

**THE BODO UNREST: FROM UDAYACHAL POLITICS TO MILITANT ASSERTION
AND THE BTC ACCORD**

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Abstract

The Bodo unrest is a popular subject matter that has earned enormous attention in both the regional and national political discourses. It was mainly, after the hardliner factions taking dictate of assertion in 1990s. Initial stage of assertion was moderate and non-violent. This paper mainly focuses the PTCA's politics of Udayachal, the failed BAC accord of 1990s, and the rise of militant assertion. Alongside, the paper also attempted to throw light on election politics of the PTCA and that of Bodo political parties in the background of social unrest. The PTCA was a tribal political party, who had a dictate in the Bodo belt in 1970s, so long it did not deviate from the Udayachal demand. With the ABSU, taking over the Bodo assertion in late 1980s, the PTCA withered completely from the arena of tribal politics. ABSU became the leader of Bodo community and dictate the 1990s homeland assertion. In 1993, the first Bodo accord was signed but it remained non-starter. This failed accord gave a birth to BLT, a hardliner after the fruitless result with soft technique of assertion. Thereafter, the violent militant assertion, fratricidal killing amongst themselves in a bid to dominate Bodo politics, and ethnic conflicts took the nest. This study throws observation and critical analysis of the secondary source.

Keywords: Assertion, Bodo, BAC, BTC, PTCA, Udayachal

1. Introduction

Bodo assertion for homeland embarked in the late 1980s. Before that the assertion for Plains Tribal's homeland in Assam was expressed by the PTCA in 1967. These assertions are linked to that of late 1920's separate electorate demand of plain tribals. This reflection can be found expressed in substantial writings including that of K. Sonowal (2013), N. Haloi (2018). It was the

initial phase of Bodo assertion in embryonic form which came to develop under certain socio-political environment of 1920s (Sonowal, 2013). Apart from that, the 1920s had already showed development of several quasi-political Bodo organizations which were actively articulating tribals interests. In 1930s, the political articulation in organized form was attempted to expressed under the amalgamated plains tribal's political organisation called the Tribal League (AAPTL). Substantial writings including that of Sonowal (2013), S. Choudhury (2007), H. Deka (2014) and N. Hakhrari (2019) has suggested this phase as an initial stage of Bodo assertion resulting from the development of an ethnic consciousness (Hakrari, 2019). Behind all these developments, the threat of caste Hindu Assamese dominance, migration, and tribals land alienation were observed by substantial size of academic peers. In matter of land, the Tribal League's propagation of an open coalition to any parties which ever commit to fulfill land protection schemes only shows the gravity of aforesaid threat (Narzary C. , 2011). Important to note that the Tribal League's struggle for land protection bear result when an amendment to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 was adopted in 1947. By this act, the Chapter X was added to the ALRR, 1886 to give protection of tribal land by creating the Tribal Belt and Block (Barpujari, 1998).

The concerned expressed for land alienation was not an isolated case. Throughout Bodo assertion, the persistent expression of tribals land alienation and socio-economic deprivation can be distinctly observed. It may not be therefore wrong to say that the foundation of Bodo assertion is entirely based on land rights of the plain tribals, in which they aspire to foster their socio-economy with distinct identity. Land in that sense can be held as an economic asset as well as symbolic to tribal's identity. Land alienation of plain tribals therefore when became a threat to identity, they asserted for protective mechanism such as political autonomy and homeland before the government (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). This proposition can be linked to that of the colonial era's Tribal League politics. In this regard, the Tribal League in fear of tribal's land alienation raised before the colonial government for legislation, similar to the Line System in plain tribal areas that was already operating in the hill areas in order to protect plain tribals land from immigrants (Deka, 2014). After independence, such demand of constitutional provision for land protection only doubled. In late 1960s, the plain tribals demand for the first time came in the form of autonomous administrative region. Such demand got momentum in 1970s, with the PTCA spearheading assertion for Udayachal, the Union Territory, alongside the hill tribals statehood demand. In late 1980s, the birth of BdSF (*later renamed as NDFB*) and BLT (1990s) gave rise to militant assertion. With the rise of arm groups, violent assertion, ethnic conflicts, fratricidal killings, and socio-political unrest also began to take a nest in the Bodo belt.

2. Material and Methods

The Bodo unrest in recent times has fascinated many academic peers to take a research-based study into the field. Substantial piece of text, books, journals articles are found which sought to offer academic glance of it. Chiefly, this piece of article throws a critical look into the Udayachal movement of the PTCA and their election politics. The paper also gives a critical account into the Bodo unrest after the failed BAC accord, emergence of militant assertion and the result of BTC

Accord. This research article is founded on observation and critical analysis of the secondary sources. The sources consulted are published books, magazines, journals, thesis, election commissions websites, memorandums document, ABSU's office record and documents and so on. The results and findings of this paper is broadly drawn from observation and theoretical perspective based on available piece of text from secondary sources.

