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M. Amarjeet Singh

# NIAS

## CONFLICTS IN ASSAM



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

Bangalore, India

# BACKGROUNDERS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Series editor: Narendar Pani

This series of backgrounders hopes to provide accessible and authentic overviews of specific conflicts that affect India, or have the potential to do so. It is a part of a larger effort by the Conflict Resolution Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, to develop an inclusive knowledge base that would help effectively address major conflicts of interest to the country. In pursuit of this objective it carries out research that could help throw up fresh perspectives on conflict even as it develops mechanisms to increase awareness about the nature of specific crises. The backgrounders form an important part of the second exercise.

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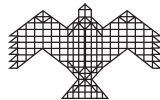
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Backgrounders on Conflict

# CONFLICTS IN ASSAM

M. Amarjeet Singh



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Conflict Resolution Programme  
Bangalore, India

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

BdSF	Bodo Security Force
BLT	Bodo Liberation Tigers
BVF	Bodo Volunteer Force
DHD	Dima Halim Daogah
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
KIA	Kachin Independent Army
KLNLF	Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front
KRA	Kuki Revolutionary Army
MULTA	Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NSCN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UPDS	United People's Democratic Solidarity

# EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

Assam, which is the most populous state in North East India, has been facing a number of movements aiming to achieve a variety of objectives having both ethnic and territorial focus. While some of these issues were partially resolved through the intervention of the Central government, several others remain unresolved. The unresolved conflicts have resulted in a series of flashpoints. In February 1983, ethnic riots took place in and around the village of Nellie killing over 1500 Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin. As many as 14 senior government officials, including a Russian coalmine expert, were abducted by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) from different parts of the state on July 1, 1991. The Russian coalmine expert and two other officials were subsequently killed. The others were released one after another in exchange for several jailed ULFA rebels. Thirty-four train passengers were killed in a powerful bomb explosion in a Delhi-bound train in

Kokrajhar district on December 30, 1996. Sanjoy Ghosh, a known social worker, was abducted and later killed by ULFA in 1997. In 2003, the Bhutanese government launched an operation to flush out Indian armed groups operating on its soil in which a large number of rebels were either arrested or killed. More than 100 people were killed in the violent Kuki-Karbi conflict in Karbi Anglong district during 2003 and 2004. Sixteen children were killed in a bomb explosion at the venue of the Independence Day celebrations at Dhemaji on August 15, 2004. Nine near-simultaneous bomb explosions on October 30, 2008 claimed nearly 90 lives and wounded more than 300 others.

## THE ISSUES

Conflicts in Assam are related in one form or the other to the issues of immigration, use of and competition over the control of natural resources, and the subsequent polarisation of its society and polity.

- 
- The author is an Assistant Professor in the Conflict Resolution Programme at National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore.
  - The paper has benefited from the comments by M S Prabhakara and T Khurshchev Singh. None of them, of course, are responsible for the views presented here.

## 1. Immigration

Over the years, one of the biggest concerns for Assam has been unauthorised immigration from Bangladesh and the resultant fears of a profound demographic transformation of the state. Most of the conflicts in the state are related to the complexities of unauthorised immigration. This issue is debated not just between Bangladesh and India; but also within Assam. The unwillingness of Bangladesh to recognise Assam's concerns generated tensions along the borders on numerous occasions. Bangladesh has never acknowledged the presence of its citizens in Assam or in other parts of India. It even accused India of evicting 'Bengali-speaking Muslims' by branding them as 'Bangladeshis'. Estimates of the number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam alone vary from four million to 10 million. In the absence of reliable data, the demographic impact of immigration remains a highly controversial issue. It led to an anti-foreigner agitation, popularly known as the Assam Agitation, between 1978 and 1985, demanding the detection of all foreigners, their deletion from the voters' list, and their deportation. The agitators demanded the use of the National Register of Citizens, 1951 to determine the citizenship of all those living in the state. The agitation finally

concluded following the signing of the Assam Accord between the Central government and the leaders of the agitation in 1985. The accord promised to identify and deport all foreigners who came after March 1971 and to disenfranchise those who came between January 1966 and March 1971. However, the promises remained largely unfulfilled. Immigration has now become major electoral issue. In the meantime, nativist-vigilante groups also periodically launch campaigns against the alleged immigrants. Such campaigns have led to mistrust between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as there are practical difficulties in determining who is a foreigner and who is not. Most armed groups operating in Assam are equally resentful of the immigration. Although ULFA is silent on unauthorised immigration, the silence is more of a tactical move since Army operations have forced most of its leaders to reside in Bangladesh.

## 2. Natural resources and sons of the soil

Assam is one of the single largest producers of natural gas, oil, tea, plywood and other forest products in the country. There is a general perception that these resources are used to benefit people outside the state more than those in it;

that the industries based on its natural resources are located outside; and Assam is becoming a market for the finished goods. There was widespread opposition to the setting up of an oil refinery in Barauni in Bihar to refine crude oil extracted from the state. Despite a mass agitation, the Central government built the refinery in Barauni. It was after several further agitations that a refinery was set up near Guwahati and later another one at Numaligarh. Likewise, most tea gardens are owned by the 'non-locals' and the main offices of major tea companies are located outside the state. In addition, there is a feeling that the profit from tea plantations is several times more than the total revenue received by the state. Similar allegations prevail in the case of oil. Further, trade and business is also controlled by 'non-locals'. The economic pressures underlying this perceived discrimination are accentuated by the fact that Assam's economic growth lags behind that of several other states of the country. There has thus been a demand by organisations such as the All Assam Students' Union for preferential policies for the 'sons of the soil', especially in areas of education and employment, that aim to rid the state of 'ethnic outsiders'.

### **3. Ethnic polarisation and assertiveness**

Along with the existence of the feeling

of alienation towards the Indian national mainstream, there also exists ethnic polarisation and assertiveness within the state. The non-Assamese communities, both tribal and non-tribal, have started questioning the alleged domineering attitude of the Assamese population. Earlier several hill areas were detached from Assam to facilitate the creation of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Now, the Bodos, a major tribe, often accuse the Assamese of imposing their language and culture on the tribals which they term as a 'conspiracy' to assimilate them. The Bodos also disapproved Clause 6 of the Assam Accord which promised to safeguard the cultural identity of the 'Assamese people' as they fear the clause might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture. Several tribal groups, one after another, have been demanding the creation of their own state to be carved out of the existing Assam. Such grievances also led to the emergence of a large number of smaller armed groups. The competing claims over land and territory by rival armed groups led to the outbreak of several ethnic clashes, the latest one being the Dimasas-Zeme Naga conflict. The movements for separate states that were not considered feasible have been partially resolved by establishing several tribal councils. But these policy measures have not stopped

the desire for more autonomy. After the anti-foreigner agitation, the Bodos started an intense agitation for a separate Bodoland state. That agitation concluded in 1993 following an agreement with the state government, resulting in the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council with a view to provide maximum autonomy to fulfill the economic, educational, and linguistic aspirations of the Bodos and other plains tribes. However, the inability to draw an acceptable territorial boundary for this council led to the revival of another phase of the statehood movement. This gave birth to a separate brand of conflict led by the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). Following the Central government's intervention, the BLT agreed to give up the statehood demand in return for a politico-administrative arrangement for autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Finally, in 2003, the Bodoland Territorial Council was constituted. So far nine tribal councils have been established in response to tribal demands for more political autonomy. The existence of these councils, however, does not guarantee the resolution of tribal problems. Indeed, it has only aggravated their posturing for more autonomy. As expected, the Bodoland Territorial Council has officially adopted in February 2010 a resolution demanding a separate state for the Bodos in Assam.

## CONFLICT AND INSTITUTIONS

The conflicts in Assam have not only weakened the institutions of democratic governance, but have also created new institutions. Some of these institutions are socio-political while others are economic. The socio-political institutions include armed groups such as ULFA, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). They have laid down a set of rules and have the power to enforce them in selected areas. The economic institution that has been created by the conflicts is the taxation mechanism put in place by these groups. They solicit 'revolutionary taxes' or 'voluntary contributions' from salaried class, businessmen, political class and contractors. This constitutes a major source of their funds. A further chunk of their income is generated from government sources. Usually, they interfere in the award of development contracts as well as at the time of the execution of those projects. Some of these contracts have been known to be awarded to their loyalists from whom they share the profits.

