

Extremist Politics as a Catalyst to Ethnic Assertions in Northeast India: An Enquiry into Bodo Extremism

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Introduction

Ethnic assertions worldwide have assumed different forms ranging from moderate methods of articulation of autonomy to extremist means of violent struggle. Resort to extremism by some sections of an ethnic group usually triggers inter-ethnic conflicts with other groups on the one hand and leads to confrontation with the state on the other. This paper seeks to examine the dynamics of this phenomenon in the context of Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam, a State of Northeast India. The paper enquires as to whether extremist politics has met the Bodo aspirations for self-determination or has intensified the conflicts and contradictions within the Bodo society with ramifications for other ethnic groups inhabiting the Bodo-dominated areas. It is also necessary to explore the responses of the Union and State governments to Bodo extremist politics for an understanding of the conflict management process.

The paper has been divided into five sections. The first section deals with the conceptual framework in which working definitions of key concepts such as 'extremism', 'extremist politics', 'ethnic assertions' and 'conflict management' will be offered. Within this broad framework, the second section will discuss the contours of extremist politics as an instrument of Bodo ethnic assertions. The third section focuses on the conflicts that have arisen as a result of Bodo extremist politics. The fourth section examines the responses of the Union and State Governments to extremist politics and the measures undertaken by them for conflict management. The fifth and the final section will sum up the concluding observations of the paper.

Conceptual Framework

The term 'extremism' is generally used to describe the actions or ideologies of individuals or groups outside the perceived political centre of a society; or otherwise claimed to violate common standards of ethics and reciprocity. It is usually considered by those to whom it is applied to be a pejorative term. It is typically used in reference to political and social ideologies seen as irrational, counterproductive, unjustifiable or otherwise unacceptable to a civil society. The term connotes the illegitimacy of certain ideas or methods. An important point to note here is that the terms 'extremism' or 'extremist' are almost always applied by others rather than by a group labelling themselves as such. Rather than labelling themselves 'extremists', those labelled as such tend to see the need for militant ideas or actions in a particular situation. It seems that the term 'extremist' is used to describe groups and individuals who have become radicalised in some way.

It may be noted that the term 'extremist' is often used to label those who advocate or use violence against the will of the larger social body, but it is also used by some to describe those who advocate or use violence to enforce the will of a government or majority constituency. It is often seen that both ideology and methodology are combined under the single term 'extremism'.

In Sociology, several academics who are critical of extreme right wing have objected to the term 'extremist' which was popularised by centrist Sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. It appears that the act of labelling a person, a group or action as 'extremist'

is sometimes claimed to be a technique to further a political goal, especially by governments seeking to define the status-quo or by political centrists.

On the other hand, according to George and Wilcox, the 'extremist' label has been historically applied to both the extreme right and extreme left, but they claim that some academics on the left wish to change the frame of reference to one in which only the far right, but not the far left, lies outside the pale of societal acceptability.

Eric Hoffer and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. were two popular political writers during the mid-20th century who helped define societal understanding of political extremism. Hoffer wrote books about the Psychology and Sociology of those who join fanatical mass movements. Schlesinger in his writings talked about a centre of politics within which mainstream political discourse takes place and underscored the need for societies to draw definite lines regarding what falls outside of this acceptability. In this way, both Communism and Fascism were defined in the post war western democracies as extremist movements. The term was also used at times to describe groups which held views outside of the mainstream but which did not advocate militant or violent action, including the John Birch Society, the Black Muslims and the Nuclear Disarmament Movement.

An analysis of the perspectives discussed so far shows that most of these are status-quoist in the sense that their understanding of extremism revolves around a 'perceived political centre' which determines what constitutes 'extremist' by firmly demarcating the parameters of acceptability. This makes it imperative to look for a reasonably fair and impartial definition of 'extremism'.

One such definition may be attributed to Roger Scruton who considers 'extremism' as a vague term which can mean: (i) Taking a political idea to its limits, regardless of 'unfortunate' repercussions, impracticalities, arguments and feeling to the contrary, and with intention not only to confront, but also to eliminate opposition; (ii) intolerance towards all views other than one's own and (iii) adoption of means to political ends which show disregard for the life, liberty and human rights of others. Endorsing this definition as a fair one, Laird Wilcox comments that his own observation of political groups of the left and the right had shown that many people can hold very radical or unorthodox political view and still present them in a reasonable, rational and non-dogmatic manner. In contrast, he came across people whose views were shrill, uncompromising and distinctly authoritarian. Wilcox, therefore, argues that the latter demonstrated a starkly extremist mentality while the former demonstrated only ideological unorthodoxy, something which is hardly to be feared in a free society. He further observes that people who tend to adopt the extremist style most often champion causes and adopt ideologies that are essentially 'fringe' positions on the political spectrum although it provides a society the variety and vitality which are essential in a democracy. Wilcox refers to another popular definition of 'extremism' that it represents points of view we strongly disagree with, advocated by someone we dislike and whose interests are contrary to our own. He also notes with some concern that political ideologies often attempt definition of extremism which specifically condemn the view of their opponents and critics while leaving their own relatively untouched, or which are otherwise biased toward certain views, but not others. However, he rightly argues that, to be fair, a definition must be equally applicable across the entire political spectrum.

