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# CONFLICTS IN ASSAM



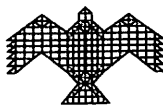
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

Bangalore, India

Backgrounders on Conflict

# CONFLICTS IN ASSAM .

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# 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 latter 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.

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  - 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 Dimasa-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,

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

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

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.

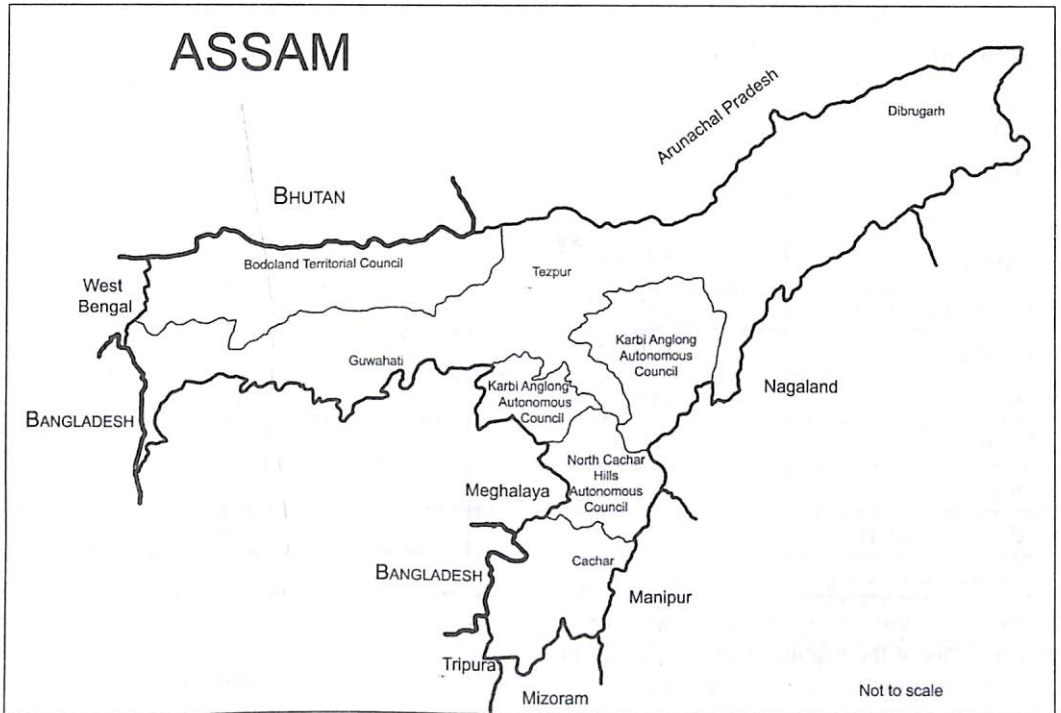
# TERRAIN

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

Name of the Scheduled Tribe	Total Population	Percentage of the total Scheduled Tribe population
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.