## OPTIONS

The official response to the conflicts in Assam has been a mix of the use of force, the promise of accelerated development, and the Central

government-initiated peace talks with armed groups. As a result, a large number of security personnel are deployed there. Enormous public resources are being spent to put Assam's economic development on a fast track. Besides, the Central government also follows the policy of engaging in peace talks with the armed groups that agree to resolve their grievances. However, all these efforts are only partially successful. The use of force has only temporarily weakened the activities of armed groups. The promise for accelerated development does not guarantee any significant change on the ground. Peace talks too have not been all that successful, except for the one with the BLT. In 2005, ULFA constituted an 11-member People's Consultative Group to prepare the ground for formal peace talks with the government. Unfortunately, it pulled out of the peace process in September 2006 following serious differences with the government. ULFA is insisting on the discussion of the 'sovereignty of Assam' as one of the pre-conditions for talks with the government.

There are other options that have not received attention they deserve. Civil society in the state has been consistently sidelined by the parties in the conflict. In

view of the prolonged crisis where the parties have not been able to arrive at a meaningful resolution of the conflict, it is extremely important for the government to encourage civil society to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between the parties. Efforts must be made to reopen consultations with the People's Consultative Group. The option of providing temporary 'safe passage' to members of the armed groups on the occasion of major festivals could be explored so as to enable them to freely visit their families and relatives. Tribal development must be given due importance for which the successful working of the tribal councils must be ensured. Periodic evaluation of the performance of the tribal councils is important as their failure is bound to bring new brands of conflict. Assam being a multi-ethnic society, solutions based primarily on ethnic or tribal considerations often fail. It may be appropriate to think and advocate solutions on multi-ethnic considerations. Finally, apart from tightening border security and proper border management, a political consensus is required on immigration. Good friendly relationships with neighbouring countries will help restore normalcy in this region.

# CONFLICTS IN ASSAM

## FLASHPOINTS

The many conflicts in Assam have resulted in 7366 people (3917 civilians, 780 security personnel, and 2669 armed combatants) losing their lives in conflict-related incidents between 1992 and 2009.<sup>1</sup> The conflicts have had a series of flashpoints that have gained national, if not global attention.

### **Nellie massacre of 1983**

The massacre at Nellie occurred during the anti-foreigner agitation. Officially, 1819 people, mostly Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin, were killed in an attack organised by rival communities in and around Nellie village on February 18, 1983. The victims had participated in the state elections of 1983 defying a poll boycott. The boycott was called by those demanding the holding of the election on the basis of a revised voters' list.

### **Abduction of 14 high-ranking officials in 1991**

Fourteen high-ranking officials,

including a Russian coalmine expert Sergei Gritchenko, two senior bureaucrats, and eight Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) officers/engineers, were abducted by ULFA from different parts of the state on July 1, 1991. The Russian coalmine expert and two ONGC engineers were subsequently killed. The others were released one after another in exchange for the release of several jailed ULFA rebels. Following this incident, the Army-led counter-insurgency strike, *Operation Rhino*, was launched against ULFA.

### **Bomb explosion in a train in 1996**

Thirty-four train passengers were killed and several others wounded in a powerful bomb explosion in the Delhi-bound Brahmaputra Mail Express at Sesapani in Kokrajhar district on December 30, 1996.

### **Abduction and killing of Sanjoy Ghosh in 1997**

Sanjoy Ghosh, a known social worker

<sup>1</sup> *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, New Delhi.

who worked with the people of Majuli, a river-island, in Jorhat district, was abducted and later killed in 1997. The killing was believed to be related to his exposing widespread corruption in Majuli. ULFA, on the other hand, charged him with being an agent of India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

### **Operation All Clear in 2003**

In 2003, Bhutan launched a military strike, *Operation All Clear*, against Indian militant groups, such as ULFA and NDFB, operating in its territory. The Royal Bhutan Army-led operation centered on the southern part of that country, bordering Assam, where rebel camps were located. More than 30 rebel camps were reported destroyed, and a large number of rebels were either arrested or killed. All those arrested were subsequently handed over to India. Thereafter, several hundreds of rebels mostly belonging to ULFA and NDFB surrendered before the government in Assam.

### **Kuki-Karbi conflict of 2003-04**

Among the several bloody inter-tribal conflicts in Assam was the Kuki-Karbi conflict that occurred during 2003 and 2004 in Karbi Anglong district. More than 100 people were reported killed in

retaliatory violence that involved burning down of several villages in that district. Several thousands of families were either temporarily or permanently displaced.

### **Bomb blast during Independence Day celebrations in 2004**

Sixteen school-going children were killed on the spot and more than 50 others wounded in a powerful bomb blast at Dhemaji town on August 15, 2004. The blast took place when the children gathered at the lawn of a local college for Independence Day celebrations. The blast was said to be carried out by ULFA for defying its call for the boycott of Independence Day celebrations.

### **Bomb explosions in October 2008**

Nine near-simultaneous bomb explosions (three each in Guwahati and Kokrajhar, two at Barpeta Road, and one at Bongaigaon) on October 30, 2008, claimed nearly 90 civilian lives and wounded more than 300 others. Nearly 80 kilograms of RDX were reportedly used in the three blasts at Guwahati. Such large quantities of RDX had never been used to carry out any explosions before. This was one of the worst-ever terror attacks in the state, and was suspected to have been the handiwork of the NDFB-ULFA combine.

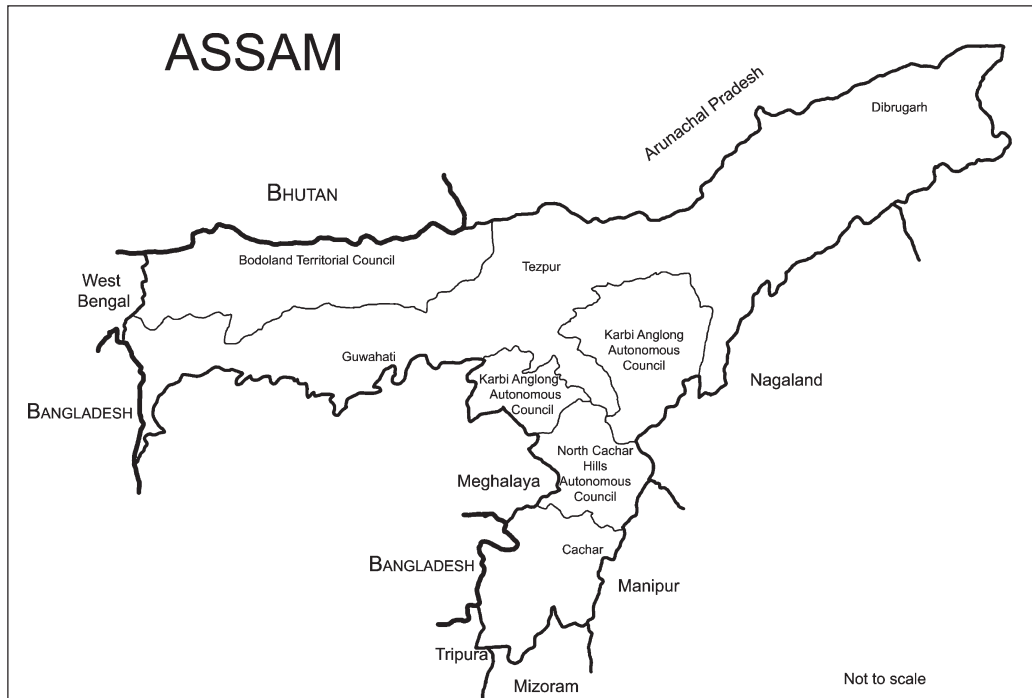
# TERRAIN

Assam is a meeting ground of diverse cultural groups such as the Mongoloid, the Indo-Burmese, the Indo-Iranian, and the Aryan. Before the advent of the Ahoms, Assam was ruled by various dynasties such as Plas, Koches, Kacharis, and Chutiyas. The Ahoms, who were said to be a Mongolian tribe from Thailand, invaded upper Assam in 1236 A.D. despite some resistance from the Kacharis and the Chutias. Ahom rule continued for nearly six hundred years till 1826 A.D. It was after the Ahoms that the land was named 'Asom', Assam being its anglicised form.

The Mughals made several unsuccessful attempts to conquer the Ahom kingdom. When Ahom power started to decline, the Burmese invaded Assam in 1818. In 1826, the British intervened. Assam came under British India after the *Treaty of Yandaboo* between the Burmese and the British in 1826. The area was politically incorporated into a 'pan-Indian imperial formation'. The British started tea plantations, coal mining, established sawmills, and explored oil. Rail lines were also constructed to transport these products.

The gradual expansion of these activities attracted large-scale immigration.