To summarise, it may be stated that extremism consists in advocating positions which may be regarded as 'fringe' or peripheral by the larger society. However, the so-called 'fringe' positions may open up the possibilities of greater debate and discussion on important issues of concern for a community. The other dimension of extremism is that it consists in total intolerance towards all views, other than one's own and is an important instrument to achieve certain political ends through means that show no concern for the life, liberty and human rights of others.

In the light of the above, this paper will look at 'extremist politics' in terms of politics that resorts to extra-constitutional means to achieve goals. This would imply rejection of the prevailing political institutions of parliamentary system of government, federal structure and judiciary as well as the basic ideological framework of the Indian Constitution. Taking such a position will mean ruling out the possibility of fulfilment of political ends within the framework of rights guaranteed in the Constitution, thereby forfeiting the legal means available for redressal of grievances and opting for violent means alone for achievement of goals.

Another key concept of the paper is 'ethnic assertions'. Such assertions become manifest when a group of people led by their dominant sections use culture to differentiate themselves from other groups. Ethnic assertions may lead to conflicts when different ethnic groups compete for valued resources and opportunities in societies undergoing rapid transformation. In a system of ethnic stratification in which one ethnic group is dominant over the other, some members from one ethnic group may attempt to move into the economic niches occupied by the rival ethnic groups and if they fail to do so, they are likely to protest against the system of ethnic stratification as a whole and attempt to mobilise members of their own ethnic group. On the other hand, the privileged group may mobilise to defend its interests and may also use ethnic sentiments in doing so. These assertions and counter-assertions lie at the core of ethnic conflicts. Paul Brass argues that the principal dangers of violent conflict arise when all routes to power in an existing system seem closed to an organised force and particularly when the possibility of changing the political arena is a real one. According to him, the existence of one of these conditions is often sufficient to be conducive to ethnic conflict. This paper views the ethnic conflicts generated by Bodo extremism in terms of a competition for resources and opportunities which has juxtaposed the dominant Assamese nationality against smaller nationalities like Bodos.

In this context, it is pertinent to attempt a conceptual understanding of conflict management. Scholars like M. Deutsch and Z. Maoz have observed that conflict management represents an attempt to reduce, limit or eliminate the level, scope and intensity of violence in a conflict situation and to build a structure where the need to resort to violence in future conflicts is controlled. Conflict management combines three elements, viz. Prevention, containment and termination. Prevention refers to a strategy which leads to the dilution of disputes so that no use of force is required and the conflict may be shelved under the carpet to be dealt with in the unspecified future. Conflict containment entails restraint in the use of force in order to deny victory to the aggressor and to prevent the spread of conflict. Finally, termination of conflict involves both settlement and resolution. Settlement means bringing violent hostilities to an end while resolution seeks to eliminate the very sources of conflict and to transform the attitude of the conflicting parties which is an understandably difficult

proposition. The paper will examine the responses of the Union and State Governments to Bodo extremism in order to comprehend the nature of conflict management within this conceptual framework.

Extremist Politics as an Instrument of Bodo Ethnic Assertions

The Bodos are the most numerous and widely spread plains tribe in northeast India. Their original home is believed to have existed somewhere between the 'Yang-Tse-Kiang' and the 'Hwang-Ho' rivers in China. It is estimated that the several hundred years ago, they had migrated to Assam, a state of northeast India. S.K. Chatterjee places them in the 'Indo-Mongoloid' group to connote "at once their Indian connection and their place within the cultural milieu in which they found themselves as well as their racial affinity".

Integral to an understanding of the dynamics of ethnic assertion of the Bodos are the two parallel and concurrent processes of nationality formation in the greater Assamese society. One is the process of Hinduisation of the various tribal communities of the region and the other is the process of tribalisation, particularly among the plains tribal communities of Western Assam because of its remoteness from the mainstream Assamese Society and culture. This phenomenon indicates that the emergence of a homogeneous Assamese national identity inclusive of both Hindus and tribals was a distant possibility, in view of an emerging identity consciousness among the tribal communities. Moreover, the underdeveloped colonial economy offered limited opportunities for the middle classes emerging within various ethnic groups, both Assamese Hindus as well as tribals, particularly Bodos. This resulted in a competition for resources and opportunities, thereby sharpening the cleavages between the tribals and Hindus within the Assamese Society.

