



India: Bodo people's rights take a step forward

BY HARIHAR BHATTACHARYYA

Ethnic violence has been endemic in the North East of India since before independence, but the creation of a new territorial council for one group, the Bodos, raises hope that a political settlement between India and other militant separatists could follow.

The region has been waiting for a time of peace. Early in October 2004, separatist violence returned, killing 37 people in the state of Assam and 28 in neighbouring Nagaland. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland, a secessionist group demanding a sovereign state for the Bodo people, was believed to be involved in the attack in Assam.

The North East, an area bordered by Nepal, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, is made up of seven federal units, most of which are tribal-dominated and contain many separatist groups. The recent outbreak of violence in Assam created problems for the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), an interim council for self government which was formed more than a year ago.

An interim version of the council was formed in 2003 in the presence of India's Deputy Prime Minister Mr. L. K. Advani. Some 2,600 hard-core Bodo militants surrendered their arms as part of the agreement. Mr. Hagrama Basumatary, the Chairman of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the main Bodo organization spearheading the creation of the council, took oath as its Chairman. Constitutionally guaranteed self-rule for India's aboriginal peoples is not new (see *Federations*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003), but the council is a case apart. So far, self-rule in India has been conceded to people who are a majority in the territory and for hill tribes. In this case, however, the Bodos make up only 11.5 per cent, or 1.1 million, of the population in the proposed council area. Bengalis, Assamese and others comprise the rest, and have seats reserved for them on the council.

Roots of Bodo discontent

The discontent of the Bodos is rooted in the history of neglect and marginalization in a state which they claim was their original home for centuries. The Bodos are a major tribal group and the most numerous plains tribesmen in Assam, constituting about 2 million out of Assam's total population of 22 million in 1991. The Bodos assert that they were the original and authentic settlers in Assam, and that in fact the Assamese are outsiders. At the time of India's independence in 1947, the Bodos constituted 49 per cent of the total population, but due to successive migration and

settlement of Bengalis, Assamese and other communities in their areas, they have been reduced to a small minority. The successive migration has resulted in the alienation of their land to the non-tribal settlers and the consequent loss of their relative strength and identity.

Resisting Assamization

When Assamese was declared the sole official language of Assam in 1960, the Bodos, having no indigenous written script for their own language, retaliated. They rejected the Assamese script that they had been using for their language in favour of Roman script. In 1976, after some persuasion by the central government, the Bodos gave up their demand for adopting Roman script in favour of the *Devnagari* script, in which Hindi, India's national language, is written.

The rejection of the Assamese script further widened the gap between the Assamese and Bodos. The move also fuelled Assamese fears that they would be reduced to a minority in their own state. For their part, the Bodos feared that their language and identity would be lost in an "Assamization".

A state-wide campaign to have illegal immigrants deported was begun in the 1970s by Asom Gana Parishad, the political party that is in power in the State of Assam today. Then in 1986, the All Bodo Students Union made new demands, including:

- a separate state north of the Brahmaputra valley,
- an autonomous district in the tribal areas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River, and
- the inclusion of Bodo language in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, giving official status to their language.

A period of violence

In the 1980s, the Bodo Liberation Tigers, a militant organization, started engaging in violence. Before the 1983 State Assembly elections in Assam, they massacred a large number of Assamese who also retaliated. Since the 1990s, violence led by the Bodo Liberation Tigers included blowing up trains and bridges, with resulting loss of life and property. Several thousands have died in the eighteen-



Bodo women threshing rice.

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Who are the Bodos?

Some authors claim a history of settlement in Assam by the Bodo people before 3,000 C.E., but contact with the emerging Aryan culture began in the 7th Century C.E. when the influence of Hinduism began. The Bodo language, spoken by 1,221,881 people according to the 1991 Census of India, is part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Their traditional economy is agricultural, amid the rise of other industries: Assam produces half of India's tea, half its rice, and a large part of India's oil. A rich tradition of song, dance and literature among the Bodos resulted in a cultural revival that began in the 1920s. With the increasing settlement of Indians from other areas, tensions grew and the revolts broke out in the 1980s, with on-again, off-again ceasefires. The name Bodo is actually a misnomer – the original name was "Boro" but Brian Hodgson, a British colonial official and ethnologist got it wrong in the 19th century, and the term "Bodo" has been used ever since.

year-old Bodo insurgency. During this entire period, the Bodos' demand for a homeland meant, in most cases, simply a political unit within the Indian federation. That demand has been one the government did not concede because the Bodos do not constitute a majority in the areas where they are concentrated today.