In 1838, Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency. In 1874, a separate province of Assam was created with its capital in Shillong. In 1905, a new province, East Bengal and Assam, was created. In 1912, this was reverted to the old province of Assam and remained so until 1947. In 1937, self-governing power was given to Assam. Saiyid Muhammad Saadulla became the first chief minister. After 1947, Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan. When the Constitution of India was adopted Assam became a state. At that time, except for Manipur and Tripura, the whole of the North East region was administratively attached to Assam. Over the years, Assam has been bifurcated to facilitate the creation of several small states. The Naga Hills district along with Tuensang hill district was reorganised to form Nagaland in 1963. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills became Meghalaya in 1972. In 1972, the Mizo Hills and the North East Frontier Agency were made union territories and the latter became full-fledged states of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987.



Assam, a land of the hills, valleys, and rivers, serves as the gateway to the states of the North East region of India. It is surrounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north; Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh on the east; and Bangladesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram on the south. It shares 263-kilometer-long international boundary with Bangladesh and another 262 kilometers with Bhutan. The transport and communication network to and from Assam was severely affected following the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Since then Assam has become geographically isolated from mainland India.

With a total area of 78,438 square kilometers, it occupies 2.39 per cent of the Indian landmass and 29.92 per cent of the North East region. It is connected to mainland India by a 22-kilometer-long land corridor passing through Siliguri town of West Bengal. For administration convenience, the state is divided into 27 districts. Roughly, one-fourth of its area comprises the hills, and the rest is the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. The hills comprise Karbi Anglong (10,434 square kilometers) and North Cachar Hills (4,890 square kilometers) districts. The state is bisected by Brahmaputra that flows for 725 kilometers before entering

**Table 1: Scheduled Tribes Population of Assam, 2001 Census**

<b>Name of the Scheduled Tribe</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Percentage of the total Scheduled Tribe population</b>
Bodo	1,352,771	40.9
Miri	587,310	17.8
Karbi	353,513	10.7
Rabha	277,517	8.4
Sonowal Kachari	235,881	7.1
Lalung	170,622	5.2
Dimasa	110,976	3.4
Deori	41,161	1.2
Others*	178,819	5.3
All Scheduled Tribes	3,308,570	100
Population of Assam	26,655,528	-

Notes: \*These tribes have very small populations.

Source: Office of the Registrar General, New Delhi.

Bangladesh. It has forest cover (reserved forest and unclassed forest) of roughly 27,018 square kilometers (or 34.45 per cent of its area). The land has rich natural resources such as oil, natural gas, coal, rubber, and tea.

Assam is a multiethnic land with a population of 26,655,528 in the 2001 census. It has a population density of 339 persons per square kilometer. During 1951–2001, it recorded the highest population growth among all states in the country. It is inhabited by three distinct groups of people: the hill tribes, the plain tribes, and the non-

tribal population of the plains. Contrary to the popular perception outside the region, tribes in Assam constitute just about 12.4 per cent of its population. The plain tribes constitute 10.23 per cent of the total population of the state, whereas the hill tribes constitute just 2.18 per cent.

The economy of Assam is sometimes referred to as a unique example of ‘poverty amidst plenty’. In spite of being richly endowed with abundant natural resources, it lags behind several other states in the country in a number of key development indicators.

# HISTORY

The gradual expansion of oil and tea industries during British rule encouraged large-scale immigration into Assam. The partition of the Indian subcontinent also resulted in large-scale immigration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into Assam, a trend that continues till today. The resultant tensions culminated in an anti-foreigner agitation, popularly called the Assam Agitation, spearhead by the All Assam Students' Union. The agitation that started in 1979 concluded in 1985 following the signing of the Assam Accord between the Central government and the leaders of the agitation on August 15, 1985. Following this accord, leaders of the agitation formed a political party, Asom Gana Parishad, which later ruled the state twice during 1985-1990 and 1996-2001. The promises made in the accord remain largely unfulfilled, but the agitation led to intense ethnic polarisation.

The agitation also coincided with the emergence of the first ever-organised armed group in the state with the formation of the United Liberation Front of Asom in 1979. Since then, ULFA has emerged as an influential armed group despite several

Army-led operations being conducted against it. In September 2005, ULFA made public the constitution of an eleven-member People's Consultative Group, to work out the modalities for its formal talks with the Central government. Apart from holding consultations with several civil society groups, it held at least three rounds of talks with representatives of the government. The efforts however ended without success.

At the same time, an agitation was started by the All Bodo Students' Union demanding a separate state for the Bodos, leading to the emergence of several Bodo armed groups. Sporadic violent clashes also took place between Bodos and non-Bodos during this agitation. An agreement was arrived at between the agitating Bodo leaders and the government leading to the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993. But the failure of the council led to the revival of another round of conflict spearheaded by the Bodo Liberation Tigers. It unleashed a reign of terror until it entered a ceasefire agreement with the Central government. After prolonged negotiations, an agreement was arrived at constituting another autonomous body

called the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India in 2003. Following this, all the BLT members laid down arms. The council consists of a general council and an executive council and enjoys legislative, executive, and financial powers in respect of 40 subjects, including forestry, agriculture, public works, sericulture, and cultural affairs. Four contiguous districts of Kokrajhar, Baska, Udalguri, and Chirang come under the jurisdiction of the council. Hagrama Mahilary, the former leader of the now disbanded BLT, is the current chief of the council. However, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, the only surviving Bodo armed group, rejected the peace deal calling it an ‘exercise in futility’. As was perhaps to be expected, in February 2010, the Bodoland Territorial Council passed a resolution reviving the statehood demand.

In addition, several smaller armed groups claiming to represent an ethnic or a tribal group have also become active since the 1990s, with the objective of securing either separate states or some form of autonomy for themselves. Their competing claims over land and territory have led to violent clashes. Further, activities of several Islamic radical groups have also been noticed. Since 2000, the Hindi-speaking people have also become victims of conflicts afflicting the state.

On its part, the government has deployed a large number of security personnel, and a number of counter-insurgency operations have been conducted. In the meantime, some armed groups have suspended their operations against the government to facilitate peace dialogues, while new ones have emerged and become influential players in this conflict-ridden environment.

## ISSUES AND CONTENDERS

The numerous conflicts in Assam have made the state home to a large number of armed groups. *South Asia Terrorism Portal* lists as many as 38 such groups, three of which are officially banned, nine others active, and 26 inactive. The conflicts are not confined to those between the government and the armed groups, but frequently extend to those between the ethnic or tribal groups themselves. ULFA, which grew during the course of the anti-foreigner agitation, still remains the most influential group capable of running a parallel government in several pockets of the state.

The conflicts in the state tend to be based primarily on three inter-linked issues: immigration and its complexities; natural resources and the sons of the soil; and ethnic polarisation and assertiveness.

### IMMIGRATION

The single biggest worry for Assam and its people has been unauthorised immigration from across the border with Bangladesh. There is widespread apprehension among the majority of the state's population of a profound

demographic transformation if immigration continues.

Immigration into Assam is the result of a variety of push and pull factors. Factors that push immigrants out of Bangladesh are primarily economic and environmental. Apart from being a populous and a poor country, Bangladesh is vulnerable to natural calamities, such as floods, cyclones, droughts, riverbank erosion, and landslides. Factors that pull them to India are the economic opportunities available in Assam or elsewhere, including the availability of land; and cultural similarities between the two neighbours. A porous border facilitates unhindered Bangladeshi immigration into Assam. This controversial issue has been widely debated both within Assam as well as between India and Bangladesh. The reluctance of Bangladesh to recognise Assam's concerns has generated tension between the two neighbours on numerous occasions. These episodes of tension have occurred whenever India has tried to deport alleged immigrants. Bangladesh denied the presence of its citizens in India and even accused India of evicting

‘Bengali-speaking Muslims’ by branding them as ‘Bangladeshis’.

No one really knows the exact population of Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Assam. The conservative estimates vary from 4 million to 10 million. In 2000, the Government of India-appointed *Task Force on Border Management* estimated about 15 million Bangladeshis in the country, with about 3 lakh entering clandestinely every year.