3 PTCA and the Udayachal Movement: A Politics of Union Territory

After the end of Tribal League era, the legacy of assertion for tribal's land protection and political autonomy was spearheaded by the freshly founded PTCA. From bulk of writings, the concerned for tribal's land protection can be found holding a distinctly central place throughout assertion, besides that of the socio-economic factors. As views are held that of the Bodo's socio-economic and political exploitation by the Assamese elite were reasons for their resentment (Ghosh, 2014). The indifferent attitude towards tribals that has cultivated distinction since colonial era further deviated them from composite Assamese society after independence. Since then, they developed the idea of political struggle for survival with distinct ethnic identity. Apart from that, the ongoing assertion for statehood in neighboring hills districts were some immediate reasons. It may be said that the assertion that have echoed the entire hills districts, were also felt robustly along the Assam's plain tribal area (Karjie, 2019). In this regard, Charan Narzary, one of the chief architects to that of Udayachal movement has attributed to the losing composite character of Assam in post-colonial era due to imposition of Assamese Language in 1960. Each ethnic and linguistic groups conscious of their identity was concerned to that of the growing threat form immigrants. The fear of being marginalized, swamped, and being attacked by others appeared imminent. Threat of demographic change in tribals belt and the forthcoming political impact on local ethnic groups became distinctly imminent to elite tribals. The keen observers foresighted ethnic tensions, intolerance, and violence in Assam if demographic invasion goes on without cease. Each ethnic groups were therefore assertive for autonomous administration where they can feel secure and protected (Narzary C. , 2011). Backdrop of these developments, the Congress in 1967 was compelled to declare reorganization of Assam due to rising tide of statehood movement in the Hills districts. The PM Gandhi's 1967 declaration created a dubious state of mind among plain tribals leader. Notably, because the declaration gave them both the hope and fear. The fear of being alienated from the Hills tribals brother that bothered them of further marginalization in Assam's politics. At the same time, the Gandhi's declaration also gave a hope to dream for tribal homeland. However, the community did not have a strong leadership that time to dictate it. Lack of leadership was forbidding them from advancing its interest. Therefore, the need for community leadership to articulate and to mobilize community's socio-economic and political aspiration gave a foundation to the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) on 15th February 1967 (Sengupta, 2010). Behind the formation of ABSU, the main motif was to unify themselves and to work for upliftment of the Bodo society as it can be observed from their nature of work throughout its initial years (Sonowal, 2013). Initial phase of ABSU remained dormant politically, devoted mainly towards emancipating the Bodo's socio-economic conditions.

Shortly after the birth of ABSU, the Plains Tribals also created the “*Plain Tribal Council of Assam*” (PTCA) on 27th February 1967. Charan Narzary, Bir Lachan Doley, and Samar Brahma Choudhury were among the founding architects. This party was created in order to place the plains tribal’s interest into mainstream politics following the development of political scenario after the Gandhi’s declaration of Assam’s reorganization. Given the situation, it was a move from tribals leaders directed towards political unification of plain tribals under the common tribal political forum. Immediately after its birth, they submitted several petitions to the India’s President demanding Autonomous Region for Assam’s plain tribals. As usual the State government did not heed to their demand. In this case, what proposition looks suitable to describe is that this party was newly floated and yet to test its strength in the game of power. Therefore, the Congress that still held monopoly in Assam was politically unlikely to get affected by the presence of PTCA did show any bother to them (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). Instigated by the cold response of Assam government, they violently reacted to make their voice heard. Like usual position, the State government show reluctant to fix tribals issue. This resulted a redundant violence in Assam’s plain tribals area. In late 1960s, when the parliamentary by poll election was around the corner the party took this chance to test its strength and to reach out among the tribals. Picking the issue of re-delimitation of existing constituency, the PTCA boycotted the Parliamentary by poll elections of 1967 and 1968 in order to draw the Centre’s attention. For them, the existing constituency bear any good for tribals because it was re-delimited in a manner that deny them from political advantage. It was drawn by curving some tribal majority areas and converted them to political minority (Narzary C. , 2011). The government’s cold response convinced them that unless the tribal share an adequate power in State their assertion is meaningless. Therefore, giving up their old policy of poll boycott they decided to participate in election. In 1972, they took part in Assam Assembly poll and Charan Narzary got elected from the party (Moshshary, 1993). This mandate not only gave a ray of hope to the party but to the entire Bodo community in general. It was because this new party was seeding a tribal politics in the State, that was traditionally considered as the Congress monopoly, the party who own mass support from cross section of society including that of ordinary tribals and many tribal leaders. Shortly after that in 1973, they elevated demand from Autonomous Region to ‘*Udayachal*’ a movement for “Union Territory” (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). At the same time around, the imposition of Assamese language was brought into effect under the State’s language policy act. This policy drew state-wide agitation from the tribals. Especially, the Bodos were conscious about the possible threat to the Bodo language by such policy. This floated the movement for Roman script, leaving the entire Bodo belt engulfed with heated situation. Emergence of Language assertion simultaneously also left the *Udayachal* in cold. This movement turned more violent with government’s repressive policy, imposing coerce to suppress their demand (Pegu, 2004). Later, this movement came into halt after the partly consensus for accepting Devanagri script.

But where a mother tongue is considered entitlement for every citizen, ‘why the Bodos had to assert’? Answering it is a difficult because of its affiliation to linguistic nationalism and ethnic identity that may contrast the others. There is also the question of rights, equality, justice which

the constitution entitles to every citizen. In this regard, what appeared to be at fault is that of the Constitution's non-inclusion of tribal languages for long in the Schedule. In addition, the indifferent attitude of government's policy towards development, and preservation of tribals languages is another. Instead, the government's policy shows impulsiveness to impose Assamese, a non-tribal language upon tribals (Basumatary D. , 2022). Like hill tribals from adjacent area the Bodos also had shown resistive to any move designed to Assamization. When they countered with such designed, they showed resistive. The demand for retaining the Roman script for Bodos was none but a resistance to Assamization. The rejection of such demand from State was any surprise move. It was for the obvious reason and that of being a foreign script and the fear naturally arising from the foreign and missionary influence. Also, the Assamese elites had a fear of spread of separatist tendency like Hill tribes among the Bodos. Importantly, the Assamese had a desired to make Assam a unilingual state. It may be mentioned that the Bodos had been using Assamese script since 1963 in Bodo medium schools. So long the Bodo used Assamese script, it did not affect the Assamese interest. But when the Roman script became demand, they sensed anti-Assamese in it. For that matter of fact, the Roman Script movement faced a brutal suppression from state, police and Asamiya press. Leaders and demand groups suggested that the Devanagari in lieu of Roman script was forced upon them against willful acceptance and consensus of all the movement groups (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). As described by the PTCA leadership, the party accepted Devanagari Script after an intervention of the PM Indira Gandhi for the sake and favor of broader national perspective. ABSU, however rejected it and declared it as dictate against will (Haloi, 2018). It may be stated that the Bodo inherited no script of their own. Although, the mention of using Deodhai script in ancient times among Bodos can be found expressed by noted writer and singer Bishnu Prasad Rabha. In course of time, they lost the script with the fall of Kingdom. In absence of own script, they used various scripts including that of Bengali, Assamese and Roman. Towards the end of 19th century, the Missionary used Roman script for Bodo language in schools but it remained a limited practice. Since then, the Bodos found Roman script convenient for them. During 1970s, the Saisangra Sub-Committee was appointed by the BSS to examine feasibility of various scripts to use for Bodo language. Acting upon the recommendation of the committee the BSS dictated the Roman script for the Bodo medium schools (Hakrari, 2019). As said above, it got rejected and brutal repression by the State.

