

Ethnic Crisis and Insurgency: An Analysis of India’s Northeastern State, Assam

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Abstract

A land of scenic beauty and divine nature, Assam is a home to diverse ethnic folks. The complex ethnic mosaic has significantly been changing the demographic structure and a sense of resentment has developed among the tribal and non-tribal population. In order to protect their own distinct culture and identity, native people have indulged themselves in armed conflict. This article tries to examine some prominent insurgent outfit profiles, their demands and area of operation in Assam. The articles also emphasis the initiatives and peace-talks between the Centre and insurgents outfits which has led to the gradual surrender of arms and such activities by the outfits.

Keywords: ethnic crisis, insurgency, immigrants, peace-talks.

Introduction

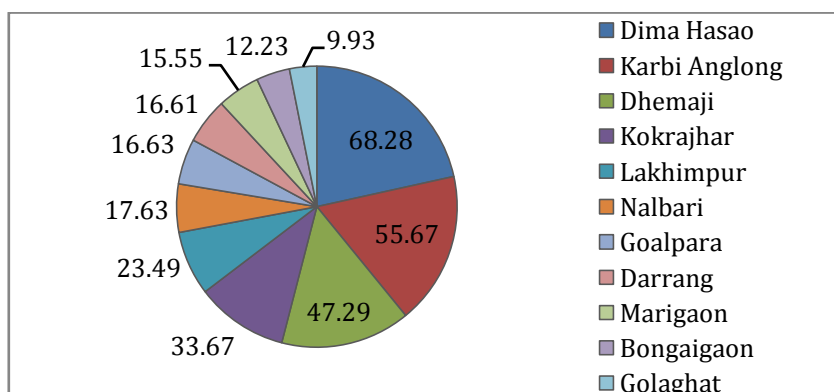
India’s North Eastern Region (NER) includes the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Sikkim. Situated at the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, Assam accounts for nearly 2.4% of the total geographical area of India. As per Census 2011, Assam provides shelter to 2.6% of India’s population and is the largest state in the Northeast India. The population of Assam is a broad racial

inter mixture of various social stocks such as Mongoloid, Indo –Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan. The region is an abode of diverse ethnic groups, each with its own distinctive individualities. Anthropological Survey of India (1985) identified 115 communities residing in Assam. There can be no doubt, without the wide contributions of the tribal; Assam would not have been so richer in its cultural life as well as in the socio-economic set-up.

Ethnic Groups In Assam

According to Glazer and Moynihan, 1975 the term “ethnicity” for the first time appeared in 1972 in a Supplement of the Oxford Dictionary. It used to analyse the socio-political demands of Veluen and Flanders in Belgium. Its meaning was an ethnic pride of the group, having a common belonging, sharing socio-cultural norms, values and institutions.

Assam is a state of heterogeneous population rich is diverse socio-cultural ethnicity. Since time immemorial, it has been living places of many races, tribes and ethnic groups. It was in between 13th and 19th century that several tribal communities came into the forefront of Assam. Ahoms, Kacharis, Chutias and Koch were the prominent tribal groups of the medieval Assam.



Assam accounts for 12.40% of the tribal population, which is much higher than that of the

India as a whole i.e. 8.20%. The tribal population of Assam can be divided into Hill Tribes and Plain

Tribes. Dima Hasao (North Cachar) district has the highest proportion of the tribal population, followed by Karbi Anglong, Dhemaji, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Nalbari, Goalpara, Darrang, Marigaon, Bongaigaona and Golaghat. 9 major tribes of Assam viz. Bodo (40.9% of the total STs Population of the state), Missing (17.80%), Karbi (10.70%), Garo (5%), Rabha 8.40%, Dimasa (3.40%), Tiwa 5.20%, Deuri (1.20%) and Sonowal Kachari (7.10%). According to the list of Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution [order, 1950(a)], there are 23 tribes (14 Hills and 9 Plains). The 14 Hill Tribes are Chakma, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Khasi and Jaintia, Lakher, Maan (Tai Speaking), Karbi, Pawi, Syntheng, any Kuki Tribes, any Mizo Tribes and Any Naga Tribes. On the other side, Barman, Bodo, Deori, Hojai, Sonowal Kachari, Tiwa or Lalung, Mech, Mising And Rabha includes the 9 Plain Tribes.

