

Genesis of the Tribal Belts and Blocks and their existential crisis with special reference to Bodo tribe in Assam: A geopolitical Approach

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Abstract:

Assam in the north –eastern part of India is a land of diverse ethnic groups. Both tribal and non-tribal people are found to be distributed in this region. The tribal people who are living in this area have also formed a sizable share of the total population of Assam with 12.42% as per 2011 census. They have been contributing for the development of Assam and Assamese language and culture since their appearance in state of Assam. They are very simple and their life is controlled by primary economic activities namely, agriculture, fishing, lumbering etc. Though they are very poor economically, educationally and politically, but maintain distinctiveness in their socio-cultural life e.g. food habit, dress habit, language, customs and traditions, etc. But very unfortunately, the life of these people have been threatened during Colonial period which continued to independent India leading to conflicts between the tribal and non-tribal people. For the protection of tribal people tribal belts and blocks were created demarcating the tribal dominated areas of Assam. This paper tries to find out the reason behind the genesis of tribal belts and blocks and their geopolitical problems as well as a separatist tendency among the Bodo tribal group leading to autonomy movement.

Key words: ethnic groups, distinctiveness, threatened, genesis, separatist , autonomy

Introduction:

Bodo- Kachari is one of the major tribes of Assam belonging to Mongoloid stock of Human Race. They were migrated from Southern parts of China and Tibet and scattered in almost the entire north-east India having maximum concentration in the western Assam on the north bank of the Mighty Brahmaputra River. They are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of Assam. The Bodo community consists of not only the people known today as the Bodos but also communities like Dimasa, Rabha, Deori, Lalung, Tiwa, Madani, Mech, Sarania, Garo, Rajbongshi or Koch, Chutiya, Sonowal, Morang, Hajong , Tippera, Mahalia etc. Although they belong to the same stock of Human race , during the long historical period due to their migratory nature as well as for geographic influence they have been separated from each other resulting in non-contiguous nature of their settlements. Due to their migratory nature and scattered distribution they easily became prey to other groups of people. These people have been confronting with several problems since pre-colonial times. Encroachment, Land alienation, etc. had threatened their lives. Observing and realizing the grave situation , the government had created Belts and Blocks to protect the tribal people so that other nontribal people could not encroached their land. The creation of Blocks and belts were the provision to safeguard the tribal identity, their language , culture and traditions. In spite of the creation of tribal belts and blocks their identity is still being threatened.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this paper are-

1. To study the background of the genesis of tribal belts and blocks
2. To find out the causes of existential crisis of the tribal belts and blocks
3. To analyze the factors of clashes between the tribal and non-tribal people which lead to the separatist tendency among the tribal groups.

Methodology:

The study has been carried out with the help of secondary data source. For this purpose different books, government reports, notifications, Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 as well as related research articles have been studied. Besides, to find out the location of the tribal belts and blocks the administrative Atlas of Assam, (census of India, 2011) has been consulted. Historical and analytical approaches have been adopted to write this research paper.

Background behind the creation of tribal belts and blocks:

The tribal people are very simple in nature and owing to lack of education and material advantages, they could not look after their own welfare and hardly capable of protecting their own interest. It has been observed that migration of people to Assam had been continuing for long time. But during 1930s tremendous pressure of migrants mostly from the eastern part of Bengal i.e. present Bangladesh had been felt in Assam. At that time the Administrative system delimits certain areas as 'Closed' to the immigrants and non-tribal people by means of imaginary lines so that the predominantly tribal inhabited areas could be protected. It was known as 'Line System'¹ This Line System was unable to work satisfactorily and in 1937 a committee was formed by the government with Mr. Hockenbull as the chairman to enquire into the working of 'Line System'². The Committee recommended drive out the unauthorized occupants from the so called 'closed villages'. Large areas of tribal lands of Assam had been engulfed by the non-tribal people or the outsiders and the so called Belts and Blocks which have seemed for the name sake only have not been protected at all.³ Officially, there are as many as 47 Tribal Belts and Blocks to protect the tribal people in Assam covering an area of 85,80,842 bighas (2147460.5 hacrare) including 3980 villages.⁴ But nowhere they have been preserved by the enforcement agencies of the state government till date and what worries the tribal communities in the state is that about 60% in 47 Tribal Belts and Blocks in the state had been encroached illegally by the migrant population.⁵ It is observed that due to this illegal encroachment of land, the tribal people had been alienated from their lands, compelling them to migrate to new lands. Thus, land has become the bone of contention between the tribal and non-tribal people resulting in repeated ethnic conflicts.

