].

→ Discontent Among Non-Bodo Communities

The increased discontentment of non-Bodo populations is one of the most disputable questions in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR)[30]. In spite of the Bodo community being the main beneficiary of autonomy, there are other ethnic communities that live in the region in great numbers, such as Bengali Muslims, Adivasis, Koch-Rajbongshis, and Rabhas. Such communities usually feel marginalized in the governance systems and are not involved in policy formulation. The feeling that the administrative structure is dominated by Bodo-centric policies has contributed

to sporadic protests, tension between communities and weak peace in multi-ethnic parts of the BTR.

→ **Factionalism Within Bodo Leadership**

The other issue is caused by internal split in the Bodo politics. Competitions between the key political parties like Bodoland People Front (BPF) and the United People Party Liberal (UPPL) and ideological divisions of the past insurgencies group of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) have brought instability in governance[31]. Such intra-group conflicts usually interfere with collective leadership and postpone the execution of developmental plans. The disorganization of political actors at some point has destroyed the trust of the people and diminished the effectiveness of administration.

→ **Delayed Implementation of Developmental Promises**

Even though there have been major promises of financial assistance and infrastructure development in the peace accords, the actual ground implementation has been slow[32]. The 1500 crore development package announced as part of the 2020 accord, is an example of partial deployment of the package so far. Healthcare, education, employment, and rural infrastructural projects to alleviate the situation have either been moving at a snail pace or completely stalled because of bureaucratic red tape, inability to coordinate, and corruption. The young generation, which was quite optimistic about workplaces and new infrastructure, are especially disillusioned, which raises concerns about the revival of radical moods in the hotbeds of the region.

→ **Incomplete Political Integration**

Although the formation of the BTR has been a positive development, there are concerns as to the complete political integration of the Bodo region into the larger polity of Assamese. The relationship between the BTR administration and the Assam state government is at times strained particularly when interests clash[33]. The issue of balance between autonomy and accountability, especially on financial transparency and allocation of resources in the governance of BTR is also the subject of debate.

7. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE WITH OTHER TRIBAL MOVEMENTS

The tribal movements in North-East India are diverse in their origin and manifestation but have common themes in the preservation of ethnic identity, demands of autonomy and reaction to perceived political marginalization[34]. A comparative study of the Bodo Movement vis-a-vis the other significant tribal movements in the region like the Naga, Mizo and Kuki movements shows that there are certain patterns that have been common as well as distinct tracks in the struggle by the region to seek political space and recognition.

a) The Naga Movement

Naga movement The Naga movement, which was originally led by the Naga National Council (NNC) and later by groups of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), is regarded as the oldest and longest-running insurgency in the region[35]. The movement which started in the 1940s has always insisted on full sovereignty or on a separate Nagalim that would include Naga-inhabited regions outside Nagaland. By contrast, the Bodo Movement has not left the confines of the Indian constitutional system, and has ended up with territorial autonomy, not secession. As the Naga insurgency remains in existence as ceasefire arrangements and the suspended peace negotiations, the Bodo struggle has resulted in organized peace agreements and tangible results, such as the establishment of the BTC and the BTR.

b) The Mizo Movement

The Mizo Movement which was spearheaded by the Mizo National Front (MNF) gained momentum following the 1959 famine and became an all out insurgency in the 1960s. The movement ended in Mizo Accord of 1986, which gave full statehood and absorbed former insurgents into the mainstream politics[36]. In comparison to this, the Bodo Movement attained autonomy but not full statehood through the councils. Whereas, the assimilation of Mizoram was characterized by a clear process of state formation, the Bodo experience gives us an idea of a decentralized form of ethnic politics in Assam.

c) The Kuki Movement

The Kuki Movement, mostly concentrated in Manipur, is characterized by internal division, overlapping claims, and constant negotiations on a separate Kukiland. Inability to act together has made Kuki groups unsuccessful in politics. Conversely, though at the onset Bodo groups such as the ABSU, NDFB, and the BLT were divided; they later formed into a unity under shared agreements especially in 2020. This coordinated effort played a central role in gaining autonomy and peace. To bring out the unique and common qualities of these movements, a comparative description is given in Table 1 below, which summarizes the academic views on their leadership, demands, outcomes and peace plans.

Table 1: Reference Table

Author(s)	Movement	Leadership / Factions	Core Demand	Nature of Peace Settlement	Key Findings
Saikia (2023)[37]	Naga	NNC, NSCN (IM, K)	Sovereignty / Greater Nagalim	No final accord despite decades of negotiation	Ethnonationalism remains strong; movement has symbolic and territorial overlap; prolonged due to complex ethnic and inter-state claims
Sharma & Borgohain (2024)[38]	Mizo	Mizo National Front (MNF)	Full statehood	Mizo Accord signed; insurgents joined mainstream politics	Successful transition from armed rebellion to peaceful statehood; showcases efficacy of inclusive negotiation and central support
Singha (2017)[39]	Kuki	KNO, UPF, and other groups	Separate Kukiland	Talks underway; fragmented leadership	Movement remains splintered; lacks unified representation; overlaps with other ethnic

				hampers progress	territories, complicating resolution
Bijukumar (2023)[40]	Bodo	ABSU, BLT, NDFB (various factions)	Autonomy / Separate Bodoland	Three peace accords signed; institutional- ized autonomy	Movement successfully balanced identity assertion with democratic accommodation; example of phased and inclusive peacebuilding

8. CONCLUSION

The Bodo Movement is one of the major episodes in the larger history of tribal assertion in North-East India. The movement is based on long-term historical injustices and motivated by the desire to preserve the culture and political independence, the movement has passed through various stages, first was peaceful demonstrations, then militancy, and lastly, negotiations. The establishment of such institutions as the BTC and BTR is evidence of the readiness of the state to respond to ethnic demands as well as the strength of the Bodo community in the quest to achieve self-determination. Nevertheless, although the movement has resulted in significant political and cultural developments among Bodos, it has also revealed the unseen problems like ethnic polarization, governance constraints, and unequal development. To ensure long-term peace and socio-political stability within the region, the issues of both Bodo and non-Bodo communities should be considered in the policymaking process, the agreements need to be implemented productively, and the dialogue should be maintained. The path of the Bodo Movement goes to show how crucial the balance between identity-based desires and the values of unity, democracy, and equitable development are in a pluralistic society.

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