

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TWO MAJOR INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS OF KOKRAJHAR DISTRICT OF ASSAM DURING THE YEARS 1996-98 & 2012

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## Abstract

India's northeast is well known for some of the worst ethnic clashes that have left the region turbulent and strife torn for several decades. In this perspective, the conflicts between the Bodo and Santhal-Adivasi and the Bodos and the Bengali-speaking Muslims of Kokrajhar district of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), Assam (1996-98 & 2012) deserve proper study and analysis. The cited conflicts in the north-western district of Assam had managed to occupy a space in the history of Northeast in general and Assam in particular due to bloody and disastrous consequences.

**Key words:** Ethnic, Conflict, Rehabilitation, Demography, Influx

## **Introduction**

Being a land of diversity, India has been victimized by several disastrous ethnic clashes in different periods of history since independence. India's northeast in particular is well known for some of the worst ethnic clashes that have left the region turbulent and strife torn for several decades. In this perspective, the Bodo-Santhal (1996-1998) and Bodo-Muslim (2012) conflicts in Kokrajhar district of Assam have managed to occupy a space in the history of Northeast in general and Assam in particular due to bloody and disastrous consequences. The said conflicts had led to the loss of several lives, injuries to hundreds, displacement of more than four lakhs and destruction of properties worth crores of rupees. Albeit the concerned conflicts have certain similarities as far as their origin, proliferation, consequences and resolutions are concerned, certain variations are noticeable in the latter. Hence, a comparative analysis of the two conflicts under different socio-economic and political conditions but within the same district has also been made. However, the present work is merely confined to the inter-ethnic conflicts of 1996-98 and 2012 (Kokrajhar district) and other sporadic inter and intra-ethnic conflicts which had taken place within and outside the specified period of time have not been covered.

## The study area

The present study is confined to existing Kokrajhar district which became the head quarter of the new administrative council after the formation of BTAD in 2003. The district covers an area of 3,167.85 square kilometers and lies in the westernmost part of Assam sharing boundaries with West Bengal in the west and in the northern sector international boundary with Bhutan. According to 2011 census Kokrajhar district's total population stood at 8,87,142 consisting of the communities like the Bodos, Adivasis, Santhals, Rajbanshis, Rabhas, Garos, Bengalis, Biharis, Nepalis and Muslims.

## Objectives of the study

The prime objectives of the paper lie in tracing the root causes of the concerned ethnic conflicts and highlighting the disastrous consequences brought forth by them and the need to prevent them from future recurrences. Besides tracing the genesis of the conflicts, it has attempted to make a comparative analysis of the same under specific socio-economic and political conditions prevalent there. It's also has been to pinpoint that communalization and politicization of such disastrous conflicts can be taken advantage by vested interests and the need for cautious resolution of the same.

## Conflict: Theoretical meaning

*Conflict* means a serious disagreement or argument relating to a particular ideology or activity. Conflicts are usually complex, concerned with personal, local, national or international issues in which there are several interrelated disputes. Conflicts may be applicable also to family disputes, consumer disputes, environmental disputes, inter-ethnic disputes, government and people disputes and international disputes. There are many sources of conflicts but the one arising out of economy surpasses the others. Conflicts also can develop basing on religious differences and conflicting interests among different ethnic groups. Our concern here is the inter-ethnic conflicts centered-around three ethnic groups over claims for land, forest and other natural resources in Kokrajhar district of Assam.

## Background of the conflicting ethnic groups

The Bodos are the earliest known inhabitants of Assam. Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people like the Boros, Meches, Rabhas, Garos, Dimasas, Kacharis, Boroks of Tripura, Lalungs, Sonowals, Hajongs and Deoris. Majority of these people are found on the North bank of the river Brahmaputra from west to east. Although the term Bodo stands for larger group of people, in the present context, the Bodo-speaking people residing in different parts of the state from west to east are taken into consideration. In Kokrajhar district (area of study) they form a formidable force. They have been demanding for separate homeland since 1960s mainly spearheaded by Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) and host of other allied organizations.

Santhals are ethnically the largest community in whole of India. Presently they are mainly in the states of Jharkhand (largest concentration), Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. Their entry in the state of Assam can be traced back mainly to the period of British rule and the start of tea plantation. Their ancestors were brought by the British tea planters mainly for working as tea garden labourers during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In due course of time, they moved out of the tea gardens and started agricultural life in and around tea gardens. However, in the years that followed, many more of their families migrated to Assam including Kokrajhar district and assimilated with earlier settlers.

The Bengali-speaking Muslims on the other hand, are the immigrants from former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who made inroads into the state of Assam (inclusive of present Kokrajhar) since the days of colonial rule. During the British regime they were encouraged to migrate to this place for bringing more of forest and wastelands under cultivation. The policy of *grow more food* during the Shadullah Ministry in the 1930s also swelled their number in the state. In the post-independence period also the trend continued with huge influx during the Bangladesh Liberation war of early 1970s. Thereafter, the socio-economic conditions and other vested interests caused unceasing immigration in the state to the extent of outnumbering the indigenous natives.