Assam’s anxiety is compounded by the fact that the state recorded a rapid growth in its population in the post-Independence era. This led to an anti-foreigner agitation, popularly known as the Assam Agitation, spearheaded by the All Assam Students’ Union between 1978 and 1985, demanding the detection of all foreigners, their deletion from the voters’ list, and their deportation. The agitators demanded the use of the National Register of Citizens of 1951 to determine the citizenship of all those living in the state. The agitation concluded following the signing of the Assam Accord (**see Appendix I**) between the Central government and the leaders of the agitation on August 15, 1985. The accord promised to take sufficient measures to identify and deport all foreigners who came after March 1971 and to disenfranchise those who came between January 1966 and March 1971. The

accord also promised constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve, and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity, and heritage of the ‘Assamese people’. Besides, it also promised to renew the Indian government’s commitment to the speedy all-round economic development of Assam, and a commitment to establish advanced scientific institutions in the state. But, the identification and deportation of foreigners, the primary objective of the agitation, remained entirely unfulfilled. This was to be expected as in Assam, determining who is a ‘foreigner’, that is, an illegal immigrant, is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The Assamese point of view is that immigration has already transformed its demography to a large extent. This apprehension is compounded by the fact that the state recorded the highest population growth in the country, of 136 per cent during 1951–2001 as against the national growth rate of 116 per cent. In 1951–1961, there was a nearly 35 per cent increase in its population as against less than 22 per cent nationally. It was 35 per cent in 1961–1971 and 48 per cent in 1971–1991 (there was no census in the state in 1981). Its population growth, however, came down to less than 19 per cent in 1991–2001. Like several states

in the country, the growth rate of Muslim population is also high in Assam. As the 2001 census indicates, the overall Hindu population was 65 per cent, down from 67 per cent in 1991, whereas the Muslim population increased to 31 per cent from 28 per cent. Rightly or wrongly, this was widely attributed to immigration. There were allegations of the state's voters' list being manipulated to enroll people of dubious nationality. This allegation used the fact that the number of voters in several assembly constituencies in the state grew more rapidly than the national average. Between 1994 and 1997, 57 assembly constituencies of the state recorded increases of over 20 per cent in the number of voters as against the all-India average of about 7.4 per cent. Earlier in 1979, out of the 600,000 voters of Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency, a state government-appointed tribunal detected 45,000 voters as 'foreigners'. Immediately after the anti-foreigner agitation, its leaders launched the Asom Gana Parishad, which came to power twice in the state. If the Asom Gana Parishad wanted the implementation of the Assam Accord, the United Minorities Front demanded the scraping of the accord.

The displeasure of the Assamese is not confined to immigration from Bangladesh alone. There is also resentment against those from the 'Hindi belt' of India because they control trade and business in the state. The state also employs a large number of migrants from the 'Hindi belt' to work on low-paying manual jobs. With rising population and unemployment, Assamese believe migrants from the 'Hindi belt' have taken away their jobs. Some armed groups have also chosen to specifically target Hindi-speaking people. In 2007, ULFA served notice to 'all Indians' who migrated to Assam. The organization said it had "appealed to the Hindi-speaking people that the conflict is running in Assam with colonial India, so go away from here as soon as possible."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in a 20-page booklet titled *A Short History of the Boro People*, NDFB accused the Assam government of encouraging migrants to overrun "tribal belts and turn the indigenous population into minorities in their homeland." The booklet claimed that the pro-migrant policy of the government is responsible for the deteriorating conditions in tribal areas. The booklet claimed the primary motive behind encouraging migration was to create 'vote-banks'. It alleged that non-tribals own most of the tribal land.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 'India rebels tell Hindi-speakers to leave Assam', *Reuters*, January 18, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> National Democratic Front of Bodoland, *A Short History of the Boro People*, 2007.

## NATURAL RESOURCES AND SONS OF THE SOIL

Being a land rich in natural resources, Assam is also one of the largest producers of natural gas, oil, tea, plywood and other forest products in the country. The state is said to possess over 1.3 billion tonnes of crude oil and 156 billion cubic metres of natural gas reserves, of which about 58 per cent is yet to be explored. Assam accounts for over 15 per cent of crude oil production in the country. The state also has a vibrant tea industry that produces about 50 per cent of the country's total tea output. Tea plantations accounted for 321,319 hectares of the states land in 2007 and the average number of workers employed daily was about 619,743 in 2006.<sup>4</sup>

However, the general perception is that the extensive exploitation of natural resources has benefited people outside the state rather than those within it. Most of the tea gardens are owned by 'non-locals' with their main offices being situated outside the state. Another popular perception is that the profit from tea plantations is several times more than the total revenue received by the state. This view has some official sanction as well. A committee appointed by the Assam government in 1976 stated that "a comparative study between the gardens under the four different associations [the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association, the Tea Association of India, the Bharatiya Chah Parishad, and the Assam Tea Planters Association –

**Table 2: Tea Production in Assam**

(Figures in thousand kgs.)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Assam	453,587	433,327	434,759	435,649	487,487	502,041	511,885	487,497
India	853,923	838,474	878,129	892,965	945,974	981,805	986,427	980,818

Source: Tea Board of India, Kolkata

**Table 3: Mineral Production in Assam**

Year	Coal ('000 MT)	Crude Oil ('000 MT)	Natural Gas (Utilised)(MCM)	Limestone ('000 MT)
2001-2002	652	5107	1850	480
2002-2003	629	4746	1909	552
2003-2004	738	4571	1999	460

Source: Indian Bureau of Mines, Nagpur.

<sup>4</sup> Tea Board of India, Kolkata. <http://www.teaboard.gov.in/>

Brahmaputra Valley] reveals that, so far as the representation of local people in the managerial cadre (including assistant managers) is concerned the position is the worst in respect of the tea gardens under the Tea Association of India, where 82 per cent of posts in the managerial cadre have been held by persons with birthplaces outside Assam ... One striking point to be noted is that, after change-over to Indian management, almost all the posts in the managerial cadre (including assistant managers) were filled up by persons from outside the state of Assam without any open advertisement or without notifying the employment exchange.”<sup>5</sup>

The resentment against ‘non-locals’ is not only because of the origins of those who control these resources within Assam but also because industries were set up elsewhere in the country using the raw materials produced in the state. There were protests against the proposal to set up an oil refinery at Barauni in Bihar to refine crude oil extracted from the state. Despite a mass agitation, the Central government built the refinery at Barauni. The crude oil extracted from Assam is transported through a long pipeline to refine at

Barauni. It was after several rounds of agitation that a small refinery was set up near Guwahati and another one at Numaligarh. It was during this agitation that the issue of neglect and exploitation of Assam by the Indian government was raised. Since then the seed of distrust between the Centre and the people of Assam was sown. Although the state earns a royalty for its crude oil and natural gas, the general feeling is that the state is not getting its due share. As a result, the state government has, from time to time, demanded the increase in oil royalty. Before the anti-foreigner agitation, the state received only Rs. 42 as royalty for every metric tone of crude oil, whereas the Centre collected six times as much in cess.<sup>6</sup> In 2003, the Central government revised the royalty on crude oil to Rs. 850 per metric tonne with effect from April 1, 1998. The royalty paid to the Assam government was Rs. 1,237.01 crores for 2006-07, Rs. 1426.71 crores for 2007-08 and Rs. 1300.84 crores for 2008-09.<sup>7</sup>

This feeling of neglect and exploitation is reinforced by the fact that the economic growth of the state during the post-independence period lags behind several other states of the country. Since the

<sup>5</sup> Government of Assam, *Report of the Employment Review Committee*, 1976, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Bhaumik, Subir: 2007. *Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Co-optation & Change*, Working Paper No. 10. Washington: East-West Center.

<sup>7</sup> Government of India, Press Information Bureau, *Exploration of Crude Oil*, December 17, 2009.

partition of the Indian subcontinent, the North East region was largely isolated. Industrial development was severely affected and agricultural growth has not been anywhere near its potential. Per capita state income has remained one of the lowest in the country. The number of people living below the poverty line too is one of the highest among all states. The state has registered low per capita electricity consumption, worse even than other states in the North East. Its literacy rate is again below the national average. At the same time, its population has grown rapidly.

The grievances against the alleged exploitation of natural resources combined with underdevelopment have only deepened the feeling of neglect and exploitation, thus contributing to further alienation and unrest. Influential organisations like the All Assam Students' Union have started demanding preferential policies for the 'sons of the soil'. For example, in August 2009, student activists gathered at the venue of the interviews conducted in Guwahati for the recruitment for an upcoming gas cracker project at Lepetkata near Dibrugarh town. They insisted that since the project was the outcome of the Assam Accord only local youth must be recruited. They shouted slogans against the cracker company's decision to call only 46 locals against the 540 advertised posts. The

interview was allowed to continue only after the authorities assured them that their demands would be looked into.