Important to note is that the Bodo language faced negligence even after it was accepted at Secondary and Primary schools. These schools faced problems like under-staffed and ill-equipped. The government's policy was equally responsible for crippling them educationally. As observed in substantial writings including that of M. Hussain, K. Sonowal (2013), the State's negligence, Assamization policy, and above all the little opportunity for upward social mobility of tribal Bodos without Asamiya knowledge, many Bodos had embraced Asamiya identity by giving up own identity and language. As a matter of fact, a substantial size from the community had already become completely Assamised (Hussain, 1993). The intolerant language policy continued unaffected during AGP's reign. Neither the AGP's policy showed sympathy towards indigenous tribal languages, nor the Assamese elites had any concerned for it. In a flip side, AGP has been

assertive for making Assamese a compulsory State language and its proficiency for government services (Sonwalkar, 1989). Educated Tribals were compelled to feel left out in cold by such policy. They looked such policy as a conspiracy to deprive them from the administrative services and a designed to monopolize administrative power (Gohain, 1988). Hussain’s articulation in this regard is important for broad understanding about the impact of Assam’s language policy. His observation goes by saying that “the Bodos started reviving their dormant language from slumber and advancing it as their ethnic symbol to assert their rights in their historical homeland through political mobilization”. He maintained that the Assamese chauvinism was the reason for alienation of Hills tribals from Assam. Instead of taking lessons from past blunders they adamantly were repeating it against the plains tribal’s will. It may be said that not only they were conscious of sub-nationality but also resistive whenever State’s policy endangering to their existence was forced upon them. His observation in this regard goes by saying that when a more dominant and elite *Asamiyas* began to press group identity, it also gave rise to new social movement of weaker nationalities (Hussain, 1993). What distinctly can be observed throughout the Roman script movement was that of prevailing reign of terror in the Bodo belt to clamped down the satyagrahis. In short satyagraha, the six were killed in police firing, more than 1500 were arrested, and several went untraced. They ransacked several Bodo professors, teachers, BSS members, Congressman, and well-wisher’s houses. At Bijni and Kokrajhar the police destroyed several Bodo Library, Halls and BSS camps (Narzary C. , 2011). Throughout the movement, atrocities were committed against the Bodos in the name of raid.

Throughout mid-1970s, after the imposition of National Emergency amid political crisis, normal political affairs were put to halt across the nation. Under the circumstance of National Emergency, the PTCA’s Udayachal assertion also became lackadaisical. After the cease of National Emergency, the Lok Sabha poll was also held in 1977. This election gave another victory to Charan Narzary of PTCA from Kokrajhar parliamentary seat (Chaube, 1985). Of course, this victory was significant for plain tribals from the viewpoint of representing tribal’s voice at national assembly. Although, the number was not adequate to make politically any major difference at national and state assemblies. Throughout the assertion, it was notable that until a situation was created in which the government did not feel threatened to their political advantage, they were adamant to accept any demand. Below the performances of the Bodo candidates in Assam Assembly elections from different parties are shown:

Table: 3.1 Performances of Bodo Candidates in ALA, since 1978- 1996

Year/Elections	PTCA	INC	IND	CPM	AGP	ICS
1978	4	1	1	1	--	--
1983	3	5	--	2	--	--
1985	3	--	5	--	--	1
1991	--	1	9	--	2	--
1996	--	--	8	--	4	--
2001	--	1	10	--	--	--

Source: Election Commission of India

Shortly after the Parliamentary election, the State Assembly election was also held in 1978. The party, following its poll adjustment with Janata party put up only nine candidates despite the expectations were running high after the party's Parliamentary seat win (Narzary C. , 2011). But these remained only fantasy when the party won just four seats in Assembly election. Peculiar to previous Assam elections verdict this time the Janata Party emerged single largest party, though it felt few shorts of majority. The Janata Party's promise to implement the Tribal Belt and Block in the Southern bank and the creation of autonomous administrative region in the Northern bank of Brahmaputra brought the two in coalition at State. Shortly after the government formation and before the agreements could be implemented this government also fell due to internal division for power and leadership (Narzary B. B., 2004). After its fall, the party took a matter with the Union government. In absence of popular government, the President by an ordinance promulgated the Land Law Amendment Bill, and that was assented in the form of President's Act in 1981. In that mean time, the Congress (I) in State sought support from PTCA in the pretext of implementation of amended land laws. On condition of earlier demand and assurance from the Central Congress High Command for fulfillment, both the party agreed to alliance. But felt betrayed by the Congress (I) led Anowara Taimur and its sincerity to fulfill the commitments the party withdrew support in 1981. The party again decided to support the Congress (I) led by Keshab Gogoi on a condition to commitment to fulfill the promise of Tribal Development Authority Bill (TDA Bill). But the party again fell in the first Budget Session of the Assembly in 1982 and the President rule was reimposed (Narzary C. , 2011). However, throughout this instability period and their petitions to the Government, apparently the party's core political manifesto i.e., the "Udayachal" a tribal Union Territory remained periphery issue. This not only resented many plains tribals well-wishers but compelled to doubt their leadership and sincerity towards commitment to ordinary tribals. This endorsed some keen observers, conscious tribals leaders and civil bodies to propagate against the party's stand, that of exploiting the sentiment of ordinary tribals people in the name of Udayachal for their own vested political interest. Apparently, the internal and external division within the party began to show in public. Clearer the division appeared when the internal revolt from young factions occurred. Behind all these developments the downgrade of Udayachal to Autonomous Region was observed. After pairing with the Janata government an internal and external conflict showed due to concession on Udayachal. Especially, the ABSU became farcie for such decision taken without their consent. For this double standard policy, the ABSU withdrew support from the party (Sonowal, 2013). The ABSU called them opportunist who were exploiting it for own political interest. Their Udayachal demand was a blatant lie to ordinary plain tribals, and they did it to bargain for power and leadership only. Their politics is only an electoral politics (All Bodo Students Union, ABSU). The party had shown a similar stand on Roman script like that of Udayachal movement when they accepted Devanagari. For those unprincipled ideology shown during the Janata and Congress-I, the supporters doubted party's sincerity (Choudhury, 2015). This resulted the party's partition. Especially, the young likeminded, resented party worker's parted away and formed the PTCA (P) in May 1979. In July 1980, this new faction submitted a