HISTORY

Theoretically, speaking, ethnic identity is the symbolic use of certain markers of culture by a community to differentiate itself from other groups or communities. The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interest is ethnicity, which is initially utilised for people's mobilisation. Subsequently, the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantages (Karna 1999b) take a violent turn and some may even have armed wings, which may eventually separate themselves from the parent body and acquire a structure of their own.

It was in the year 1978, Hiralal Patwari died, requiring a by-election in the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha Constituency to fill his seat. During the process of the election, people noticed a sudden surge in the number of registered voters. During the process of the election, observers noticed that the number of registered voters had grown drastically. All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad AASU (AAGSP) soon started protesting and demanded to postpone the by-election until the names of the illegal foreign nationals were deleted from the electoral rolls. Slowly it turned into a mass movement driven by concerns over the changing demographics, loss of land, jobs and the impact of illegal immigrants on the native people of Assam. The six yearlong

agitations ended with the signing of Assam Accord in 1985. The Accord outlines the detection and deportation of the illegal immigrants as well as the protection of the indigenous Assamese people. However, the idea of forming an underground organisation with the sole objective of 'liberating Assam' did not lie down and as a result The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was founded in 1979 around the same time as the beginning of Assam Movement. Consequently, with the fear of being culturally and politically 'swamped', resentment gradually started to build up among different ethnic groups of the region and escalated into the rise of insurgency in Assam.

INSURGENT GROUPS OF ASSAM

In recent scenario, various ethnic groups in the region have started stressing their identity based on ethnic loyalties- be culturally, linguistic or religious. The limited success or failure of the mass movements for 'autonomy', 'land', 'separate state within or outside India union' or demand for Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) statuses' have led to the rise of insurgent groups in Assam. There are numbers of armed groups operating in the region, many of which are ethnically- based. While many of the groups are seeking outright independence for their region, others are fighting to gain increased autonomy.

UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASOM (ULFA)

In April, 1979 Bhimkanta Buragohain, Rajiv Rajkonwar alias Arabinda Rajkhua, Golap Barua alia Anup Chetia, Samiran Gogoi, Bhadreswar Gohain and Paresh Baruah at the Rang Ghar in Sibsagar founded the United Liberation Front Of Asom (ULFA) to establish a "**sovereign, socialist Assam**" through an armed rebellion. Its aim was to liberate Assamese people from the shackles of Indian imperialism. ULFA put forward two arguments: Assam was not a part of India at any point of time, and Assam's rich natural resources has been exploited since British Raj without giving corresponding benefits to the people of Assam from the early 1990s; the ULFA sought shelter in the forest on the Indo-Bhutan border and had a number of camps in Bangladesh. Links were established with the then unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Karachi

Independency Army (KIA) of Myanmar for training and arms. Subsequently, ULFA also established links with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Afghan Mujahedeen. According to surrendered ULFA cadres, the ULFA terrorists had also crossed over into China via Bhutan and established contacts with the Chinese army. With a profitable narcotics business in Myanmar and Thailand, ULFA also maintains a close nexus with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT OF BODOLAND (NDFB)

An outfit named Bodo Security Force (BdsF) was formed on October 3, 1986 under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary and on 25 November 1994, with the purpose of securing a '**sovereign Bodoland**' in the area north of the river Brahmaputra, the BdsF rechristened itself as The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). The objective of the outfit was to liberate Bodoland from the Indian Expansionism and occupation; free the Bodo nation from the colonialist exploitation, oppression and domination; establish a Democratic Socialist Society to promote Liberty Equality and Fraternity and uphold the integrity and sovereign of Bodoland. Moreover, NDFB members are mostly Christians and demands to use of the Roman script instead of the current Bodo language. The NDFB acts in collaboration with the ULFA and shares close linkages with other armed outfits like Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Khalpang (NSCN-K).

THE BODO LIBERATION TIGERS FORCE (BLT)

On June 18, 1996 under the leadership of Prem Singh Brahma, the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (also known as BLT) was established. Its major objective was the creation of **a separate State of Bodoland in the north bank of Brahmaputra** and in the south bank of Brahmaputra, the creation of an autonomous district council. The outfit raised its demand regarding the inclusion of the Bodos of Karbi Anglong district in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Its areas of operation constituted Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari and Darrang districts of Assam.

