



RISING ASIA  
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA  
FOUNDATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MILAN NARZARY  
*Jadavpur University*

# An Aversion to ‘Savage’ Culture: Rectifying Popular Misinterpretations of the Bodoland Movement

**Keywords:** Bodoland Movement, Bodo in Popular Culture, Bodo Literature, Tribals in India, Savage Culture.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the prevailing misinterpretations of Bodos in popular Indian cinema and in historical studies and media. It attempts to understand the perception of Bodos in particular and ‘tribals’ in general through the writings about them by political leaders, scholars and journalists. To provide the Bodo perspective, the article delves into two Bodo novels, *Mwihur* (To Hunt) and *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai* (Bigrai and Dwisrai), that are distinguished works of semi-historical fiction. *Mwihur* records the dislocation of Bodo people from their forest homelands after the area had been declared as the Manas National Park. The author reads *Mwihur* employing Ecocriticism theory to excavate the idea of the ‘savage’ which reveals the biases held towards certain communities, and how the ‘savage’ was conceptualized and understood by Indian leaders that cast doubt on the capability of aboriginal communities to run their independent governments. The article argues that *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai*, set during the Bodoland agitation, amplifies the voice of the All Bodo Students’ Union, whose emphasis on using the Gandhian model of peaceful struggle—by using constitutional methods—helps in reaching a new understanding of the Bodoland Movement that is often represented in the popular discourse as a struggle sustained through military means. The novel establishes the demand for Bodoland as a desire within the community for political representation within the Indian union while accepting itself as part of the larger nation.

RISING ASIA JOURNAL.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 (WINTER/SPRING) JANUARY TO APRIL 2021.

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This article offers five principal arguments about the manner in which the Bodo community of Assam has been represented. First, it demonstrates the ways in which the Bodoland Movement in Assam has been misrepresented in popular and scholarly literature and in the cinema. It explores how the Bodo community has been treated in popular mainstream culture by conflating it with the Movement. Bodos are often missing from the mainstream media, but whenever they have been the subject of articles and films, they are not presented favorably. There has been a prejudice in the formation of opinions because as the subjects of these representations the Bodos have not always found a way to voice their side of the story. The lack of a platform to speak out creates epistemic ignorance within the mainstream society, where the episteme or knowledge of the concerned subject runs the risk of being misinformed.

The Bodo community has repeatedly been subjected to epistemic ignorance. They have been a topic of discussion in the media only during protests and riots, and their history, culture, traditions, and music are rarely used to explain their true identity and nature. The whole community has slowly come to be perceived as 'terrorists.' I will explore just how deep rooted this perception is.

Secondly, the article examines the formation of the idea of 'tribal life' by citing Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's views. As a leader in the Constituent Assembly who fought for the rights of Dalits against Brahmin oppression, he always tried to protect the minorities in India. His words shed important light on how 'tribals' are perceived in India, which has been significantly reflected in the Indian Constitution. I posit that his use of words such as "primitive" and "criminals" to characterize the tribal explains how they were perceived in India and reveals the gap of understanding between tribals and non-tribals. The motive was to tame the tribes, but such a measure might not have been necessary.

Thirdly, the article offers a theoretical assessment of Ecocriticism, through a deconstruction of the word 'savage.' This particular word has found space in multiple literatures of all genres, and a deeper engagement



with this word itself seems to reveal the cause of discrimination that ‘tribals’ all around the world experience. I argue that ‘savage’ at a literal level should mean ‘people who live in nature,’ but it has built up a canon of connotations along the lines of being ‘beastly, untamable, murderous, lawless, etc.’ The human tendency to progress beyond and above nature makes them look down on those who have not learnt to live without it.

Fourthly, my reading of a Bodo novel, *Mwihur*, helps to explicate aspects of the theory of Ecocriticism. It shows how the Bodo people had imbibed sentiments of inferiority only because they held on to their ancestral habits to directly depend on nature and to treat it with respect. It records a transitional phase in the lives of Bodo people in Assam as they were acquainting themselves with the western model of civilization.

The last and fifth argument is that while the attention of the mainstream media was usually on the extremists and insurgencies associated with the Bodoland movement, the novel *Bigrāi arw Dwisrai* presents the movement from the perspective of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) that had always tried to guide the people down the path of Mahatma Gandhi’s model of peaceful protest. This novel highlights the often ignored ABSU within the larger movement and recognizes its contribution. To begin with, the long period of insurgency, punctuated by multiple rounds of negotiations between insurgents and government, received large coverage in the national and local media, and Bodos even became the subject of Bollywood cinema.