### Tracing the genesis of the conflicts

Albeit the presence of other communities in the study area, the real actors (ethnic groups) involved in the conflicts are mainly the Bodos, Santhals and the Bengali-speaking Muslims.

**Bodo-Santhal conflicts of 1996-98:** Many interpretations and speculations emerged with regard to actual causes of the bloody conflicts between the Bodos and Santhals in the years 1996-98. The Santhals put the blame upon Bodos for the conflicts and termed it as an act of ethnic cleansing and the recovery of the three dead bodies of Bodo girls in a Santhal dominated village of Gossaigaon sub-division was preplanned strategy. Bodos on the other hand blamed the Santhals for attempting to create Santhal majority in the district at the behest of Jharkhandis and for the purpose kept secret links with them. Mutual distrusts as the causes of such devastating conflicts can only be regarded as immediate ones and the genesis of the problem actually was rooted in forest land occupation and clash of interests. Being agriculturists, both the communities heavily relied upon cultivation and minor forest produce. Expansion of families, urbanization process and the growth of small private tea growers led to the shortage of cultivable lands in the district. Moreover, Santhal people from other districts of Assam (some from unknown places) found forestlands as new and cheap source of livelihood and settlement. On the other hand, being sons of the soil, the Bodos could not easily accept their little lands being taken away by the Santhals despite sharing similar status and hardships. Meanwhile, the Santhals also had twin interests of fulfilling sustenance and settlement and remaining together as security from external threats. When the movement for Bodoland gained momentum, the Santhals could not take that easily and suspected that they perhaps might not be allowed to stay in the proposed Bodoland. When the resistance was made by the Bodo militants against the poachers and timber smugglers, much of their interests too were curtailed. Hence, banning of entry into forests by the NDFB frustrated the Santhals and suspected that only they were prevented and not the Bodos. This indirectly

resulted in the conflicts of 1996 and 1998. Though majority of the conflict related displaced persons were resettled and rehabilitated a sizeable number of them remained back in the camps near forest areas and engaged in forestlands clearance for cultivation and other activities for livelihood.

**Bodo and Bengali-speaking Muslim conflict of 2012:** Another bloody clash between the Bodo indigenous peoples and Bengali-speaking Muslims since 19<sup>th</sup> July 2012 was also related to politics for space in the district. Apparently one might assume the conflict resulted due to killing of two Bengali-speaking Muslim persons at Gossaigaon on 6<sup>th</sup> July and shooting and injuring of two members of ABMSU on 19<sup>th</sup> July of 2012 which resulted in the retaliatory killings of four former Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 by the miscreants in Joypur (a Muslim-majority village of Kokrajhar district). But deeper analysis leads to the knowledge that it is beyond that and is actually related to politics for space in the reserved forests and adjoining wasteland areas. The native Bodos were perturbed by Muslims alarming rise in number and feared that if the trend persisted, they would be outnumbered and politically be under their dictate. This insecurity feeling deepened when the Muslims decided to set up *Igdah* at disputed *Bedlangmari* forestland area falling under the Chakrashilla Wildlife Sanctuary by putting up a signboard for the purpose. This act was not pleasing to the local communities and they with the help of forest department got the signboard removed on May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012. In retaliation, religious minority student organizations called BTAD bandh on May 29 and turned violent leading to attack and hospitalization of some Bodo employees including injuring of many security personnel at Joypur. On the other hand, on the August of 2012, eleven Bodo organizations called for an emergency meeting over the land occupation by suspected nationalities at *Bedlangmari* in Kokrajhar district and decided that the tribal belts and blocks and the forest land must be prevented from going into the hands of the latter. In this connection, they submitted a memorandum to BTC Chief, DC and SP, Kokrajhar for taking necessary steps for preventing the proposal of setting up of *Igdah* at *Bedlangmari* by the Muslims.

Before the second phase of rehabilitation could be completed, again some instances of killings took place in the district since 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2012 with the gunning down of Ainul Hoque at No-2 Bajugaon village (Gossaigaon) and retaliatory killing of a Bodo person at *Bedlangmari* (south Kokrajhar) on the following day (11<sup>th</sup> Sunday). On 12<sup>th</sup> of the same month, another Muslim farmer (Ali Hussain) was gunned down by unidentified gunmen at No-2 Bankapara and on 13<sup>th</sup> of the same month a Muslim woman was killed and another injured at Diplai in southern Kokrajhar. This was followed by gunning down of Asseruiddin (school teacher) and injuring of Ikramul Ahmed at Kachugaon and several other killings and counter killings in the district and adjacent areas.