## **ETHNIC POLARISATION AND ASSERTIVENESS**

One of the outcomes of the campaign against alleged illegal immigrants has been the growing mistrust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The immigrants are largely seen by non-Muslims as belonging to a single, homogeneous Muslim community. As a result members of the Indian Muslim community feel victimised as their nationality is questioned. This polarisation has now extended to other tribal communities as well. The Bodos also disapproved Clause 6 of the Assam Accord which promises to safeguard the cultural identity of the 'Assamese people' as they fear the clause might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture on the tribals. The non-Assamese communities, both tribal and non-tribal, have started questioning the alleged domineering attitude of the majority Assamese.

The deepening polarisation of its society and polity has led to the relations between its multiple sub-nationalities being driven along ethnic and communal lines. The perceived grievances have led to the emergence of a number of armed

groups. Several tribal groups, one after another, have also started demanding the creation of exclusive administrative units or separate states to be carved out of Assam. These demands gain strength from the fact that the state had earlier undergone major reorganisation leading to the creation of several smaller states. Those statehood demands that are not considered feasible have been partly resolved by establishing several territorially defined tribal councils like the Bodoland Territorial Council. But these policy measures have not whetted the appetite for more autonomy.

After the anti-foreigner agitation, the Bodos started a vigorous agitation demanding a separate state in the northern side of the river Brahmaputra. That agitation concluded in 1993 following an agreement with the state government, resulting in the formation of a self-governing council known as the Bodoland Autonomous Council with a view to provide maximum autonomy to fulfill the economic, educational, and linguistic aspirations of the Bodos and other plain tribes. The Council, which comprised a general council and an executive council, was empowered to make bye-laws, rules, and orders for application within the council area on 38 subjects such as cottage industry, forests, cultural affairs, irrigation, and so on.

However, the inability to carve out a clear-cut territorial boundary coupled with infighting among the Bodo leaders led to the revival of another Bodoland agitation. The revival of the statehood agitation gave birth to a separate brand of militancy led by the Bodo Liberation Tigers. Later, the BLT offered a unilateral ceasefire and agreed to talk to the Central government. It too gave up the claims for Bodoland, in return for a politico-administrative arrangement for autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. Finally, in 2003, the Bodoland Territorial Council (**Appendix II**) was constituted. Like the earlier one, the Bodoland Territorial Council has a general council and an executive council. The council has legislative, executive, and financial powers in respect of 40 subjects. Kokrajhar, Baska, Udalguri, and Chirang districts fall under its administrative jurisdiction. It is the third council constituted under the Sixth Schedule after the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and the NC Hills Autonomous Council. Apart from these three, there are six more tribal councils (non-Sixth Schedule): Mishing Autonomous Council, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, Tiwa Autonomous Council, Deori Autonomous Council, Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council, and Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council.

The existence of these councils, however, has not guaranteed the resolution of the problems of the tribes. Indeed, it has aggravated their posturing for more autonomy. All the non-Sixth Schedule councils want to upgrade their status to a level similar to that of the Bodoland Territorial Council. At the same time, the bigger ones like the Bodoland Territorial Council are demanding separate states. As was perhaps to be expected, in February 2010 the Bodoland Territorial Council officially adopted a resolution demanding a separate state. There have also been problems within these councils. The smaller tribes and communities within each council allege that these councils mainly serve the interests of the larger groups. In the Bodoland Territorial Council area, there is an open division between the Bodos and the non-Bodos. The latter had even opposed its formation. They accused the government of succumbing to the ‘gun culture’ of the Bodo rebels. Competing claims over land and territory by rival armed groups was also a major cause for inter-tribal as well as tribal-non tribal conflicts.

There were at least two such conflicts that had a violent fallout. The **Kuki-Karbi Conflict** was one of the bloodiest inter-tribal conflicts. It rocked Karbi Anglong district in 2003–04 killing more than 100 people and scores of remote villages were reduced to ashes. The Kuki-affiliated Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and the Karbi-affiliated Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF) were both responsible for the outrage. Both the groups wanted separate homelands for the tribes they claim to represent. The Karbis, a major tribe in the district, want a separate state as against the Kukis demand for a tribal council. But, the Karbis see the Kukis as ‘migrants’ from Manipur. The latest such conflict was the **Dimasa-Zeme Naga conflict** of 2009. It claimed more than 50 lives and displaced several others, either temporarily or permanently. The Dimasas, a major tribe in the NC Hills district, want a separate state. On the other hand, the Nagas, though a smaller number in the district, have a similar ambition in the form of Greater Nagalim. The Dimasas accused them of indulging in land grabbing.

# INSTITUTIONS

The decades-old conflicts in Assam have generated their own institutional mechanisms. Some of these institutions are socio-political while others are economic. Among the socio-political institutions are the armed groups who lay down a set of rules and have the means and resources to enforce them in areas where their writ runs. The economic institution is the taxation mechanism put in place by various armed groups. These new institutional practices interfere with and hence weaken the institutions of the state. Once the institutions of the state are weakened, the armed groups exploit the situation to their advantage.

## SOCIO-POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

The socio-political institutions are specific to different groups though they have some common features. It is useful to look at these institutions as they have emerged in each group.

## UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASOM

Organised armed conflicts in Assam

started with the formation of ULFA in 1979. It claims to be a revolutionary political organisation to liberate Assam through armed struggle from the ‘clutches of the illegal occupation of India’; and to establish a sovereign independent Assam. It believes in a ‘federal Assam’; and also claims, “Ours is not a movement for the Asomiya (Assamese), and ours is a movement for the Asombashis (dwellers of Assam)”.<sup>8</sup> It insists that Assam was never a part of India; and the relationship between the two is ‘colonial’. It boycotts all national events like Republic Day and Independence Day celebrations since it does not believe in the Constitution of India.

Its emergence was closely related to the use of and competition over the control of natural resources, unauthorised immigration from Bangladesh, and underdevelopment of the state. With its leadership, under pressure from Army action, being forced to take refuge in Bangladesh it has in recent years been keeping silent on unauthorised immigration. It has shifted its focus to

<sup>8</sup> Bhaumik, Subir. 2007. *Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Co-option & Change*, Working Paper No. 10. Washington: East-West Center.

other immigrants (especially Hindi-speakers) who it sees as the ‘real threat’ to Assam. ULFA accused the Central government of large scale exploitation of natural resources and blamed it for the lack of development in the state. Being the most influential group, ULFA has been virtually running a parallel government in several pockets of the state. During the first Asom Gana Parishad government (1985–1990), ULFA enjoyed a near free run as the then government was widely believed to be sympathetic to it.

ULFA is organised into a political wing and a military wing. The former is headed by a chairman and the latter by a commander-in-chief. The military wing is known to be more influential than the political wing, and is reported to consist of four battalions. Further, for operational purposes, ULFA is divided into a Central Unit, a District Unit and an Anachalik Unit, with the former being the top decision-making body. It was believed that at its peak ULFA maintained about 5000 regular soldiers, and also enjoyed huge public support. But that has drastically weakened over the years.

Its propaganda mouthpiece, *Swadhinata* (also known as *Freedom*) is widely circulated. It maintains regular contact with the local press to present its side of the story. It also maintains good working relationships with a number of

like-minded organisations of the region and beyond. During its formative stage, it secured support from National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and Kachin Independent Army (KIA) for training and arms procurement. Subsequently, it started clandestine operations from neighbouring countries; and came into contact with Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan. Since then, it relies heavily on ISI for training, sophisticated arms, and other logistics.

## **BODO GROUPS**

The Bodo groups began with political mobilisation for a separate state. Initially the agitation was spearheaded by the All Bodo Students’ Union, an influential Bodo student organisation, that mobilised the Bodos against what they called ‘Assamese chauvinism’. In 1987, it gave a highly exclusivist slogan ‘Divide Assam-fifty-fifty’. During that period, certain armed groups such as Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) and Bodo Security Force (BdSF) were also emerged and extended tactical support to the Bodoland agitation. When the All Bodo Students’ Union agreed to settle for a tribal council in 1993, in lieu of a separate state, the BVF was dissolved and its volunteers came over-ground. The BdSF, then renamed as the NDFB, continued its struggle with the stated objective of

securing a 'sovereign Bodoland' (Free Bodoland).

When the first council failed to deliver on its designated responsibilities, a group of Bodo youth raised another armed group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers in 1996. Suddenly, the Bodo region of Assam was thrown into a quagmire of violence, including bombings of trains and organised ethnic riots. The BLT entered into a ceasefire with the Central government in 1999, and later another council, with enhanced powers and functions, was formed in 2003. Thereafter, members of the BLT launched a political party called Bodo People's Front, participated in elections, and is currently ruling the Bodoland Territorial Council. It is also a coalition partner of the present Congress-led state government. Some of its functionaries have been elected to the council, headed by its former leader Hagrama Mahilary. Several of its former members have been recruited in the state police and other paramilitary forces.