The contest over tribal land and subsequent displacement of indigenous people has its Colonial legacy. After the annexation of Assam by the British in 1826, the pressure on land belonging to tribal people increased with the entry of peasants from East Bengal now Bangladesh. In this connection, Amalendu Guha (1977) in his *Planter Raj to Swaraj* notes that the British were responsible for the land alienation of the Bodos.⁶ A liberal wasteland settlement policy of the British government had tempted planters to grab more land than they need.⁷ They used this extra land to settle Adivasis who had been brought in to work in tea gardens as tenants. Simultaneously, they brought educated and English knowing Bengali people to assist them in Administration.

Another very important point in the tribal history of Assam was that Muslim League leader Saadullah who became the chief minister of Assam with the support of the Tribal League failed to fulfill his commitment but also brought large number of Muslim migrants to settle in Bodo areas.⁸ During the period between 1939 and 1941, Saadullah allocated one lakh bighas of land in Assam Valley for the settlement of immigrants from east Bengal.⁹ In 1942, the Saadullah government opened up grazing reserves for settlement by immigrants under a 'Grow more

food campaign’ which encouraged lakhs of Muslims to migrate to Assam and thus leaving the tribals unprotected in the state.

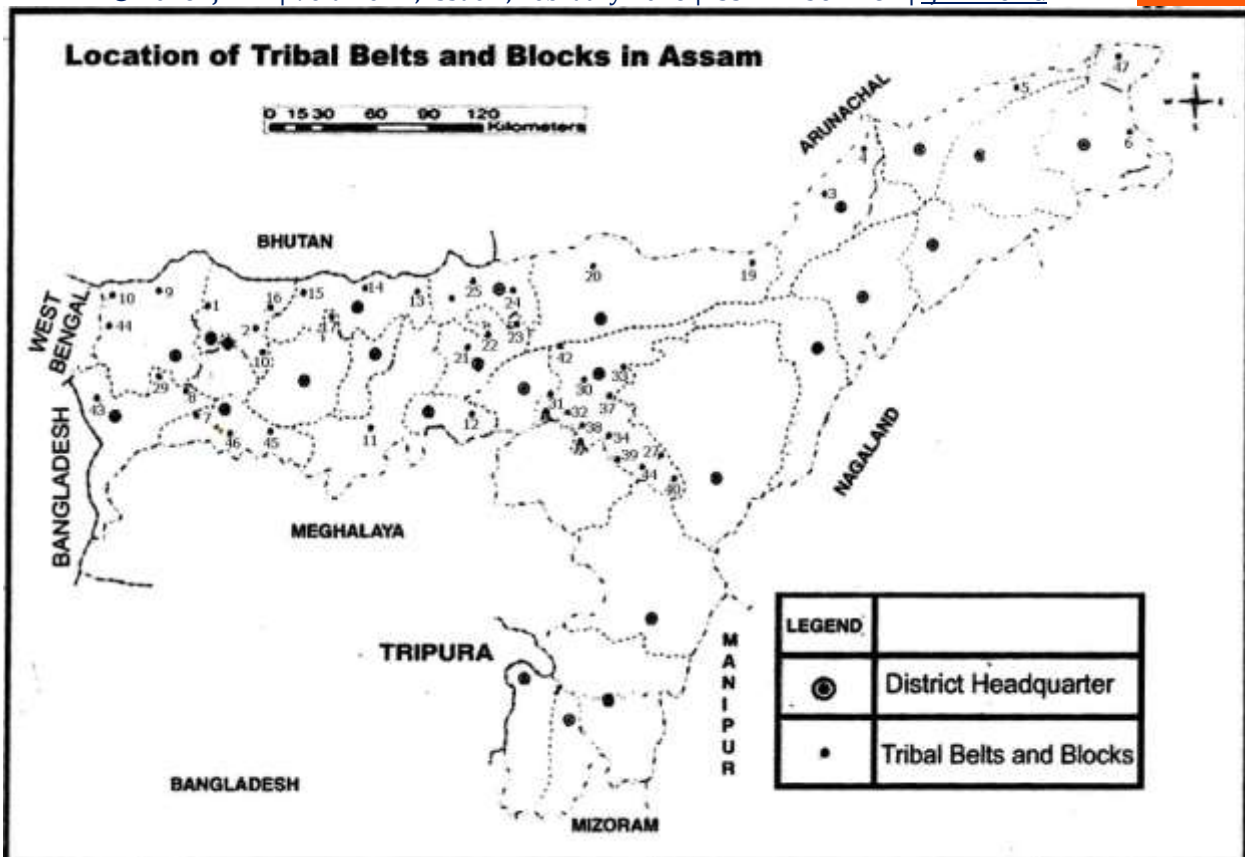
For providing protection to the tribal and other backward classes of people , the government included a Para in the ‘Resolution of Land Settlement’ published under No. RD.66/44/52, dated 15th January,1945 which read as follows:

“Special provision will be made for protection of tribal classes by constituting a tribal belt in the sub-Montane tract where they predominate”.¹⁰ Ultimately , in 1945 the government adopted a resolution bearing No.RD. 68/44, dated 13th July,1945 for the protection of tribal classes of people and laid down a guideline that all the villages in which the percentage of tribal people exceeded 50% over the total population of those villages should be marked on map and tribal Belts or Blocks as the case may be in the sub-montane area should be constituted by issuing notifications for protection of the interest of the tribal people. Accordingly, in order to give effect to the spirit of the Line System the Chapter X was incorporated in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886, and the tribal Belts and Blocks were constituted under the provisions of Chapter X.¹¹ As per the guidelines the state government had constituted 47 tribal Belts and Blocks in the state. The Belts are larger units, while the blocks are smaller ones. At present there are 17 Belts and Blocks which are located in the plains districts of Assam.¹² The following table shows the number of tribal belts and blocks created so far for the protection of the tribal people in Assam.

Table 1: Tribal Belts and Blocks created at different times in Assam (from 1947-1989)

Sl.No.	Year of constitution	No. of Belts/Blocks	Districts
i	1947	2	Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar
ii	1948	8	Darrang, Lakhimpur and Kokrajhar
iii	1949	7	Kamrup, Nalbari and Barpeta
iv	1950	10	Kamrup,Nagaon, Morigaon and Sonitpur
v	1951	4	Sonitpur, Dhemaji and Tinsukia
vi	1953	1	Nagaon
vii	1958	3	Nagaon and Morigaon
viii	1964	1	Nagaon
ix	1977	1	Kokrajhar
x	1978	1	Nagaon
xi	1979	1	Nagaon
xii	1982	3	Nagaon and Goalpara
xiii	1983	1	Kokrajhar
xiv	1984	3	Kokrajhar and Dhuburi
xv	1989	1	Goalpara
	Total	47	

Source: “Land Administration in Protected Belts Nd Blocks of Assam” (1990), Government of Assam, Revenue Department, Dispur



Name of the Tribal Belts and Blocks as shown in the Map of Assam:

Sl. No.	Name of the tribal belts and blocks	Sl. No.	Name of the tribal belts and blocks
1	Sidli Tribal Belt	25	Bhuyakhat Tribal Block
2	Bijni Tribal Block	26	Dalgaon Tribal Block
3	North Lakhimpur Tribal Belt	27	Barkacharigaon Tribal Block
4	North Lakhimpur Riverine Tribal Block	28	Bhalikjhari Tribal Block
5	Murkongselek Jonai Tribal Belt	29	Balaghat Nayekgaon Tribal Block
6	Abor-Mismi Tirap Tribal Belt	30	Ghagua Tribal Block
7	Bordamal Tribal Block	31	Tetelia Tribal Block
8	Balaghat Nayekgaon Tribal Block	32	Bardolong
9	Dotoma Tribal Belt	33	Amguri Chang Phulguri Tribal Block
10	Santal Colony Tribal Block	34	Phulguri Tribal Block
11	South Kamrup (Chaygaon) Tribal Belt	35	Amsoi Tribal Block
12	South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt	36	Bagriguri Tribal Block
13	Tamulpur Tribal Belt	37	Jamadari Tribal Block
14	Baska Tribal Belt	38	Baranganipathar Tribal Block
15	Chapaguri Tribal Belt	39	Barpather Tribal Block
16	Gobardhan Tribal Block	40	Kaki Tribal Block
17	Bajegaon Tribal Block	41	Kandura Tribal Block
18	Kharija Bijni Tribal Block	42	Batabarigaon Tribal Block
19	Gohpur Tribal Block	43	Parbatjhuar Tribal Belt
20	Balipara Tribal Belt	44	Ripu Tribal Belt