memorandum to the PM Indira Gandhi demanding for Union Territory, the ‘*Mishing-Bodoland*’ (Roy, 1995). Although, it was responded with tripartite talk in August 1980 between the Union, State, and delegates of PTCA (P) but it did not bear fruitful result. Important to note that the division further sharpened between two factions over separate state issue. The effects of this factionalism were sharply felt in the Bodo belts (Memorandum, 1985). Clearly, the adversity of this effect was visible in election outcomes. Afterwards, the PTCA’s fast eroding from the tribal belts became open in public, in front of the eyes. Declining popularity and its poll figures show clear evident of it. For a matter of fact, the party just won three from 21 contested seats in 1983 election (Election Commission of India, 1983). It may be mentioned that, at a time when alienation of two factions have become inevitable due to the sharpening conflict, the serious attempt by ABSU to reunify them in 1980s also did not result any fruit. In 1984, the PTCA (P) was dissolved, and Binay Kungur Basumatary declared a new party called UNLFT (Brahma N. , 2008). In 1985 Assembly election, the PTCA stucked to old Udayachal demand and able to pick three from 28 seats contested in Assembly and one in Parliamentary election (Election Commission of India, 1985). This mandate of PTCA was perhaps due to poll alliance with AGP that became a darling of Assamese nationalist after 1985 Assam accord. Certainly, the alliance had advanced them to draw support of non-Bodo voters also. To note, its faction UTNLF also got a lone seat. It may be mentioned that the UTNLF was a freshly founded party and it had less organizational strength at grassroots level (Hakrari, 2019). This newly founded UNLFT also got split shortly into factions i.e., the UTNLF and UBNLF. In a nutshell, the Udayachal movement became failure as it delivered any fruitful result. Behind the failure, what can be clearly observed is that of disunity, self-centered political hobnobbing, divided by conflicting interest and adamant of Bodo leaders who were reluctant to compromise rivalry for greater community interest (Basumatary, Mushahary, & Karjie, 2023). More importantly, the short-sighted politics and the lack of adequate representation in Assembly to raised voice also left the plain tribal’s demand in cold for long. Also, neither the ABSU nor BSS were politically active, although the autonomy demand was first voiced by ABSU in 1967 (Deka, 2014). The ABSU, despite being influential organisation mostly refrained from direct involvement in politics but their support for the Tribal’s political party, Language and Udayachal movement was palpable. Towards the end of 1980s, the PTCA became rejected by the ordinary tribals supporters when deviated from its path and principal objective for own political emancipation. This kept the party in split and because of opportunist politics they withered completely from the tribal politics. In clear terms, they failed not only in Udayachal but also to endorse the issues of economic underdevelopment, unemployment, education etc. of the Bodos. On top of that the unstable political principles caused dissatisfaction towards them and their ideologies.

4 The Bodo Assertion and Election Politics: From Unrest to Accords (1987-2003)

From 1987, the Bodo assertion was pioneered by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). Previously, this Students Union did not involve directly in Udayachal movement, but they wholeheartedly supported from outside. Unlike previous demand which were Union Territory and Autonomous Administrative region, the assertion this time was for Bodoland separate State. It

may be mentioned that the initial demand started with 92-points charters including Separate homeland. Later, they decided to go with only homeland demand. The ABSU also created a political wing, the BPAC to give a political influence for homeland demand. Together, the ABSU-BPAC launched the Bodoland movement picking catchy slogan “*Divide Assam 50-50*” (Wary & Daimary, 2015). Under the young visionary leadership of Upendranath Brahma, the Bodo assertion became intense. Afterward, clearer it became to see that of new paradigm taking place in Bodo assertion with enormous scaling of community participation. Echo of the “*Divide Assam 50-50*” became so loud that it was clearly heard in every nook and corner of the Bodo belt. The intensity of it was clearly felt throughout the Brahmaputra Valley of Lower Assam and the State politics. It may be observed that this slogan was persistently propagated in the Bodo villages and shortly it became household’s slogan during peak of assertion (Basumatary B. , 2006). It immensely helped towards political awakening the ordinary Bodos. This dynamic leader mobilized the Bodos from mass slumber, who were mostly ignorant about own existence with dignity, liberty and right to self-determination. His mobilization has greatly fascinated the Bodos and kindled them politically (Narzary B. , 2007). Why did they raise it is a known parlance. When they raised it surely, they meant not only for ethnic identity preservation and political security of the tribals. It had a broader aim and that were to free themselves from repressive Assam Government’s anti-tribal policy and chauvinist Assamese colonialism in which tribals were trapped into the cycle of socio-economic slavery (Basumatary S. , 2023). It was a voice for all-round security, rapid progress, and development of tribals, better administration, more employment, self-rule, constitutional rights to equal status, justice, and human rights from which the tribals are deprived of. Above all to protect the tribals land, to preserve and flourish the language and culture of Bodos and other tribals and to free the tribals from the exploitations by non-tribals (All Bodo Students Union, ABSU). What demarcates this phase from the earlier phases is that of recourse to violent by armed wing of ABSU to those of pro-PTCA and who did not endorse their policies and actions (Hakrari, 2019).