In the beginning of the 20th century, identity consciousness of the Bodos found expression through a religious reform movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma in 1920 which transcended the domain of religion and extended itself into the realms of society, polity and economy. The impact of this 'renaissance' on the sphere of education facilitated the entry of many Bodo Youths into the colonial job market, thereby triggering the advent of a middle class among the Bodos. The aspirations and interests of this class were articulated by the Tribal League which was formed in 1932. However, the League played no role in mobilising the masses on issues of poverty and socio-economic backwardness and was eventually disbanded after India's independence. During 1952-1967, the premier literary organisation of the Bodos, i.e. the Bodo *Sahitya Sabha*, was instrumental in the assertion of Bodo identity and the issues of language and script were integral to such assertion. In 1967, a new phase in Bodo politics began with the formation of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). It raised the demand for a centrally administered territory for all the plains tribes of Assam, thereby taking the initiative to construct a pan-tribal identity. However, deviation from its declared goals and principles led to the exit of the PTCA from the centre stage of the autonomy movement and paved the way for a violent phase of identity politics centred on the demand for a separate Bodoland State spearheaded by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). A parallel development during this period was the articulation of the demand for sovereignty by an underground militant outfit called the Bodo Security Force (BdSF). Meanwhile, the Bodo Accord was signed in February 1993, paving the way for the formation of the Bodo Autonomous Council

(BAC). However, an intense struggle for power and internal squabbling among the Bodo leadership for primacy within the BAC reduced the Bodo Accord to a political force.

It appears that a section of the Bodo educated youth was getting thoroughly disillusioned with constitutional safeguards like autonomy arrangements and resorted to a secessionist struggle by floating extremist outfits which has not only radically transformed the character and substance of the Bodo Movement from autonomy to secession in terms of goal, but also the methods of achieving it, by showing preference for extortion, murder, kidnappings and ambushes over strikes, road blockades etc. This shows a departure from mass movement to armed struggle. Two significant dimensions of Bodo extremism are: firstly, rapport between the pro-sovereignty groups and other major underground militant outfits of the North East like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN); secondly, the alleged moves by the government of Assam to encourage the floating of new militant groups to counter the influence of existing ones.

For an understanding of the nature of Bodo extremism, it is pertinent to examine the aims and objectives of the BdSF which was rechristened as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in 1994. According to its Constitution, the NDFB pledges (i) to liberate Bodoland from the Indian Expansionism and Occupation; (ii) to free the Bodo nation from Exploitation, Oppression and Domination; (iii) to establish a Democratic Socialist Society, promote Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and (iv) to uphold the Integrity and Sovereignty of Bodoland. So, the creation of a Sovereign Bodoland is the core issue for the NDFB. It argues that it was the British and not India who invaded and conquered the Bodo Kingdom and therefore, Bodos have the right to freedom after the British left India. In view of this argument, the NDFB is ideologically committed to a Sovereign Bodoland and not an autonomous Bodoland within the Indian Union. Since the question of sovereignty is not negotiable within the framework of the Constitution of India, the NDFB has resorted to extra-constitutional/extremist methods in pursuit of its goal of independence. Thus, the current phase of Bodo ethnic assertions is marked by extremist politics as outfits like NDFB exercise the right to self-determination in their quest for an alternative political space.

Conflicts Emanating From Bodo Extremists Politics

The aims and objectives mentioned in the Constitution of the NDFB clearly demonstrate the radical, secessionist agenda of this outfit. It appears that the NDFB has been carrying out three categories of activities, i.e. (i) Violence against the establishment; (ii) Violence against non-Bodo communities – ethnic cleansing and (iii) Violence against the rival groups- fratricidal clashes.

The NDFB was on a violent trajectory from 1993 onwards and indulged in activities like abduction, killing of civil and military officials, snatching of arms and ammunition and so on. It is alleged that extremist outfits like NDFB and Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF is believed to have been floated by the Government of Assam to counter the influence of other militant outfits) were involved in the ethnic cleansing operations in Barpeta in 1994, around Kokrajhar and Gosaigaon in 1996 and near Barama in the Nalbari district in 1997 and 1998. It appears that such

operations were prompted by the desire to turn these areas into Bodo-dominated ones in terms of demography and influence, by compelling the people of other ethnic groups to leave areas which came under the proposed Bodoland. This is in response to the contention that the territory claimed for Bodoland comprises many such areas where Bodos do not enjoy a majority. This has led to the displacement of huge populations belonging to other communities.