UNITED PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY (UPDS)

United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) was formed in March 1999 with the merger of two insurgent groups in Karbi Anglong district: Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Karbi People's Front (KPF). The aim of UPDS is **to "purge the area off non-Karbi settler"**, including Biharis, Bengalis, and Nepalis. The Biharis, who opened the forest area of Karbi Anglong for sugarcane cultivation in the early nineteen fifties, are in majority in the Hamren sub-division. Its main area of operations is in the Karbi Anglong district, with a relatively minor presence in the North Cachar Hills district. The outfit is also known to receive active assistance from the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM) and shares linkage with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).

KARBI LONGRI NORTH CACHAR HILLS LIBERATION FRONT KARBI (KLNLF)

With the purpose of achieving '**separate state of Hemprak Kangthim (karbi homeland)**' the outfit was formed on May 16, 2004 as a breakaway faction of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). The split was triggered by the ceasefire agreement between the UPDS and Union government signed on May 23, 2002. The outfit claims to fight for the cause of the Karbi tribes. The outfit has a strong hold in the districts of Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and Nagaon. It also reportedly has links with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM).

KARBI PEOPLE'S LIBERATION TIGER (KPLT)

The Karbi People's Liberation Tiger (KPLT) was formed on 8 January 2011, by the anti-talk faction of KLNLF with the objective of **"carving out an Autonomous Karbi State (AKS) out of Assam"**. The outfit has its base in Dima Hasao district of Assam and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. The KPLT continues to remain a major agent of violence in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam until AKS is formed. The KPLT has links with the Anti-Talk faction of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB-ATF) and reportedly with National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Khalpang (NSCN-k).

KAMATAPUR LIBERATION ORGANISATION (KLO)

On December 28, 1995, certain members of the Rajbongsi community belonging to the All Kamatapur Students' Union (AKSU) established the

Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) to organise an armed struggle for a separate Kamatapur State. The objective of KLO is to **“carve out a separate Kamatapur State comprising six districts- Coach Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur and Malda of west Bengal and four contiguous districts of Assam- Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Kokrajhar”**. Reports suggest that the insurgent group is mostly active in the areas like Alipurduar (Jalpaiguri) and the Shiliguri subdivision of Darjeeling. The outfit maintains close linkages with ULFA, NDFB as well as with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM) and the Maoist insurgents of Nepal. Reports also suggest that Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) is assisting terrorist groups, including the KLO, to commit subversion along the Siliguri Corridor of West Bengal.

DIMA HALIM DAOGAH (DHD)

With the objective to create a **separate State of ‘Dimaraji’ for the Dimasa(‘ Sons Of The Great River’) tribe**, comprising Dimasa dominated area of the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and parts of Dimapur district in Nagaland, Jewel Garlossa (commander-in-chief of erstwhile Dimasa National Security Force, 1995) launched Dima Halim Daogah (DHD). It has a strong presence in the Dimasa dominated Dhansiri area of Karbi Anglong district, as well as Cachar, N C Hills, Karbi Anglong and Nagaon District of Assam. The DHD has reportedly established links with the National Socialist Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Socialist Council Of Nagaland-Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM) as well as with the Pakistan’s external intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)

BLACK WIDOW

Militant outfit Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) had a split and Black Widow was established aftermath of a coup by Pranab Nunisa, then military Chief of the DHD on June 24, 2004. The outfit declared its objective as to create **“a separate homeland, within the Constitution of India, for the Dimasa tribe comprising the Dimasa-dominated areas”**. The outfit primarily operates in the North Cachar Hills district, one of the biggest districts covering an area of 4980 sq. km. It is also active in the Cachar, Nagaon and Dhansiri area in the Karbi Anglong district. The BW outfit maintains linkages

with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muviah (NSCN-IM) by providing weaponry, training and shelter to the BW cadres in its camps.

DIMASA NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY (DNLA)

One of the newest groups to have taken up arms in Dima Hasao is the The Dimasa National Liberation Army. The group announced its formation through a press release on April 15, 2019 and claimed that it is **“ committed to revamp the national struggle and fight for the liberation of a sovereign, independent Dimasa nation”**. It stated that the organisation is for and to develop a sense of brotherhood among the Dimasa and also to rebuild the trust and faith among the Dimasa society for regaining the Dimasa Kingdom. It is also reported that the group has established a government in exile called Dimasa Peoples’ Supreme Council.

WHY THE LONG STRUGGLE?