The only surviving Bodo armed group is the NDFB, now split into two factions, in which one of them is currently observing a temporary ceasefire with the government.

## OTHER SMALLER GROUPS

This category includes several small armed groups claiming to represent an ethnic or a tribal group. Notable ones

among them are the Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), Black Widow (BW), United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA). Most of them have been demanding separate states. Organised armed conflict among the Dimasa tribe started in the 1980s with the objective of securing a separate state, and is led by DHD and BW. Territories claimed by the Dimasas for a separate state called Dimaraji comprise whole of NC Hills district, parts of Karbi Anglong district and Nagaland. The DHD is currently holding a temporary ceasefire with the Central government. At the same time, several BW rebels have either surrendered or been arrested. Another organised armed movement among the Karbis was initiated in the 1990s with the objective of securing a separate state and is led by UPDS and KLNLF. The former is currently holding a ceasefire with the government. Several Muslim armed groups also emerged around 1990-96. Security analyst Jaideep Saikia listed 16 Islamic armed groups operating in the state that included Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Jehad. MULTA is the most active. Very little information is openly available on their activities and objectives, but most of them are inclined to protect the interests of the

Muslim community. Some observers allege that they indulge in propaganda for a separate Islamic homeland, and a society based on Islamic values. In addition, some Naga and Kuki armed groups from the neighbouring states of Manipur and Nagaland have also started operating, on a small scale, in some areas of Assam.

Except for ULFA, the rest have limited influence outside their ethnic or tribal groups. All of them have working relationships with like-minded groups. Most of them are small with a few leaders and their followers. Smaller groups normally acquire arms as well as training from the bigger ones. Any group, either big or small, is capable of influencing public opinion to a large extent in their area of operations.

## ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS

The armed groups regularly collect taxes from salaried class, business community, politicians and contractors. Major business establishments and oil and tea companies are the prime target. This is then further extended to the common people.

Another component of their income is generated from government sources. There have been allegations of departments of the government diverting their budgetary allocations to the armed

groups. These groups are capable of interfering in the award of development contracts as well as at the time of their execution. They also put pressure on officials of the state to award some of these contracts to their loyalists so that the profits can be shared. In order to avoid any risk, the officials are compelled to associate with them clandestinely. Over the years, this partnership has grown alarmingly. ULFA's monthly collection in the 1990s was estimated at about Rs. 1.5 crore. HN Das, a former senior bureaucrat of Assam, has argued that a major portion of such funds seem to have come indirectly from government sources. According to Das, extortionists could easily blackmail corrupt officials because they knew of their illegal activities. Rural development, according to Das, is a 'lucrative sector' and as much as 70 per cent of all the funds available to the state government were systematically siphoned off under an organised network of ULFA, former ULFA (locally known as SULFA), contractors, civil servants and politicians. Quoting unspecified sources, he estimated that of the total Rs. 11.65 billion made available under various rural development schemes in Assam during the period 1992–1993 to February 1998, less than Rs. 4 billion went to legitimate schemes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Das, H.N., *Economic Consequences of Insurgency in Assam*, The Indian Police Journal, LV (1), January-March 2008, p. 72.

In such an environment, many development projects have been either delayed or sometimes abandoned abruptly due to insecurity. A case in point is the 201-kilometer-long Silchar–Lumding Broad Gauge Conversion Project, sanctioned in 1996 with a budget

of Rs. 648 crore. The project came to a halt due to the interference and frequent violence committed by Dimasa groups in the NC Hills district. This project was earlier scheduled to be completed in 2006, was then extended to 2009, resulting in cost escalation to Rs. 1823 crore.

## OPTIONS

### ATTEMPTED

The official response to the conflicts in Assam has been a mix of the use of force, the promise for accelerated development and Central government-initiated peace talks with the armed groups. The state was declared a ‘disturbed area’ and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, was imposed. As a result, a large number of security personnel are being deployed there. Some of the armed groups have been notified as unlawful organisations. From time to time, a number of Army-led counter-insurgency strikes, such as *Operation Rhino* and *Operation Bajrang*, have been launched against them. The *Unified Command*, a three-tier command structure of the Army, the Assam Police and the Central paramilitary forces, has been overseeing the counter-insurgency operation since 1997. The command, headed by the state chief minister, holds periodic reviews of the security situation.

Being a *Special Category State* coupled with ongoing conflicts, enormous public resources are being spent to put its economic development on a fast track. Unfortunately, these funds could not be

fully utilised for the benefit of the state. In the absence of systematic monitoring, these funds can be used to benefit a small section of society that consists of armed groups, officials of the state, and contractors.

Besides, the Central government also follows a policy of engaging in peace talks with any armed group that agrees to adjure violence. The DHD (since 2003), UPDS (since 2002) and a faction of NDFB (since 2004) are observing a *suspension of operations agreement* with the government. At the same time, the state government has managed to strike peace deals with some of the smaller groups. On February 11, 2010, 419 KLNLF rebels formally laid down arms at Diphu, the headquarters of Karbi Anglong district, and the government promised to give Rs. 2 lakh each as a one-time grant for their rehabilitation. The government also promised to release Rs. 50 crore for the development of the Karbi Anglong district. Earlier on October 2, 2009, more than 400 BW rebels also laid down arms at Halflong, the headquarters of NC Hills district. Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi who attended the surrender ceremony

promised to release Rs 50 crore for immediate developmental activities in the NC Hills district. Also in 2008, the United Liberation Front of Barak Valley (ULFBV) surrendered *en masse*.

The experience of negotiating with the bigger groups provides us insights into how the process works. The BLT started direct negotiations with the Central government that lasted about four years, in which it agreed to drop the statehood demand as the government promised to fulfill their other demands with an arrangement under the amended Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution by creating an autonomous self-governing council. The BLT became the first armed group of Assam to successfully complete peace parleys with the government. A Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the BLT and the Central government in New Delhi in February 2003. The successful end to the negotiations witnessed one of the largest surrender ceremonies in the country in December 2003, when 2641 BLT rebels along with more than 500 sophisticated weapons bade farewell to arms. Thereafter, BLT formed a political party and is currently ruling the Bodoland Territorial Council.

In September 2005, ULFA made public the constitution of an eleven-member People's Consultative Group, to work out the modalities for their formal

peace talks with the Central government. It was headed by eminent litterateur Mamoni Raisom Goswami and noted footballer Rebati Phukan as 'facilitators'. Operations against ULFA were suspended in August 2006 for about a month. The group held at least three rounds of talks with the government. The government insisted on a written commitment from ULFA authorising the participation of its topmost leaders in the talks. On its part, ULFA insisted on the inclusion of the 'sovereignty of Assam' as one of the conditions. Finally, the People's Consultative Group pulled out of the peace process in September 2006.

In 2008, a section of ULFA, locally known as ULFA-pro-talk group, declared a unilateral ceasefire without any preconditions defying its top leaderships. This section accused its top leaders of not being interested in a negotiated settlement, and also claimed that their ceasefire was aimed at exerting pressure on their top leaders to initiate unconditional talks with the government. Their move was, however, summarily rejected by its top leaders who insisted that there could be any peace talks without discussing the issue of sovereignty. This development exposed their internal dissent and the government was not in favour of initiating talk with this section.

Meanwhile, the chairman and a key architect of ULFA, Arabinda Rajkhowa, was arrested from an unspecified location in Bangladesh in November 2009 and handed over to India. Most of its senior leaders are now in the custody of the state government, but, according to government sources, its commander-in-chief, Paresh Barua, is taking shelter somewhere in the Kachin-China border inside Myanmar.

## NEW OPTIONS

### 1. Civil society as facilitator

In view of the prolonged crisis where conflicting parties have not been able to arrive at a meaning resolution of the conflict, it would be advisable for the state to go a step forward, encourage and support civil society to act as a ‘facilitator’ for a meaningful dialogue between the conflicting parties. This is possible since the state has a strong civil society network. The first prerequisite is to encourage and engage them positively. With their support, it would be much easier to bridge the existing differences that exist between the state and the non-state armed groups, and also the conflict of interests between the armed groups themselves. If civil society in neighbouring Nagaland could persuade the warring NSCN factions to narrow their differences in the overall interests of the Naga society, the same

could be attempted in Assam as well. It is, therefore, important to reopen consultations with the People’s Consultative Group, which was constituted by ULFA. All the members of the People’s Consultative Group are influential persons who have excelled in various walks of life. Once ULFA is brought to the dialogue table, the involvement of foreign hands in the current crisis will be weakened. Further, peace in the Bodo region is also unlikely unless NDFB shun violence. Bodo civil society could help persuade NDFB to accept and cooperate in the affairs of the Bodoland Territorial Council. Over time, the NDFB has slightly softened its opposition to this council.