So far, the election is concerned the Bodoland movement had overwhelming effect in Bodo belt. The 1991 Assembly election mandate showed clear indication of ABSU’s presence and influence in Bodo belts, when the 10 Bodo MLAs backed by them got elected from BPAC (Basumatary B. , 2006). Previous mandates that have shown fractured into multiple political parties for the first time gave absolute verdict to single party within the Bodo belt. Since then, the notable withering presence of PTCA totally got wiped from the Bodo belt after this election. Not only that, but the substantial dominance that Congress had in Bodo belt was also now completely taken over by ABSU backed candidates or tribal’s party. What can be distinctly seen during Bodo movement was that of the mass support of the Bodos to local parties, shifting from previously fractured mandates to regional oriented verdicts (Basumatary, Mushahary, & Karjie, 2023). Another distinct to note was that of the ABSU’s involvement in election politics through its political wing also appeared increasingly clear towards 1990s. Before that also, while its keen interest and indirect involvement were no secrets in the Bodo politics. The ABSU’s scaling community support in this

election was because the Bodos had mandated their faith in its leadership. Other reason was the ongoing talks with the Bodo leaders, pioneered by the ABSU and BPAC. Already, several rounds of tripartite talks were held between the Union, State, and the Bodo leaders. The ordinary Bodo masses were sure of forthcoming political agreement, and towards resolving of long-standing Bodo problems. This probably gave political leverage and reason for mass tilt towards ABSU and BPAC. The ongoing talk ended in a historic BAC agreement on 20th February 1993 (Basumatary B. , 2006). It was the first Bodo accord, that gave administrative autonomy to the plain tribals at the dispense of State power.

5 Bodoland Autonomous Council: The Failed Accord and the Emergence of Militant Assertion

It may be mentioned that the highly anticipated BAC accord which became a public hyped started to show its hollowness shortly. Why did it fail? What caused militant assertion after this accord and what were its repercussion are few queries to be glanced at? Throughout Bodo assertion of post-accord, it may be observed to that of armed violence in Bodo belts dominating the media narratives and Assam's political discourses. It may be mentioned that there were high expectations among the Bodo community after this accord. It was anticipated to accelerate the political, economic, social, and cultural development and violence to cease in the Bodo belt (Basumatary B. , 2006). It is because this accord has paved way for the autonomous administration with certain executive powers.

Shortly after the accord, to capture political power of BAC, the ABSU-BPAC leaders founded the Bodo People's Party (BPP). This was followed by an intense power struggle and internal squabbling among themselves for leadership. In this matter Sharma observed that the accord once hailed by some was reduced to a political farce (Sharma C. , 2000). The party, then constituted 18 members Executive Councilors under the SK Bwiswmutiary. However, the problems started to show promptly. In this matter, it is worth to mentioned that the Council's executive power that had on 38 subjects in reality were under dispensation of State government. It was far from enjoying real autonomy as they faced frequent intervention from state government (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). Another problem that stumbled this accord was that of boundary demarcation. In a subsequent notification, the Assam government declared an inclusion of 2570 villages in the BAC, excluding 515 villages and a 10 Kms border belt with Bhutan. Over this notification, the exuberant signatories felt cheated as it did not meet to the terms of agreement. Angered by such insincerity, they blamed the government of hatching conspiracy to break unity through divisive politics (Sonowal, 2013). Behind all these ongoing developments, clearly it appeared that the boundary non-demarcation was at major fault apart from that of government's sincerity to implement the accord. Followed by this, SK Bwiswmutiary's faction resigned from the Chief Executive Councilor. But another faction led by the Premshing Brahma exploited this opportunity and held the office. Later, the BPP split into factions i.e., the BPP (*Premshing wing*) and BPP (*Sansuma wing*) (Basumatary B. , 2006). The former stick to ABSU and the later tilt towards ruling Congress. While all these political farces were taking place, the common people's interest

figured nowhere in their scheme of things except that of distinctly visible internal power struggle for own selfish interest.

Meanwhile in 1996, the AGP led coalition government came to power. The Bodos were doubtful of AGP government for its anti-tribal policies because the party was born from Assamese nationalism. It may be mentioned that the Assamese hegemon towards tribals and other ethnicities were out open in AGP's reign. Apart from that the genocide against Bodos in Gohpur and gang raped in Bhumka were occurred during the AGP government in late 1980s. In mid 1990s, there was mounting dissatisfaction with the working of Council. As a result, the Bodo assertion and politics were taking new courses. Violent ideologies were taking nest in the mind of radicalized section of movement group, who were previously moderate and non-violent (Mwshahary D. S., 2015). Ideological differences of Bodo leadership had also given birth to several Bodo political parties. Among those, the People's Democratic Front (PDF) founded by the Garla Batha Basumatary on 24th March 1996 was notable with substantial Bodo supporters. At the same time, S.K Bwiswmutiary also formed the Bodoland Statehood Movement Council (BSMC) on 28th March 1996. The former had a support of NDFB and the later had a support of ABSU (Assam Tribune, 1996). In 1996 election, these two rivals picked the Bodoland for electoral battle. Their rivalry heated up to group confrontation when they bid for supremacy. While all these developments were taking place, the Bodos mandated PDF with 8 MLA and 1 MP seat against that of BSMC's 2 MLA seats. PDF stucked to Mahanta led AGP government following the poll agreement. In 1996, the demise of Premshing Brahma brought the PDF's Kanakeswar Narzary to Council. Expression of boundary demarcation was expected from this coalition but contrast to that they kept it unraised. Over this issue, the resented ABSU decided to denounce the accord and declared to retreat a movement for Bodoland (Sonowal, 2013).