Another ramification of extremist politics has been the fratricidal clashes among different Bodo factions. In 1996, two rival groups, viz. NDFB and BLTF launched operations to annihilate each other. In 1996, three suspected NDFB cadres killed the All Bodo Students' Union President Swamla Basumatari and injured his wife at his residence at Kokrajhar. In August 2000, Bineswar Brahma, the President of Bodo *Sahitya Sabha* (Literary Association) was murdered by suspected NDFB cadres. The NDFB was in favour of the Roman Script and was unhappy with Brahma for adopting *Devanagari* Script for Bodo language. Thus, the NDFB is not only killing other communities but also killing Bodos due to mutual distrust and rivalry.

It is evident from the above that violent, extremist methods are being used by the NDFB and other extremist factions as effective weapons against the establishment, non-Bodo communities as well as rival Bodo groups for fulfilment of their extra-Constitutional objectives.

Government Response to Bodo Extremism

The Government of India has responded to Bodo assertions for self-determination in a number of ways. The first response was in the form of signing the bi-partite Bodo Accord of February 20, 1993, which resulted in the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). But severe infighting among the Bodo factions and their leadership made it impossible to achieve stability within the BAC. After the failure of the BAC Accord, the Assam Government, the Union Government and the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) signed the Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in New Delhi on February 10, 2003. After the return of the BLTF into the national mainstream, the Government of India made a ceasefire agreement with the NDFB which was signed on May 24, 2005. This agreement was to come into force from June 1, 2005. Meanwhile, a split in the NDFB brought a new dimension to Bodo extremist politics. In 2008, NDFB had split into two factions, viz. the anti-talks faction led by Ranjan Daimary and the pro-talks faction led by Govinda Basumatary. The pro-talks faction partially accepted the Constitutional norms and took shelter at designated camps, but the anti-talk faction declined to obey the ground rules of the ceasefire agreement. The founder President of NDFB, Ranjan Daimary, was arrested in Bangladesh on 2nd may 2010. Following his arrest, the sentiments of a section of the Bodos were hurt as the State Government declined to give him the status of a political prisoner. In April 2013, Daimary was released on bail for negotiation and in November, 2013, the Union Government signed a tripartite suspension of operation agreement with the Daimary faction of the NDFB¹. The Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, has also set up a Committee headed by a former Home Secretary G.K. Pillai to look into the demands of a separate Bodoland State to be carved out of Assam. Meanwhile, suspected Bodo extremists

belonging to NDFB's anti-talk Songbijit group have indulged in a series of attacks on civilians including migrants and police officials even as the Government of Assam is yet to rehabilitate over 1300 families which were affected during the ethnic clashes in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) in 2012. It may be observed that both the Union and State Government have only sought to contain the conflicts arising out of Bodo extremism rather than eliminate the very sources of the conflict.

Concluding Observations

In the context of the above discussion, the role of the Indian State assumes a lot of significance. It appears that the mainstream ruling elite has taken an intolerant stance towards legitimate aspirations for autonomy voiced by smaller nationalities like the Bodos. This is because the ruling elite views India as one nation and perceives the concept of the State as inseparable from that of the nation. Refusal to recognise small communities as nationalities breeds discontent among these communities inciting some aggressive sections to propagate anti-Indian ideas. Recent trends in northeast India show that extremist factions of aggrieved communities like Bodos and Nagas have become thoroughly disenchanted with the existing arrangements and are seeking to explore new political frontiers beyond India. The dynamics of Bodo identity assertion reveal that the Bodo leadership was initially clamouring for territorial autonomy in the form of a state for all plains tribes of Assam. This was followed by the demand for a separate State of Bodoland. Both the demands met with a negative response from the Indian State. The autonomy accords which were signed in 1993 and 2003 were desperate attempts at conflict management. By then, a section of the Bodo youth had already embarked on a trajectory of extremist politics since prospects of democratic and Constitutional options seemed bleak as far as fulfilment of their goals for self-determination was concerned. Insensitivity to concerns of smaller communities for preservation of their identity, failure to protect the interests of minority communities in areas dominated by aggrieved tribal communities, inadequate measures for rehabilitation of victims of extremist violence – all these reflect the inept handling of the conflict management mechanism by the Indian State. Unless this trend is reversed, warns a political analyst, there may be an acute crisis in the Indian political community. It may, therefore, be argued that in order to dilute the appeal of extremist politics as a catalyst to identity assertions in northeast India, the Indian State needs to appreciate nationality aspirations within a framework of mutual understanding and trust and respect for other groups inhabiting the 'perceived' homeland of these nationalities.

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