### 2. Safe passage and rehabilitation

The option of providing temporary safe passage to members of the armed groups on the occasion of major festivals, like *Bihu*, could be initiated so as to enable them to freely visit their families and relatives. This would help in building goodwill, and also show the sincerity of the government. Along with this, there is also a need for an effective rehabilitation policy for the surrendered insurgents like that of the Jammu & Kashmir or Andhra Pradesh. This would certainly help in bringing at least some of the rebels back into the mainstream.

### **3. Periodic review of the working of the tribal councils**

Assam has altogether nine tribal councils. However, the performance of most of these councils has never been satisfactory right from their inception. Periodic elections to most of them, though mandatory, have never been held on time. Their overall performance has also not been satisfactory. There are allegations of funds being misused. Their failure will only generate violence and unrest. That happened in the case of the first Bodo council; and the same could happen with others too. A committee of experts could be constituted by the state government for each of them to periodically assess their performance and suggest remedial measures.

### **4. Focus on multi-ethnic solution and non-territorial autonomy**

Assam is a multi-ethnic society. Hence, solutions to problems primarily based on particular ethnic or tribal considerations often backfire. It may be appropriate to think and advocate solution to problems on multi-ethnic considerations. One way to satisfy the aspirations of various tribal groups while preserving the territory of Assam could be by establishing regimes of non-territorial autonomy. This type of autonomy might be granted to all

members of particular group across different states. It could include a representative legislative body and an executive component. The scope of such autonomy could extend over areas like religion, culture, language, and other welfare matters. This model of autonomy assumes significance in view of the need to counter territory-specific demands, such as that of the Greater Nagalim or Bodoland.

### **5. Strengthen measures to control illegal immigration**

Peace in Assam is unthinkable unless a compromise formula is arrived at on the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. It is likely to remain the key source of future conflict. The campaign against illegal immigration has already generated conflict, not only between immigrants and the local population, but also among groups of the local population as well. Apart from tightening border security and proper border management, a political consensus is required on the issue. Assamese fear of becoming minority in their own land must be acknowledged.

### **6. Renewed engagement with neighbouring countries**

Armed conflict in the region is, in one form or the other, linked to neighbouring countries as many of the armed

combatants have been taking shelter there. Good friendly relations with the neighbours will significantly help the government resolve to restore normalcy in this part of the country. So far however only Bhutan has responded to India's concerns by launching an operation against Indian armed groups operating from its soil.

## **7. Tribal development**

Much of the pressure for separate states has come from the tribals believing their interests are not protected in Assam. There are several demands by tribal groups for the creation of more states. In order to discourage such tendencies, tribal development must be given due importance for which successful working of the tribal councils must be ensured.

## Assam Accord, 1985<sup>1</sup>

The following are the texts of the Assam Accord - 1985 signed between students' representatives from the state of Assam and the government officials in the presence of then Prime Minister, Republic of India Mr. Rajiv Gandhi.

1. Government have all along been most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have also expressed their keenness to find such a solution.
2. The AASU through their Memorandum dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1980 presented to the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse effects upon the political, social, culture and economic life of the state.
3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the

dialogue with the AASU/AAGSP. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Minister's level during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.

4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:

### FOREIGNERS ISSUE

- 5.1 For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base data and year.
- 5.2 All persons who come to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections shall be regularised.
- 5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24 th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy: All Assam Students' Union

Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.

- 5.4 Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939.
- 5.5 For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.
- 5.6 On the expiry of a period of ten years following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.
- 5.7 All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since reentered illegally into Assam shall be expelled.
- 5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.
- 5.9 The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.

## **SAFEGUARDS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.
7. The Government take this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science and technology through establishment of national institutions.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

- 8.1 The Government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificates in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.
- 8.2 Specific complaints that may be made by the AASU/AAGSP about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.
9. The international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places.

Patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes all along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, an adequate number of check posts shall be set up.

9.2 Besides the arrangements mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road would be kept free of human habitation, wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators crossing or attempting to cross the international border.

10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the relevant law restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners in Assam is strictly enforced.

12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

## RESTORATION OF NORMALCY

13. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) call off the agitation, assure full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the country.

14. The Central and the State Government have agreed to:

- ◆ review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimization;
- ◆ frame a scheme for ex-gratia payment to next of kin of those who were killed in the course of the agitation;
- ◆ give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public services in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding of academic and competitive examinations, etc., in the context of agitation in Assam;
- ◆ undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases

against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences;

- ◆ consider withdrawal of the prohibitory orders/ notifications in force, if any.

15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

Signed/- (P.K. Mahanta), President, All Assam Students' Union

Signed/- (R.D. Pradhan), Home Secretary, Govt. of India

Signed/- (B.K. Phukan), General Secretary, All Assam Students' Union

Signed/- (P.P. Trivedi), Chief Secretary, Govt. of Assam

Signed/- (Biraj Sharma), Convenor, All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad

In the presence of

Signed/- (Rajiv Gandhi), Prime Minister of India

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1985, Place: New Delhi

1. Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls.
2. Time for submission of claims and objections will be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the Election rules.
3. The Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

Signed/- Home Secretary

1. Oil refinery will be established in Assam.
2. Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to re-open: Ashok Paper Mill and Jute Mills.
3. I.I.T. will be set-up in Assam.

## Memorandum of Settlement with BLT, 2003<sup>2</sup>

The Government of India and the Government of Assam have been making concerted efforts to fulfill the aspirations of Bodo people relating to their cultural identity, language, education and economic development. Towards this end, a series of talks were held between Government of India, Government of Assam and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) since March, 2000. As a result, it is agreed to create a self-governing body for the Bodo areas in the State of Assam as follows:

### 2. Objectives

The objectives of the agreement are : to create an autonomous self governing body to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the State of Assam and to provide Constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule to the said Autonomous Body; to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area.

### 3. Area

- 3.1 The area of the proposed BTC shall comprise all the villages and areas as per Annexure-I to be so notified by the State Government. The above mentioned villages and areas shall be divided into 4 contiguous districts after reorganisation of the existing districts of Assam within a period of 6 months of the signing of the agreement on the lines of the proposal given by BLT subject to clearance of the Delimitation Commission.
- 3.2 A Committee comprising one representative each from Governments of India & Assam and BLT will decide by consensus on the inclusion of additional villages and areas in the BTC from out of villages and areas given in Annexure-II on the basis of the criteria of tribal population being not less than 50%, contiguity or any other agreed relevant criteria within a period of three months of signing of this MoS.

<sup>2</sup> Courtesy: Bodoland Territorial Council

#### 4. Status of Bodoland Territorial Council

The provision of the Sixth Schedule and other relevant Articles of the Constitution of India will apply to BTC, mutatis mutandis in terms of this agreement. The safeguards/modifications for the non-tribals in BTC area, inter-alia, will include the followings:

4.1 Provisions of para 1(2) of Sixth Schedule regarding Autonomous Regions will not be applicable to BTC.

4.2 A provision will be made in para 2(1) of the Sixth Schedule for increasing the number of members for BTC up to 46 out of which 30 will be reserved for Scheduled Tribes, 5 for non-tribal communities, 5 open for all communities and 6 to be nominated by Governor of Assam from the unrepresented communities from BTC area of which at least two should be women. Nominated members will have the same rights and privileges as other members, including voting rights. Election from the 40 constituencies of BTC shall be on the basis of adult franchise. The term of the elected members of BTC shall be for 5 years.

4.3 Safeguards for the settlement rights, transfer and inheritance of property etc. of non-tribals will be suitably

incorporated in para 3 of the Sixth Schedule. Any such law may be made by the BTC in this regard will not, in particular:

- a) extinguish the rights and privileges enjoyed by any citizen of India in respect of his land at the commencement of BTC, and
- b) bar any citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by way of transfer if such citizens were eligible for such bonafide acquisition of land within the BTC area.

4.4 Provision will be added in para of Sixth Schedule that in BTC area, language and medium of instruction in educational institutions will not be changed without approval of the State Government.

4.5 Provisions of para 8 of Sixth Schedule regarding power to assess and collect land revenue and impose taxes shall be applicable to BTC.

4.6 Para 10 of the Sixth Schedule will not be applicable to BTC area.

4.7 Provisions of Article 332(6) of the Constitution will be so modified that the existing status of representation of BTC area in the State Assembly is kept intact. After the creation of BTC, the Parliamentary and

Assembly Constituencies shall be delimited by the Delimitation Commission in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.