As mentioned, the radical ideas had already taken gripped over some Bodos, the radicalized youth formed militant wing "Bodoland Liberation Tiger" (BLT) in 1996. It was created to assist the ABSU in Bodoland assertion (Brahma B. K., 2008). Because by that time they become fully convinced the needs of hardliner. In that mean time, the NDA government at national also declared reorganization of three states viz. Chattisgarh, Uttaranchal, and Vananchal. In this wake, before 1998 Parliamentary election the ABSU called for unification of all the Bodo organizations for the sake of community interest. But the community interest got overshadowed by factionalism of individual and party interest (Narzary M. , 2019). As a result, many Bodo parties in tune of party interest contested election picking the same Bodoland issue. This time the mandate favored to the ABSU backed, SK Bwiswmutiary in this election (Sonowal, 2013).

As stated, the ABSU and BLT took a fresh start of Bodo movement after the declaration of state reorganization. Throughout the phase of early 1990s, the assertion was moderate and peaceful. But the government's deaf ear to demand and lackadaisical towards implementation of the accord broke their patience. They become fully convinced that using only soft technique is not going to help them, to achieve Bodoland. So, they resorted to violent path to make the demand more assertive. It may be said that the ABSU stucked to non-violent assertion, but the BLT resorted to violent activities. This violent assertion created social unrest across the Bodo belts (Brahma B. K.,

2008). The government responded with force to suppress the hardliners and dealt with an iron fist policy. This heightened the actions and counter-actions between them. As a result, free hands were given to the police to counter-suppress the militancy. Notable to say that the effect of human cost resulting from this violence had a far-reaching impact in Bodo belt. The State's response with draconian law endorsed further the police brutality, torture, fake-encounters, rape crimes, secret-killing, plundering properties, violation of human rights in the name of raid by the state administration (Swargiary, 1992). It may be observed that the radicalization of the Bodos started taking nest after that of Gohpur genocide. In addition, the Assam police sinister crime of gang raping the 9 Bodo girls and women at Bhumka village of Kokrajhar in 1988 (India Today, 1989) and the use of state's force to brutal repression of democratic protest were design to derail the peaceful assertion. Fair to say that the Bodo assertion was moderate and non-violent till late 1980s. It is said that the Gohpur genocide of 1989, that left more than 535 Bodos killed, and more than lakh's displaced were committed by the Assamese Chauvinist with the nexus of State's Police and administration (Brahma R.). After those incidents, the Bodo assertion turned more violent with vengeful activities. The ABSU for such act held responsible to AGP, AJYCP and the AASU's campaign to resist the Bodo movement physically. They blamed these groups for trying to wage civil war deigned to massacre the Bodos. This is a fact that the first martyr of Bodo assertion Sujit Narzary was killed by the AASU supporters in 1987. In another incident of 1987, the AGP, AASU and AJYCP supporters physically resisted the ABSU's 24-hour bandh and attacked the volunteers at Gohpur. Another three volunteers were killed by Assam police during peaceful protest at Darrang and Kokrajhar districts in 1987 (ABSU's Memorandum to GoI).

Table: 5.1 List of Martyrs during Bodoland Movement from 1987 to 2003

Sl. No	District	Nos. of Martyrs
1	Baksa	357
2	Chirang	75
3	Dhemaji	18
4	Goalpara	03
5	Karbi Anglong	32
6	Kokrajhar	133
7	Lakhimpur	17
8	Nalbari	09
9	Sonitpur	533
10	Udalguri	203
Total		1380

Source: Martyrs record compiled by ABSU

It may be mentioned that there was parallel development of arms movement during this period, one by NDFB and other by BLT. The former demanded for sovereignty while the latter's demand was Bodoland state within Union of India. Even before the birth of BLT, the difference existed between the NDFB and ABSU in terms of ideology and approach. Although it showed

occasionally, but never at unprecedented scale that it took after the birth of BLT. In matter of BAC and BTC accord also, the NDFB neither accepted it nor they opposed it (Hakrari, 2019). Throughout the Bodo assertion after 1990s, the fratricidal killing for political dominance was the tragic phase of Bodo politics. Fratricidal killing rise after the birth of BLT, another arms wing with different political objectives. Both these Bodo arms wing killed themselves and supporters in a bid to established political supremacy in the Bodo belts. Ideological differences of the two were central of their clash (Basumatary B. , 2007). With such intend, the NDFB start operation *Doar* against BLT while the BLT launched operation *Srangsrang* against NDFB. The NDFB targeted members of other Bodo organizations like that of BLT, ABSU, BSS, BPAC, and ABWWF for selected killing (Hakrari, 2019). This killing had an enduring social impact among the Bodo community. As it was observed that the problem which started with ideological rivalry took the political and geographical contest. It divided the Bodos politically on party line i.e., NDFB versus ABSU and BLT. Geographically, it became risky for ordinary Bodos from NDFB dominated areas to travel BLT dominated areas (Basumatary & Mushahary, 2023). Apart from that the political assassination of leaders, party workers and supporters of opponents were becoming inevitable scene of the Bodo politics. Among the Bodo leaders, the Swmbala Basumatary, (*ABSU President*) (Basumatary J. , 2014), Bineswar Brahma, (President, Bodo Sathya Sabha) (Gogoi, 2001), and Daoharu Garlabata Basumatary, (*Ex. President, ABSU*) (Narzary H. , 2014) were few prominent names who became the victims of fratricidal killing. This phase experienced violence and bloodshed in an unprecedented scale. Even the incidents of killing and threat of persecution to the Bodos sympathetic to PTCA and the leaders opposing to ABSU-led movement became heightened (Haloi, 2018). The situation became more volatile when some rival leaders patroned them to use against each other.

