

Women and Armed Conflict in Assam

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Abstract

Situated in the north-eastern part of India, Assam has a long history of armed conflict. The conflict has caused loss of life, insecurities among communities and halted economic development in the conflict region. The western part of Assam has witnessed multiple ethnic conflicts and armed conflict in the ethnically divided society. At present, a large chunk of area falls under the autonomous council (under 6th schedule) of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The area under the administration of BTC is called Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), erstwhile known as Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), constituting four districts, namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The region, though remained relatively peaceful in the post- BTC Accord signed in 2003, the presence of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), formerly known as Bodo Security Force, and the counter-insurgency measures of the security forces has immensely affected the people in the conflict zones. Women and children are arguably the most affected section of the society and face multiple challenges during conflict. The women, in particular, face vulnerabilities like sexual abuse, atrocities, and rape as a combat tool. Under such circumstances women undergoes physical, emotional and psychological trauma, and social ostracism. The paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the impact of armed conflict on Bodo women in the post BTC-Accord period.

Keywords: *Women, Conflict, Security, Militant outfit, Autonomous Council, counter-Insurgency.*

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I. Introduction

The state of Assam is a home to different communities with cultural, religion and linguistic diversity. The Bodos are the largest plains tribe in Assam. The Bodos have distinct language, religion, culture and identity. They mostly inhabit in the western part of Assam which, at present, comprises the part of the Bodoland Territorial Region, erstwhile known as Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). It originally comprises of four districts, namely: Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri and covers total area of 8970 sq.km with population of 31, 55, 359. The fourth district of Tamulpur was created by carving out Baksa district in 2022. The area is also inhabited by other communities like ethnic Assamese, Bengalis, Koch-Rajbongshis, Rabhas, Garos, Bengali speaking Muslims, Adivasis, etc.

Background of the formation Bodoland Territorial Council

In early 1970's, the Bodos demanded for autonomous council to liberate from underdevelopment, exploitation, oppression (Hussain.1987: 1332) and to protect and preserve the identity, culture and language. The movement for the autonomy has undergone different stages under different leadership. The Bodo leadership floated political party called Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967. Since its formation, the party demanded for the union territory called *Udayachal* for Bodos and other 'plains tribes' of the Brahmaputra valley. The movement for *Udayachal* was followed by the script movement. The script movement was led by Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) with the support of PTCA and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). The script movement compelled the state government to grant Bodo language the status of an associate language.

Formed in 1967 the All Bodo Student Union supported PTCA and BSS in the struggle for greater autonomy and to protect the culture, identity and language of the Bodos. However, the PTCA could not fulfill the aspiration of the Bodos and the split of PTCA into two factions further weakened the party. ABSU and the United Tribal Nationalists' Liberation Front (UTNLF), the splinter group of PTCA, under the leadership of Binai Khunger Basumatary worked together and at times accused the PTCA members for sacrificing the interest of the Bodos. It was in this juncture that the ABSU under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma mobilized the Bodo people for mass movement in the late 1980's. It launched mass movement on 2nd March 1987 demanding 92 charter points. Later, ABSU demanded for full-fledged statehood. After a series of meetings and negotiations between the Assam government and the leaders of ABSU, Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) as well as the Government of India signed the Memorandum of Settlement (Bodo Accord). Thus, the Bodoland Autonomous Council came into existence on 20 February 1993. The Accord, however, collapsed and no real

progress was made on the ground. The failure of the Accord has been attributed to various reasons which ultimately reignited the movement for Bodoland.

In the meantime, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), formed in 1996 with an aim to create separate statehood within the Indian constitutional framework, declared ceasefire in 1999. The outfit negotiated ceasefire agreement with the Government of India that was signed in 2000. Under this agreement the outfit was assured to grant arrangement under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. With the signing of the memorandum of settlement (MoS) between the leaders of BLT, Government of India and the government of Assam on 10th Feb, 2003, the Bodoland Territorial Council was created under sixth schedule of India.

In 2020, fourth Bodo Accord was signed in New Delhi on 27th January 2020. It was signed between the Government of India and Assam government and the Bodo leaders of ABSU, the United Bodo People's Organisation (UBPO) and the four factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland. The tripartite accord represents a new model that 'reduces the dependence of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) constituted under the sixth schedule, on the state government for funds, provides scope for expansion of the territory, and empowers the BTC to have a say in the appointment of Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police although the Home and Police departments will continue to be with the state government.'

Armed conflict and violence in the BTC

The region within the ambit of BTC is marred with violence, ethnic clash and armed conflict. The armed conflict includes the conflict between state and ethnic groups, the state and the insurgent groups, as well as inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflict. One particular ethnic conflict may reflect one, two or all these three kinds of conflict simultaneously (Manirul Hussain & Pradip Phanjoubam, A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur, 2007) Prior to the creation of BTC, the region has witnessed violence due to the activities of militant groups and the prolonged movement for separate statehood and ethnic clash.