- 4.8 In the event, Panchayati Raj system ceases to be in force in the Council area, the powers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in such matters shall be vested with the Council.

The amendments to the Sixth Schedule shall include provisions in such a manner that non-tribals are not disadvantaged in relation to the rights enjoyed by them at the commencement of BTC and their rights and privileges including land rights are fully protected

## 5. Powers and Functions

- 5.1 The Council shall have legislative powers in respect to subjects transferred to it as enumerated at Annexure-III. All laws made under this paragraph shall be submitted forthwith to the Governor and until assented to by him, shall have no effect. The BTC shall have executive, administrative and financial powers in respect of subjects transferred to it.
- 5.2 There shall be an Executive Council comprising of more than 12 Executive Members, one of whom

shall be the Chief and another one the Deputy Chief of the said Executive Council. There shall be adequate representation for the non-tribal members in the Executive Council. The Chief and the Deputy Chief of the Council shall have the status equivalent to the Cabinet Minister and the other Executive Members equivalent to the Minister of State of Assam for protocol purposes in BTC area.

- 5.3 The BTC shall have the full control over the officers and staff connected with the delegated subjects working in the BTC area and shall be competent to transfer these officers and staff within the BTC area. ACRs of these officers shall also be written by the appropriate BTC authority.
- 5.4 BTC shall also be competent to make appointments for all posts under its control in accordance with the rules of appointment followed by the Government of Assam. However, the posts, where recruitment is made on the recommendation of APSC, shall not be covered under this provision. The Council may constitute a Selection Board for appointments to be made by it and may also make rules, with the approval of the Governor of Assam, to regulate appointments and to

- ensure adequate representation for all communities living in the Council area.
- 5.5 No posts shall be created by BTC without concurrence of the Government of Assam and it shall also abide by the decision of the Government of Assam in respect of abolition of temporarily keeping vacant any post.
- 5.6 Development functions and bodies within the competence of BTC shall be transferred to BTC. In respect of DRDA, concurrence of Government of India will be obtained.
- 5.7 The offices of the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendent of Police will be outside the superintendence and control of BTC.
- 5.8 The State Government would provide an amount, to be decided every year on population ratio basis, as grants-in-aid in two equal installments to the BTC for executing development works. The proportionate share for the BTC shall be calculated on the basis of the Plan funds available after setting aside the funds required for earmarked sectors and the salary. This amount may be reduced proportionately if the state plan allocation is reduced or there is plan cut due to resource problem. In addition, the Council will be paid a suitable amount plan funds and non-plan funds to cover the office expenses and the salaries of the staff working under their control. The BTC shall deserve the salaries of the staff under their control and would ensure strict economy in the matter.
- 5.9 BTC authority shall prepare a plan with the amounts likely to be available for development works, both under state share and central share, covering any or all the activities of the departments under their control. The Council shall have full direction in selecting the activities and choosing the amount for the investment under the same in any year covering all groups of people in a fair and equitable manner. This plan will be a sub set of the state plan and would be treated as its integral part. Once the plan of the state, including BTC plan, gets the approval of the Planning Commission, the BTC authority shall start execution of their plan in BTC area. Modifications, if any, made by the Planning Commission in the BTC proposal, shall be binding on the BTC authority. The State Government shall not divert the funds allocated to the BTC to other

heads and also ensure its timely release. BTC may have Planning Department to prepare the plans for BTC area to be submitted to Planning Commission through the Government of Assam.

5.10 The executive functions of the BTC shall be exercised through its Principal Secretary who shall be an officer of the rank not below that of Commissioner/Secretary to Government of Assam. The sanctioning powers of the Government of Assam shall be vested with the Principal Secretary of BTC and sanctioning powers of head(s) of the department(s) including for technical sanction shall be conferred on the senior most officer of the department preferably not below the rank of Additional Director, who may be designated as Director of BTC for that department. The Principal Secretary and other officers shall exercise their powers under the overall guidance and supervision of BTC.

## 6. Law and Order

To strengthen the Police Administration, Government of Assam shall appoint an IGP for the four districts of BTC and the jurisdiction of the DIG,

Kokrajhar shall also be modified to cover these four districts.

## 7. Revision of List of ST

Consequent to the inclusion of BTC area into the Sixth Schedule, the list of ST for the State of Assam shall be so modified, so as to ensure that the tribal status of Bodos and other tribals living outside the BTC area does not get affected adversely.

## 8. Grant of ST Status to Bodo-Kacharis of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills Districts

The Government of India agrees to consider sympathetically the inclusion of the Bodo-Kacharis living in Karbi-Anglong and NC Hills Autonomous Council area in the ST (Hills) List of State of Assam

## 9. Development of Bodo Language

9.1 The Government India agrees to consider favourably the inclusion of Bodo language in Devnagri script in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

9.2 Bodo Language shall be the Official Language of BTC subject to the condition that Assamese and English shall also continue to be used for official purposes.

## 10. Additional Development Package of BTC

- 10.1 The State Government, within the limitation of financial and other constraints, may offer or allow the Council to offer, possible and sustainable additional incentives for attracting private investment in the Council area and would also support projects for external funding.
- 10.2 In order to accelerate the development of the region and to meet the aspirations of the people, the Government of India will provide financial assistance of Rs.100 Crores per annum for five years for projects to develop the socio-economic infrastructure in BTC areas over the above the normal plan assistance to the State of Assam. The size of the Corpus will be reviewed after a period of five years. Suitable mechanism will be build in the system to ensure that the funds are transferred to BTC in time and at regular intervals. An illustrative list of projects which may be considered to be taken up in BTC area is at Annexure-IV.
- 10.3 Government of India will provide necessary one time financial assistance required for development

of administrative infrastructure in the newly created district headquarters, sub-divisional headquarters and block headquarters, besides the BTC Secretariat Complex at Kokrajhar.

## 11. Centrally Funded University

- 11.1 A centrally funded Central Institute of Technology (CIT) will be set up to impart education in various technological/vocational disciplines such as Information Technology, Bio-Technology, Food-Processing, Rural Industries, Business Management etc.
- 11.2 The CIT will be subsequently upgraded to a centrally funded State University with technical and non-technical disciplines to be run by the BTC.

## 12. Relief and Rehabilitation

- 12.1 The BLT would join the national mainstream and shun the path of violence in the interest of peace and development. After the formation of the Interim Council of BTC, BLT will dissolve itself as an organisation and surrender with arms within a week of swearing-in of the interim council. The State Government would provide full support to relief and rehabilitation

of the members of BLT who would surrender with arms in this process in accordance with the existing policy of the state. Financial support in such cases, however, shall be limited to be provisions of the scheme prepared and funded by the Government of India. Withdrawal of cases against such persons and those related to over ground Bodo movement since 1987 shall be considered according to the existing policy of the State of Assam.

- 12.2 The Government of India will initiate steps for review of action against the Bodo employees of Government of India and subordinate offices as well as in respect of Central Government undertakings. Similar action would be taken by the Government of Assam.
- 12.3 Bodo youth will be considered for recruitment in Police, Army and Para-Military Forces to increase their representation in these forces.

- 13. Special Rehabilitation Programme for the People Affected by Ethnic Disturbances**  
The Special Rehabilitation Programme (SRP) for the people affected

by ethnic disturbances in Assam, who are at present living at relief camps in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon etc. shall be completed by the Government of Assam with active support of BTC. Necessary funds for their rehabilitation shall be provided by the Government of India and lands which are free from all encumbrances required for such rehabilitation shall be made available by the BTC.

#### **14. Interim Council**

Immediately after signing of the agreement, Interim Executive Council for BTC shall be formed by Governor of Assam from amongst the leaders of the present Bodo movement, including the signatories to this settlement, and shall include adequate representations to the non-tribal communities in BTC area. The Interim Council shall not continue for a period beyond 6 months during which period election to the Council shall be held. Government of Assam shall dissolve the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) and repeal the BAC Act.

15. Government of Assam will consider inclusion of all tribals including Bodos in RHAC/MAC/LAC in consultation with leaders of these Councils.

16. The implementation of the provision of the Memorandum of Settlement shall be periodically reviewed by a Committee comprising representatives of Government of India, Government of Assam and BTC.

(Signed on February 10, 2003 at New Delhi by the representatives of Bodo Liberation Tigers, governments of India and Assam in the presence of Shri L. K. Advani, Hon'ble Deputy Prime Minister of India and Shri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam.)

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