Throughout late 1990's, the militant assertion, and the contest of arms group in a bid to dominate the Bodo politics led to an unrest across the Bodo belt. There was hardly any change in the AGP government's policy towards Bodo problem. Seeing the AGP governments uninterest to solve Bodo problems the PDF withdrew their support, and extended support to the assertion for separate Bodoland (Sonowal, 2013). Far from state, in that mean time the BJP led NDA coalition came to power at the Centre in 1998. But the government's instability was impeding the normal working of the NDA coalition government. This government did not last long and fell in the first quarter of 1999. But it managed to retain power in the next General Election that was held in the same year (Election Commission of Assam, 1999). SK Bwiswmutiary, a lone Parliamentarian from Bodo community, who was elected from the Kokrajhar ST constituency extended favour to the NDA government in the Centre. Far in the state, echo for highest political level of tripartite talk was also getting louder from several Bodo organizations. In a notable development, the Centre's interest for peace process opened the doors for the BLT. Ongoing peace process was heading towards satisfactory direction. Because the government at State was now sure of forthcoming political agreement in a bid to appease the Bodos, the State government issued a fresh notification for the inclusion of previously left out additional villages in the BAC. But such temptation did not entertain the Bodo organizations. Not only they rejected this offer but also, they demanded to scrap

the BAC Accord (Sonowal, 2013). After several round of talks, this peace process ended with a historic tripartite agreement called the BTC accord on 10 February 2003.

6 Land and Conflicts in the Bodo Belt

Social relations among various ethnic groups can be determined by the land rights. Especially, for tribal people the land is both indispensable economic and political assets. Having said that the land is linked with both the questions of livelihood and political identity of the tribals, the ongoing tribal land alienation has increasingly pushed towards political and ethnic confrontation between tribals and non-tribals. Land centric conflict has distinctly risen with the increasing non-tribal population, migration, and illegal settlement in the protected tribal lands. The migration is a historical problem of Assam affecting social, economic, and political of the local ethnic groups. Especially, the Muslim and Adivasi immigrants was humongous, affecting the local demography. Threat of demographic change and marginalization in their own land have disseminated panicked among son of the soils. As a result, ethnic tension and conflicts occurred several times in the Bodo belt. In a matter of fact, the Bodo-Muslims conflict of 2012 can be linked with the case of land alienation. As reported by ACHR 2012, this conflict occurred from a spurt of violence over alleged occupation of forest land by the Muslims who put Idgah Phalak (Signboard) at Bedlangmari under Nayekgaon Balaghat Tribal Block. The Muslims blamed the Council for conspiracy of eviction drive. Against this, the ABMSU organized a protest blaming the Bodos of dismantling *Idgah*, then spread rumor of eviction drive and propagated of killing Muslims youth. Although, the killings of Muslim were committed by the KLO and Adivasi terrorist groups. Before a full-scale conflict occurred, the communal tendencies were already taking shape. After the mob lynching of four Bodo youths, the conflict flared up and spread like a wildfire (Asian Centre for Human Rights , 2012). Not only that the Bodo-Muslims conflicts of 1994, 2008, and the Bodo-Santhal conflict of 1996 can also be attributed to the land alienation of tribals. Immigrant Muslim's increasing land encroachment, indulgence in crimes, trouble making against locals were already fast becoming intolerable. But when the Bodos prevented an encroaching Muslims, their enmity got heightened, and the conflict became inevitable. Similarly, the Bodo-Adivasi conflict occurred when the Bodos became aware of Adivasi's hatching of land snatch. Adivasi dominance in Gossaigaon sub-division was distinct form election mandate's viewpoint. In addition, the intrusion of Jharkhand Sangram Parishad (JSP) cadres and their mingle with Santals disturbed the local ethnic groups. Later, the ethnic tension escalated when they hatch to fight local Bodos, snatch their land and distribute to landless Santal population. The conflict then picked when three dead bodies of Bodo girls, suspect of abducted and raped by Santhal youths were recovered from the jungle (Mwshahary S. , 2015). In this regard Dr. Mwshahary's note can be quoted:

A Santhal man telling the fellow Bodo when they found him clearing weeds in paddy field. He began to hint frankly "*Keno Etho Kosto Korichebra, Eitha To Amarsen Hobo*" i.e., "Why are you taking pain in vain, this land shall be ours". One Shantal telling another "*Oi Alpo Sotota Tui Nibire, Ami Oi Boro Ta Nibo*" i.e., "You take that smaller one, I shall take the bigger one". Further, they remained that "*Rabiram Mastererta Kub Bhalore Ghorta, Oi Ta Ami Nibo, Tui Oi*

Charan Mastererta Nibire, Iota Prai Bhalo Ache” i.e., “Rabiram master’s home is very good, I’ll take this, You take that of Charan master, his house too is almost good” (Mwshahary S. , 2015).

Back to history of India’s partition, there were consequences of numerous bloody communal clash and riots. Since then, the enmity, rivalry, and jealousy have seeded among various communities. In Assam, a sort of genetic competition between the Bangladesh Muslim and India’s Hindu, including local ethnic groups can be sensed because the fear of losing political power, land, and identity is very imminent (Brahma R. , n.d.). For many years, the conflict between Bodos and non-Bodos for political space as mainly the land centric is distinct from the bulk of writings. In order to understand the onus of BTAD’s conflict, it is important to extend one’s range of view to the Assam history and Northeast in general which is a complex region drawn into most critical issues such as ethnic nationalism, ethnic clash, extremism, land and identity politics, Bangladeshi immigrants, land alienation, anti-social activities, Muslim population explosion, tribal- non tribal and Hindu-Muslim rivalry for which Hilary Pais considered Northeast as more complex part of India than Kashmir. He says, “For many reasons, the situation in Assam is more complex than the Kashmir because the latter has one complex issue to be settled, but the former has many” (Pais, 2014). Ethnographers and historians give historical account of a large-scale exodus from the Bangladesh to Assam. Bulk of writings from the old and contemporary scholars draw the Bodo-Muslim conflicts as a direct result of long neglected issues from the Bangladeshi migration in Assam. For a matter of fact, there has been warning about ominous structural change of Assam since colonial time through the Census Report of 1911, 1921 and 1931 by then European Census experts, Lloyd and Mullan. The conflict of present time is none but the result of demographic change of the region, that were carelessly seeded from colonial era, extended even after independence, now has reaped fruits of bitter conflict and confusion. These national problems are well anticipated for many years, but the indifferent attitude and deaf ear of both the Centre and State to this problem is to be antagonized. In Assam, the presence of one lakh forty-three thousand D-Voters coming from Bangladesh is officially declared. Apart from that, the question of many more untraced D-Voter’s presence is widely raised. Because the fact that illegal influx of Bangladeshi in Assam, affecting the local demography has been overlooked by the foresight less state and national politicians for pity vote-bank politics at the cost of indigenous population’s land rights. As a result, in 1980’s there were conflict between Adivasi-immigrant Muslims, Nellie Massacre (1983), Gohpur riot (1989), Barpeta Massacre (1994), Adivasi-Assamese (1996), Kakopathar Massacre (2006), Bodo-Adivasi (1994, 1996, 2014), and Bodo-Muslims conflicts (1996, 2008, 2012). Behind all these conflicts, ethnic identity politics over land and culture has been observed (Brahma R. , n.d.). Sanjoy Hazarika’s articulation that “the core of the problems in the Northeast, be it Nagaland, Manipur, Assam or elsewhere, lies in the mobilization of identity over land, territory, and natural resources. The same is true of the Bodo areas where the Bodo’s land have been encroached and settled upon by others” is distinctly important towards understanding complex paradigm that is intertwined by land, ethnicity, and rightful control (Hazarika, 2014). In the backdrop of ethnic conflict, there were propagation of powerful narratives