The Bodos especially the Ex-BLT and surrendered NDFB did not want anybody irrespective of caste and creed to enter fresh forest areas for cultivation or settlement inclusive of setting up *Igdah* there. The minority community was displeased over the stand of the former militants and perhaps was waiting for occasions to retaliate if chance and time permitted. Meanwhile, the minority community wanted to resettle in the places from where they were displaced including forest areas. The Bodos including the influential All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) feared that many illegal Bangladeshis might have mingled with the actually

displaced people and did not want resettlement in the forestlands. It wanted separate Commission for influx, land issues and conflicts to be established by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ABSU had stressed on the implementation of Land Law (Chapter X, Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886) for protection of tribal belts and blocks. It also wanted implementation of Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, detection and deportation of foreigners and the sealing of the Indo-Bangladesh border. Notably, the Bodos claimed that the conflict was preplanned by minority community and other vested interests to help infiltrate the former to occupy forestlands in the district and thereby alter demographic set up. The Muslims on the other hand, claimed that the conflict had taken place as a result of ethnic cleansing motive by various Bodo organizations to increase the percentage of their population in the proposed Bodoland.

### **Comparative analysis of the conflicts**

The said conflicts had taken place within the same district with more or less similar socio-economic and political conditions. Both the conflicts started with the killings of Bodo people by unidentified miscreants. The first conflict took its momentum after the recovery of three Bodo girls in a Santhal dominated village of Gossaigaon sub-division. In case of the latter also, the violent conflict begun with the killing of four Bodo youths at Joypur (Muslim dominated village) of south Kokrajhar district. Both the conflicts had brought about irreparable damage to the warring communities and to the district administration. The Bodo-Santhal conflicts had together displaced about 90,770 families (4,17,027 persons). On the other hand, the Bodo-Benglai-speaking Muslim conflict also had led to displacement of more than four lakh persons. Due to the untiring efforts by the government and social organizations, thousands of victims of both the conflicts were rehabilitated soon after the situation calmed down, but the enmity, mutual distrusts and fear psychosis could not be removed from their hearts and memories in immediate future. The victims of both the conflicts had to stay in relief camps that were congested and unhygienic and hence many women and children died of different sicknesses. Thus, certain victims of both the conflicts created problem of rehabilitation due to the inability of the concerned to locate their original villages and produce adequate documents.

However, despite several similarities in the nature and the consequences of the conflicts, certain dissimilarities could also be noticed. The first conflict took place between the people of more or less similar socio-economic conditions and mutually dependent tribal communities. But the latter had taken place between indigenous natives and the suspected immigrant non-tribal Bengali-speaking Muslims. The Bodo-Santhal conflict had created wide range of criticism both within the state and outside. But the latter (Bodo-Muslim conflict), spread out far and wide to the extent of violent protest at *Azad Maidan* in Mumbai and exodus of many northeast people from western India. In case of the former, many people of the state showed sympathy towards the Santhals, but in the case of the latter, almost all the people of Assam condemned the Muslim immigrants and the sympathy rolled towards the native Bodos. In case of the latter, even the Santhals to some extent had sympathized towards the native Bodos. The complexity of the resettlement and rehabilitation process of the former appeared to be lesser than the latter. With regard to the latter's

rehabilitation process, the Congress government and the BPF-led government run into controversy to the extent of snapping their coalition government in the state. The latter conflict (2012) had directly or indirectly caused the defeat of Bodo candidate in the 5-Kokrajhar (ST) Lok Sabha constituency in the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election of Aril-May, 2014 in the hands of Naba Kumar Sarania with a margin of more than three lakhs votes (mainly supported by the Muslims).

### **Suggestions**

Both the conflicts of 1996-98 and 2012 were the outcome of man-made disasters and so the issues necessitated resolution in human ways. Camp inmates, if there be any left even after the rehabilitation processes, should not be allowed to live in such sub-human conditions for long and deny them of basic human rights. In case of the displaced and non-resettled families, their original villages should be identified and resettled immediately with adequate amount of money and materials for rehabilitation. Professional and Job oriented programmes should be organized for the victims who are still not rehabilitated due to unavoidable circumstances. Ways and means should be arranged by government and other agencies for helping them live a decent standard of life even in temporary shelter houses. Politicization of the problems should be stopped at once to avoid further conflicts. Government and voluntary organizations should cooperate with the victims themselves to help them early rehabilitation and if not, look after them well until the time they are rehabilitated. However, care must be taken in rehabilitating the camp inmates so as to avoid influx from across the international border and other states so as to avoid future conflicts with the natives mainly for forest resources and demographic alterations. If not done so, the indigenous peoples will be outnumbered in immediate future and the only option left for them will be again violent path and further loss of lives, injuries and loss of properties.

### **Conclusion**

The aforesaid conflicts despite grievousness were resolved due to ardent efforts and cooperation by the government agencies, voluntary organizations and the concerned victims themselves. Indeed, the displaced persons of both the riots were the results of manmade destructive activities and deserved help in human way. The persons and the agencies who were involved in rendering valuable helps in times of utmost needs to the needy must be thanked and remembered by the victims and the peace lovers. Amidst such perilous and helpless situations, their sub-human conditions in the camps were removed, government aids were regularized and educational facilities were provided. Due to such humanitarian outlook and approach, at least the victims irrespective of community affiliations were made to feel worth and there was future even for them. Further, remnants of the victims of the conflicts, if there be any, should be rendered humanitarian assistance as well. However, care must be taken to protect the rights and privileges of the indigenous peoples against the vested interests.

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