The ABSU led Bodoland movement in the western of Brahmaputra valley can be characterized both violent and peaceful. Initially, the movement was peaceful mostly adhering to peaceful march and protest, blocking roads and railways, and sometimes calling bandh. However, in the later stage the movement became violent. The friction and clash between the supporters of ABSU-PTCA also emerged that reached a point of no return. The clash between the two organizations resulted in misunderstanding, division in the Bodo society and also loss of life.

In the meantime, the activities of the two militant organizations namely National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), formerly known as Bodo Security Force (BSF) and BLT also increased in the Bodo inhabited areas. These two outfits engaged in bitter fighting with the armed forces. Formed with different ideology, the two outfits also engaged in fratricidal killing, thus bringing untold miseries to the Bodo society and as a whole. The incidents of killings, kidnap, extortion, etc escalated in the region fuelling fear among different communities in the conflict area.

With the signing of MoS, between BLT and Indian Government and Assam Government to create an Autonomous self governing body known as BTC, BLT was dismantled in 2003. However, NDFB continued with the secessionist movement. NDFB split in two groups in 2005 with Ranjan Daimary faction came over-ground to negotiate peace talk with the Government of India. It is estimated that from 1992 to 2013 the number of insurgency related deaths amounts to 7779 out of which 4052 civilians, 815 security forces and 2912 militants. The partial data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in 2016 recorded a total of 86 fatalities that includes 33 civilians, 4 security force and 49 militants whereas in 2015, a total of 59 deaths were recorded out of which 10 were civilians, one security force and 48 militants. The role of NDFB in 2008 ethnic conflict has come under scanner. Apart from the migrants who were suspected of starting the clash, NDFB outfit was accused also of involvement in the ethnic conflict in Udalguri.

Women, security and impact of armed conflict

As discussed above, the area under the BTC, has been marred with violence and armed conflict. The conflict has caused immense physical and psychological toll on the common people. Here, security shall be understood from the non-traditional security perspective, i.e. security from non-traditional threats that includes personal security, economic disparities, political repression, poverty, unemployment, etc. In armed conflict, it is arguably the women and children that suffers most, though men also faces threats in conflict as such. There are several security threats that women face in such conflicts. It is usually the woman that becomes the pawn and target of oppression and repression, thus becoming the victims of abuse and neglect, trafficking, sexual harassment, etc. Such violence or threats may come from state, insurgents, individuals, gangs, etc.

The armed conflict areas are highly militarized zone with presence of security forces and militant outfits. The operation carried out by the armed forces includes use of force, barging in people's houses forcefully, assaulting physically, etc. In such operations, there are incidents where female members of a family are being physically assaulted. In many cases, security personal are accused or held responsible for committing

sexual violence against women and other human rights violation. According to the report prepared by National Campaign Against Torture (NCAT), Assam has recorded 21 cases of sexual violence in the last 20 years. In the post-BTC, the first case of sexual violence was reported (in 2004) in Kokrajhar district where five Bodo women were allegedly raped the army. Such activities of the armed forces have infused fear among women and common people in general.

Another impact of the armed conflict is the conflict induced displacement. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of families. Displacement occurs in two ways: families, especially well to do family in rural areas, migrates to the nearby urban areas to escape the conflict. On the other hand, the poor families while migrating to other locations (sometimes to kass land or to forestland) had to face hardship as they have to start all over with the limited resource. The case of Bhuroar Balabari village can be cited here, the village came into existence in 2000 and most of families settled were the displaced population from 1996-98 Bodo-Adivasi ethnic conflict. The multiple ethnic clashes in the region have also resulted in the displacement. The ethnic conflict in 2008 claimed 64 lives and displaced over two lakh people while 56 lives were claimed and over four lakh people were displaced in 2012. People had to be sheltered temporarily in the relief camps. In such camps, women face multiple discriminations and living in such camps for long periods with little or no financial support from the government, they become vulnerable particularly to human trafficking.

Women also suffer emotional and psychological trauma and economic hardship due to the armed conflict. They play different role in the society as mother, wife, sister daughter, daughter-in-law, etc. The armed conflict has a vicious cycle of impact on women. As stated above, the violence during the Bodoland movement and the fratricidal killing among the rebel groups resulted in the loss of life and property. The women in the Bodo society who lost their loved ones and witnessed torture and violence has suffered long-term emotional trauma. For some family, the loss of male family member means the loss of source of livelihood. Women, thus, have to bear the economic hardship to look after children and family.

II. Conclusion

Women are one of the most affected groups by the recurrent armed conflict and ethnic clashes in BTR. The discussion in the paper has shown that armed conflict has immense impact on women in the society. Being one of the most vulnerable sections of the society, women undergoes trauma, physical assault, violence, loss of loved ones and bears the burden of the family and children, etc during conflict. Such conflicts has also fuelled economic insecurity, increased levels of crime, weakened the rule of law which directly impacts and blocks participation of women at all levels in the social, economic and political sphere and also increases the risk of violence against women.

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