21	Kalaigaon Tribal Belt	45	Khardong Tribal Block
22	Tetelibhanguria Tribal Block	46	Hatigaon Tribal Block
23	Kacharipara TribL Block	47	Sadiya Tribal Belt
24	Tazial Tribal Belt		

But, unfortunately, lakhs of non-tribal encroachers have illegally occupied lands in tribal Belts and Blocks and they have got land pattas in connivance with the govt. officials. Mr. Thaneswar Baro, the Revenue Minister of Assam himself had admitted that 2 lakh 13 thousand and 0 Bighas of lands in tribal Belts and Blocks are under the illegal occupation of nontribal encroachers.¹³

Geopolitical Problems of the Tribal Belts and Blocks:

Though the Tribal Belts and Blocks were formed to safeguard the tribal people, but some problems have been continuing in these belts and blocks.

At first, exclusion of area from the tribal belts and blocks for government interest is one of the geopolitical problems of the belts and blocks. The state government excluded an area of 11,253 bigha 2 Kathas 7 Lesas of land from the Bijni Tribal Belt in 1962 by notification No. RSD.3/59/25 dt. 1st January, 1962 for the purpose of rehabilitation of 1368 refugee families migrated from the erstwhile Pakistan. The area is known to be ‘Bishnupur Colony’ now.¹⁴

The biggest problem facing by Assam and North-eastern states of India today is large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh. The problem is very serious today because at the present rate of influx, there is the very real danger of Assam being annexed to Bangladesh in just a couple of decades from now, and the irony of situation is that the problem has stemmed from greed from both sides- greed for cultivable land on one side and greed for votes on the other.¹⁵

Again by notification No. RSD.26/64/100 dt. 18th July 1969 the government excluded some areas falling within North Lakhimpur town and also some areas of Nakari Mouza, Naobaicha Mouza and Kamalabari Mouza adjacent to the Lakhimpur town from the North Lakhimpur Tribal Belt only for the expansion and development of the town.¹⁶

By a notification No. RSD.26/64/pt./38,dt. 30th July 1969 excluded some areas from the South Kamrup (Guwahati) tribal belt for the expansion and well planned development of the Guwahati City and its suburbs.¹⁷

Thus, the exclusion of areas from the tribal belts and blocks can be considered as a threat to the lives of the tribal people. The urbanization process also helps for weakening the distinct tribal identity in some areas.

Secondly, land alienation is another problem in the tribal belts and blocks. Though the transfer, exchange, lease, agreement or settlement of any land to the non-tribal have been strictly prohibited, but it has been continuing.

On 30th December 1982, shri J.N. Changkakati, secretary to the government of Assam wrote to the Deputy Commissioners asking them to take immediate action for removal of unauthorized occupants from tribal belts and blocks and to ensure that further encroachment are stopped totally. In the letter J.N. Changkakati stated (Letter No. RSD. 16/82/10 dated 30th December ,1982).¹⁸ “.....in spite of specific instructions issued from tome to time for removal of unauthorized occupants from tribal belts and blocks, large scale encroachments are not continuing but also seen to be increasing. Governments have taken serious views of the situation arising ut of such large scale encroachments in tribal belts and blocks by undeserving and unauthorized persons which has been the greatest hurdle in fulfilling the desired goal for adoption of Chapter X of Assam Land Revenue Regulation , 1886 as amended from time to time.”