by the anti-Bodo rhetoric. The BAC accord that demand for inclusion of villages, laid down the criteria of 50 percent Bodo populated villages but that was agreed without a demarcation. When many villages that did not met criteria were left out from inclusion, the NDFB resorted ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Adivasi in a bid to alter demography in the Bodo’s favour. The propagation of such narratives became widely campaigned by Assamese media, intellectuals, politicians and non-tribals in order to create counter movement against the Bodo assertion. Not only that the tribals and all those who voiced the issue of illegal immigration loud were vilified as “anti-Muslims”. This is despite the fact that, the reality of migration is very distinct from exponential growth of Muslims and non-tribals population in tribal belt and block. Also, the secular activists, blinded by tunnel vision on secularism propagate the riots as ethnic cleansing. Their sheer ignorance of the fact that the non-tribals, irrespective of religion and caste can not intrude, purchase land in this protected belt and block as per the Chapter X of ALRR 1986. Many knowingly, try to undermine the tribals land rights recognized by the Constitution since Colonial era (Asian Centre for Human Rights , 2012). They even demand to scrap such law in fear of eviction, as substantial size have already swamped illegally into it. Also, their anti-tribal stands became distinctly out in open when they demanded to scrap the Council by terming such arrangement as “incentivising ethnic cleansing”.

Table: 6.1 Death and Displacement in the Conflicts

Sl. No	Year	Causes	Displaced	Communities Affected	Death
1	1991-93	Bodoland Movement	60000	Hindu Bengalis	61
2	1994	Massacre at Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Bongaigaion	1000	Muslims	113
3	1994	Massacre at Bansbari	70000	Muslims	90
4	1996	Bodo- Santal Conflict	250000	Santhal, Bodo, Rabha	198
5	1998	Bodo-Santhal Conflict	82000	Santhal, Bodo, Rabha	186
6	2008	Bodo-Muslim Conflict	200000	Bodo, Muslim, Garo, Nepali, Bihari, Rabha	64
7	2012	Bodo-Muslim Conflict	485921	Bodo, Muslim, Garo, Nepali, Bihari, Rabha	109
8	2014	Bodo-Muslim Conflict	496	Bodo, Muslim	46
9	2015	Bodo-Adivasi	236349	Bodo, Adivasi	76

Source: (Haloi, 2018), (Deputy Commissioner’s Office, Kokrajhar & Udalguri)

To substantiate this fact, the Kokrajhar district, a Bodo dominated area recorded an exponential decadal growth of 76.75 percent against 53.25 percent of Assam from 1971-1991. Irrespective of whether it was a result of migration or illegal immigration, its impact was clear; it results a land alienation of the Bodos in clear violation of Chapter-X (Asian Centre for Human Rights , 2012). The Chapter X of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886, that was mean to protect tribal land got never enforced in letter and spirit ever since it was enacted. Section 164 B of this chapter, a provision to punish defaulters of land transfer also remained ineffective (Das, 2007). Leading experts on tribals consider land as the most valuable assets for them in life. Elwin underscore that the loss of land and forest is the foremost reason for causing tribal depression. Ergo put forth that

any government's attitude towards tribal development can best be accessed through its attitude towards tribal land (Sharma C. K., 2001). But the ongoing illegal land grabbing, settlement of non-tribals and land transfer of tribals did not cease due to nexus of corrupt officials (Bhattacharya, 2001). The recent findings of *Brahma Committee* (Former Chief Election Commissioner of India) report reveal the presence of doubtful citizens over lakhs of acres of Tribal lands. The Committee has recommended strict implementation of the land laws in letter and spirit (Baruah, Bhattacharyya, Dutta, & Borpatragohain, 2017). Over and above, the migration and encroachment of protected tribal land, absence of concrete policies and stubborn attitudes of the State government to implement the existing land laws have already pushed the tribals to periphery in their own ancestral land.

Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, the PTCA's assertion for Udayachal i.e., the Union Territory that started with high zeal did bear any meaningful result because of selfish interest of the party. The deviation of party from its objective, commoner's emotion, and expectation has led complete marginalization of the party. With this, the echo for Udayachal also sank, but not before splitting the Bodos. The later phase's assertion took a violent path after the failed BAC accord when the government imposed repressive iron fist policy to suppress the assertion. This resulted towards violent confrontation, militant uprising, brutal genocidal by the state and also the fratricidal killing amongst for the political dominance. In a nutshell, much of the assertion between the late 1980's to 1990's was dominated by the most turbulent phases of Bodo assertion. The contestation for land and identity also resulted into ethnic conflicts. Until 2003, the state of unrest, arms struggle in the Bodo belt that were dominating the assertion and election politics came to cease with the BTC accord. To say, the BTC accord paved a way for peace, inclusiveness, integrating towards mainstream politics and surging for social, economic, and political development in the Bodo belt.

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