The large-scale immigration of Bengali-speaking Muslims from the neighbouring country of Bangladesh has been a major source of tension in the region since the early 1980s. This has led to growing resentment by the Assamese people against non-locals and considers them as a threat to their identity, culture and economic well-being. Moreover, even though peace talks have taken place with some insurgent outfits but in many cases ceasefires with the insurgent outfits have not progressed beyond periodic extension of the agreements. For instance: the tripartite ceasefire agreement with the NDFB in Assam is stuck in a limbo since 2005 and has not held any single talk with the government. In addition, despite the economic development in the rest of India, there has been a limited change in the region. The groups fighting for independence accuse the Indian government of exploiting the region’s rich mineral resources, neglecting its economy and flooding the state with migrant settlers. Tadjoeeddin and Murshed (2007) through their analysis found that there exists an inverted U shaped relationship between violence and levels of education and income of a country. When income and educational levels are in transition from low to high, a country is more likely to face the risk of intrastate violence.

Proximity to the Golden Triangle acts as a booster ensuring funding for separatist/secessionist

groups. The availability and passage of arms through the porous border from the adjacent countries like Bangladesh has contributed enormously to the on-going arms struggle. In addition, most importantly, there has been limited economic development in the region despite the changes that have occurred in the rest of India. The groups fighting for independence accuses the Indian government of exploiting the region's rich mineral resources neglecting its economy and flooding the state with migrant settlers.

A NEW DAWN EMBRACING PEACE AND HARMONY

There has been a downward trend in insurgent activities in the region. The Central government has been making continuous efforts to end insurgency and violence in the region. In this regard, various dispute settlement agreements and peace accords have been signed with relevant stakeholders.

MAJOR AGREEMENTS AND PEACE NEGOTIATIONS DIMASA PEACE AGREEMENT

In the presence of the Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation Shri Amit Shah, a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement between Government of India, Government of Assam and Dimasa National Liberation Army/Dimasa Peoples' Supreme Council (DNLA/DPSC) was signed in New Delhi on 27 April 2023.

The agreement aims at completely ending the insurgency in Dima Hasao district of Assam. Under the agreement, the representatives of DNLA have agreed to give up violence, surrender all their arms and ammunition, disband their armed groups as well as vacate all occupied camps by DNLA cadres and join the mainstream. The Government of India and Government of Assam will provide a Special Development package of Rs.500 crore over a period of five years for all round development of North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) along with the Dimasa people residing in other parts of Assam.

BODO PEACE ACCORD

With a view to end the 50-year-old Bodo crisis, Bodo Peace Accord was signed on 27 January between the Ministry Of Home Affairs, Assam government and Bodo groups including the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), United Bodo Peoples' Organisation (UBPO) and all the four

fractions of the insurgent outfit –NDFB. According to the Accord, Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) the autonomous region governed by Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), will be known as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) after demarcation of the augmented territory. It states that the criminal cases registered against the members of the NDFB factions for "non-heinous" crimes shall be withdrawn by the Assam Government and its case of "heinous" crimes it will be reviewed. The Centre has undertaken a Special Development Package of Rs.1500 Crore for the development of the Bodo areas. Around 1500 cadres of NDFB (P), NDFB (RD) and NDFB (S) will be rehabilitated and assimilated in the mainstream by the Centre and Assam Government.

KARBI ANGLONG PEACE AGREEMENT

Karbi Agreement – another milestone in PM's vision of "Insurgency free prosperous North East": Shri Amit Shah (Minister of Home Affairs of India).

On 4th September 2021, the Karbi Anglong Agreement was signed in the presence of Shri Himanta Biswa Sharma, Chief Minister of Assam, Shri Sarbanananda Sonowal, Union Minister of Ports, Shipping And Waterways And Minister of Ayush, Shri Nityanad Rai, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Tuliram Ronghang, Chief Executive Member Of KAAC, Representatives of Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), Peoples Democratic Council of Karbi Longri (PDCK), United Peoples Liberation Army UPLA, Karbi Peoples Liberation Tiger (KPLT) factions along with senior officers from the union ministry of home affairs and government of Assam. With this historic agreement, over 1000-armed cadres have shunned violence and joined the mainstream society. The Union Government and Assam Government has undertaken specific projects targeting the development of Karbi areas and a Special Development package of Rs.1000Crore over five years has been initiated.