Dr. Ranaj Pegu, President, River people and Mising Mimank Kebang said that even after more than six decades of India’s independence, protection of land of tribal, backward and indigenious people in Assam, remains an illusion. With the displacement of people every year due to factors like natural calamities, development

projects, migration, etc. the land crisis in Assam is deepening. This requires serious intervention and replacement of Colonial Laws by more contemporary, progressive and comprehensive laws.¹⁹

In Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) there are as many as 19 tribal belts and blocks in the five districts. These blocks have been continuously encroached until today. The following revenue villages within Bijni Tribal Block have been gradually encroached upon allegedly by the immigrant Muslims in violations of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886.²⁰

Table 2: Encroachment in the villages of Bijni Tribal Belt

Sl. No.	Name of the revenue villages encroached
1	Sonaikola
2	No.2 Darranga
3	Bispani
4	No.1 Dakhinmakra
5	Oxiguri
6	No.2 Dongsipara
7	Laokriguri
8	Amraguri
9	Bhaoraguri
10	No.1 Bagidara
11	No.2 Bagidara
12	Barlimari
13	No.1 Garabdara
14	No.1 Betbari
15	No.2 Betbari
16	Bagargaon
17	Alengmari
18	Deodhari
19	Majrabari
20	No.1 Dongripara
21	Fwrmaishali
22	No.3 Dakhinmakra
23	Jharbispani

Source: Assam Riots: Preventable but not prevented, Published by Asian Centre for Human Rights, September 2012, p-21es

Thirdly, due to large scale encroachment of tribal land by non-tribal people, clashes are going on between tribal and non-tribal people at different times. There have been clashes between Boros and immigrant Muslims, Boros and Adivashis leading to huge displacements of population. To keep the discussion within limits, the case of BTAD area in Assam has been considered here.

In October 1993, 50 people had to embrace death due to clashes between Bodos and immigrant Muslims in Bongaigaon District.²¹ In 1994 about 100 people were killed in the violence between Bodos and Muslims in Barpeta District. In 1996 more than 200 people were killed and over 2000000 displaced due to clash between Bodos and Santhals in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon Districts and both the communities have suffered badly. In 1998 again clashes took place between Bodos and Adivasis killing more than 50 people. In the year 2008, about 70 people were killed in clashes between Bodos and Muslims in the districts of Udalguri and Darrang which resulted in more than 100000 people homeless from both the communities. In August 2012, a violent clash took place between the Bodos and Muslims which claimed about 90 lives in the district of Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang,

Kokrajhar and Dhubri and Both the communities involved and affected.²² Again in 2014, violence broke out in Narayanguri village in Baksa district of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) of Assam and 45 people had to embrace death.²³ The Bod extremist group National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) indiscriminately shot down 70 innocent Adivasi people in the district of Kokrajhar, Udalguri and Sonitpur.²⁴

On July 3rd, 2016 the Janajati Surakha Mancha, a platform of indigenous communities consisting of Bodo, Rabha and Garo communities staged a three hour sit –in protest in Kokrajhar demanding protection of tribal areas and safeguard of indigenous people. A Memorandum was submitted to the Kokrajhar Deputy Commissioner demanding protection of tribal belts and blocks in Assam. It also mentioned that, “ the fact and extent of encroachment in the tribal belts and blocks by unauthorized people are known to the state government . The state government created nine posts of Additional Deputy Commissioner in 1993 and 16 Sub Deputy Collectors in 1984 separately for proper land and revenue administration in tribal belts and blocks. They were specially instructed to identify encroachers and take necessary actions for their eviction. But all remained on paper and nothing has been executed. It also stated that as of now ,349505 bighas 4 kathas and 8 Lesaa of land in tribal belts and blocks and sub plan areas have been encroached illegally in BTAD area alone according to data provided by Bodoland Territorial Council.²⁵

Findings: From the preceding analysis it has been found that-

1. The tribal people have been neglected both by the Administrative system and non-tribal people before and after independence.
2. Though the tribal belts and blocks were formed to protect the tribal people, but in reality they are not protected.
3. Land alienation , exchange, lease, transfer and settlement have been strictly prohibited in the tribal belts and blocks to the nontribal people, but that was going on in almost all the belts and blocks.
4. The encroachment of tribal land by non-tribal people primarily the immigrant Muslims have created tremendous pressure in the tribal lands which help in becoming minority of the tribal people in some of the belts and blocks.
5. Clashes are going on between tribal and non-tribal people on the right over land.
6. To regain their tribal status the tribal people have resorted to violent agitation killing hundreds of non-tribal people.
7. The tribal people are demanding autonomy and even separate state so that their ethnic identity with unique socio-cultural attributes could be preserved. In this respect the movement launched by All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) for a separate state of Bodoland can be cited as an example.

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