So far, two ethnic peace accords have been signed by the government and the Bodos in 1993 and 2003. These accords offer them a large measure of autonomy within Indian federalism.

The First Bodo Accord

The first accord was signed in 1993. It provided for a democratically elected Bodoland Autonomous Council in the northern valley of Brahmaputra River, which is 50 per cent or more tribal in population. The Council was given competence, under Assam State law, over the following: cottage industry, animal husbandry, forests, agriculture, public works, sericulture, adult, primary and higher secondary education, cultural affairs, co-operation, *panchayats* (village councils) and rural development, health and family welfare, irrigation, social welfare, trade and commerce, town and urban planning. A line item in the State Budget provided the finances. The council was specifically required to safeguard the religious and social practices of the Bodos, customary laws, procedures and control over ownership and transfer of land.

Failure of the Bodoland Autonomous Council

Following the Accord, the Bodoland Autonomous Council Act, 1993, was passed in the Assam Legislative Assembly. But as a result of severe opposition from various Bodo organizations, the elections to constitute the body never took place. The bone of contention was 515 additional villages that a section of the Bodos had demanded and the Government of Assam refused to include on the ground that the Bodos did not constitute more than two per cent in those villages.

A number of militant Bodo organizations including the Bodo Security Force (later renamed National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers, opposed the Accord tooth and nail but established effective control over the nominated council. A period of ethnic cleansing began in 1994 and continues into the present. In 1996 nearly

100 Santhals (another non-Bodo tribe) were killed by the Bodos in the council areas, forcing nearly 100,000 Santhals to take shelter in relief camps in Lower Assam. The goal of the extremists' agenda was to reclaim the land which had been taken away from the Bodos some 40 years ago.

The Second Bodo Accord

The post-1993 Bodoland movement turned increasingly violent, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers came to occupy the driver's seat. In 2003, the second accord was signed by the Government of India, the State of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers, on behalf of the Bodos, for an autonomous Bodo Territorial Council having more or less the same competence as the original one, but with more autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

The council was set up as a 46-member body with 40 seats elected and another 6 nominated by the Governor of Assam. A total of 30 seats were reserved for tribals, 5 for non-tribals and 5 for others. The council was set up to operate in Assam's Kokrajhor, Udalguri, Baska and Chirang districts – the last three to be created – covering 3,082 villages. Adequate safeguards were to be incorporated to ensure protection of the rights of non-tribal people, covering land and other rights in the council areas.

The future

Because the Bodos are a small minority in the council areas but will have 30 seats out of 46 in the council, the new council at first glance does not seem to be democratic. But there are rights other than pure democracy at stake: the overriding concern in the peace accords remains the protection of the endangered aboriginal community from further onslaught on their identity.

The Bodos now have their autonomous political unit for self-governance. The Bodo Territorial Council was given authorization under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution by a constitutional amendment. In December 2003, the Indian parliament protected the Bodo language by placing it under the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution with the passage of the 100th Amendment Act. These are real achievements for the Bodos. The newly formed interim council identified its priorities as a solution to long-term underdevelopment in Bodo areas: health-care, education and infrastructure. Elections to form the council were to be scheduled within six months after March 2003, when the Bodo Liberation Tigers would transform itself into a political party to contest elections. (The Tigers did disarm, and an interim council was formed in December 2003.)

But there is opposition on both sides: from the National Democratic Front of Bodoland on the one hand, and from the 18-party non-Bodo Sanmilito Jangoshtiya Sangram Samity (the united front of various peoples). The non-Bodo group claims that their community is not allowed to own land in the council areas. The central government's recent offer of talks with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland is unlikely to produce anything better than the institutional solution of the Bodo Territorial Council. The state government approved the formation of the council in principle. The local intellectuals at large tend to see the proposed council as the best hope of resolving the Bodo problem. Given that the North East is proposed as a corridor for India's trade and commerce with South East Asia, internal peace in the region is of overriding importance. (6)