PEACE TALKS WITH ULFA

On February 5, 2011, ULFA split into two groups-one led by Arabinda Rajkhuowa, who decided to give up its violent past and sit for talks with the centre without any pre-condition and another one commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah, who decided against talks and branded itself as ULFA-

Independent. Thus, emerged two fractions of ULFA – Anti-Talks Faction of ULFA (ULFA-ATF) and pro-talks faction of ULFA (ULFA-PTF), led by Paresh Baruah and Arabinda Rajkhowa respectively.

Based somewhere near the Sino-Myanmar border, the ULFA-I continues to maintain the linkages with most other militant formations with which the undivided ULFA had established relations. On the side, ULFA-PTF is presently in talks with Government. A tripartite agreement for Suspension of operation (SoO) was signed among the Centre, Assam Government and the ULFA-PTF of September 3, 2011. The main agenda of the tripartite discussion was political rights of the Assamese indigenous people. In April 2023, 12 years after the group gave up arms, the Centre sent a draft agreement to the pro-talks faction and on 18 August 2023, peace talks between the central government, Assam government and the ULFA were held.

CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT WITH THE BODO LIBERATION TIGERS FORCE

The Bodo Liberation Tigers Force BLT was engaged in several violent acts, especially in the districts of western and northern Assam, particularly the Bodo heartland of Kokrajhar. On March 29 2000, the BLT signed ceasefire agreement heartland of Kokrajhar. On 29 March 2000, the BLT signed with the government and the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was created in February 2003 in Kokrajhar ending a decade of long. This agreement is considered as a historic record with the Centre and the Assam government that paved the way for the creation of a 46- member Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam.

PEACE NEGOTIATION WITH UNITED PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY (UPDS)

United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) entered into a cease-fire agreement with the government on May 23, 2002 and on November 25, 2011, the centre and the Assam government signed a Memorandum of Settlement with the UPDS and the outfit was formally disbanded on December 14, 2013.

CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT DIMA HALAM DAOGAH

A ceasefire agreement was signed between the Dima Haram Daogah leadership and the union government on January 1, 2003. However, the agreement has been periodically extended and on

January 1, 2004, the ceasefire was further extended for a period of one year till December 31, 2004. On September 23, 2004, a six-member DHD delegation led by chairman Dilip Nunsia met union home minister Shivraj Patil in New Delhi and submitted a memorandum demanding a separate homeland for the Dimas tribal. Unfortunately, the tardy progress of the negotiation process has disappointed the DHD leadership; Chief Dilip Nunsia on December 4 termed the delay as "intentional procrastination".

PEACE ACCORD WITH BLACK WIDOW

Immediately after the arrest of the Black Widow's leader Jewel Garlossa along with two of his associate in Bangalore on 4 June 2009, the outfit announced a unilateral ceasefire with the state government. Finally, on 2nd October nearly 360 cadres of DHD-J laid down their arms in front of the authorities in Haflong, headquarter of NC Hills district. The Jewel-Garlossa fraction of militant outfit Dima Haram Daogah (J) also known as Black Widow was officially disbanded in 2012 as part of its tripartite memorandum of settlement MoS signed with the State and the Centre. The signing of this peace accord was a historic moment for the people of Dima Hasao district.

Conclusion

Before the coming of the British, entire North Eastern Region was never linked politically with any major Indian political power. The cultural link of some plain areas with the Indie culture dates back centuries. However, when the British came in 1826 after Yandaboo Treaty, hills were preserved from the sanskritization process. Their cultural foreignness to the Indie cultural system clearly marks off the hill "tribes" from the rest of Indians. The unique ethnic-cultural identity leaves the mark of "tribal" identity in the Northeast. The people of Assam inhabit a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. They speak languages that belong to four main languages group: Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Kadai and Austroasiatic. The large number of ethnic and linguistic groups, the population composition of the peopling process in the state has led to it being called an "India in miniature". Synchronizing effort from the Centre, State, and the insurgent outfit coupled with developmental initiative towards this region

the masses. Insurgent groups operating from satellite camps have also been neutralized to a great extent. North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) convenor and Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sharma opined that effort is on to bring all the insurgent groups of the North East Region to the mainstream in the coming days. It is important for the authority in power to respond to grievances

amongst the smaller ethnic groups if they are unhappy with the federal authorities or regional power-centres. Solutions, more substantive than mere transfer of federal largesse, have to be offered concerning around comprehensive devolution of power and this has to be happen before the ethnicities turn to armed guerrilla warfare.

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