## **Bodos in Popular Hindi Cinema**

The 2005 movie, *Tango Charlie*, directed by Mani Shankar, is structured around an Indian Border Security Force soldier played by the Bollywood actor, Bobby Deol, who receives a warning when he enters the depth of the Manipur jungles where his fellow army men are camped: “*Apne kaan aur ankhe khuli rakhna kyunki yahan ke atankwadi Bodos bohot hi khatarnak hai*” (Keep your eyes and ears open because the Bodo terrorists here are extremely dangerous). Later in the same scene, Tango Charlie (Bobby Deol),

the narrator of the film, speaks to the audience: "*Hum raat din jungle mein phirte rahe. Bas ek hi lakshya, Bodo dushman ko dhundo aur maro.*" (We kept wandering day and night inside the jungle. There was only one motive: To find the Bodo enemies and kill them).

These dialogues are problematic in two ways. First, Bodo is the name of an ethno-linguistic group that inhabits a large area under the territory of present-day Assam and its neighboring states. From these dialogues what one can infer is that either Bodo is the name of a militant organization or that each individual that belongs to this ethno-linguistic group is engaged in terrorist activity. The concept of the film in this particular scene aims at creating a binary between the patriotic soldiers of the Indian army and the fiendish tribal militants. The binary is established to generate strong sympathy for the soldiers' sacrifice on behalf of the citizens against the Bodos who could be a threat to their survival. The film attempts to integrate a fictional narrative with real life issues, modeling a plot where the audiences are thrown facts, which they accept and internalize as truths. The effect such facts have on the community being referred to, and the communities that are internalizing them, can be gravely concerning. Not only is there a lack of awareness about Bodo culture, but when a film is regularly telecast on national television, depicting Bodos in such a manner, it ends up creating stereotypes and subjects the community to epistemic violence.

The second element that stands out starkly and reveals the lack of research that has gone into the writing and production of this film is the use of language. Being a Bollywood production, the film has the soldiers speaking in Hindi. The militants, however, speak in Bodo in an attempt at realistic portrayal. A major flaw of the film is exposed at this juncture: the actors merely pretend to speak in Bodo. The end result is a gibberish language. The actors who play the role of Bodo terrorists do not speak in Bodo; in fact, they do not speak anything that can be called a legible language. The writers must have presumed that as long as the phonetics sounded foreign, exotic, or more precisely 'Mongoloid,' they could convince



the majority of the audience that this is how the Bodo language sounds. We can go into greater detail to dissect how Tango Charlie does injustice to the Bodo community and their culture, but since this film is not the main subject of this article, I will abandon it at this stage. The single point the reader should take away from the above analysis is that there are insurgent groups who have formed out of the Bodo community under the volatile conditions of North East India, namely the Bodo Liberation Tigers and National Democratic Front of Bodoland, but these insurgent groups do not comprise the entirety of the Bodo population. The rise of these groups will be discussed in the latter half of the essay. The primary motive in this section is to draw attention towards such popular misconceptions.

## Bodos in Scholarly Works

In August 2018, the United Tribal Organization, Assam (UTOA) lodged a First Information Report against the journalist and author, Sanjoy Hazarika, and the professor emeritus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Romila Thapar, an eminent historian of India, for allegedly defaming the Bodo community in their books, *Strangers No More* and *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The President of the UTOA, Markush Basumatary declared that the organization was compelled to lodge the FIR against the two writers because the Bodo community was deeply hurt by the use of specific phrases in *Strangers No More*. He drew attention to Thapar's "inaccurate" statement in her book, on page 378: "Few in India pause to count the number of militant groups that are terrorizing areas of the subcontinent and are not concerned with matters of Islam . . . The Bodo, the ULFA, a variety of groups in the north-east some of whom go back fifty years." Basumatary added:

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<sup>1</sup> "Kokrajhar: FIR Against Sanjoy Hazarika and Romila Thapar for Insulting Bodos," *The Sentinel*, August 8, 2018; Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers No More* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2018), 187; and Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2010).

“The inaccuracy of this sentence is that she has categorized Bodo community as a militant group. Such misrepresentation of a whole community is unacceptable as it has the potential of stereotyping a community as criminal or militant in nature.” He explained: “We do not want readers to have misconception about the Bodo community as militant through use of such generalized insensitive words.” The UTOA leader commented that Hazarika, being a local person who was familiar with the communities of Assam, should never have written statements such as “Bodo use of explosive,” or “Bodo militants,” or “blood-spattered Bodo council.” The complaint took issue with Hazarika’s allegation that Pramila Rani Brahma, a Bodo who was a minister in the Assam government, was indirectly involved in instigating violence.

Prior to the filing of the FIR, some students of Bodoland University in Kokrajhar protested in May 2018 against the two writers. Hazarika told *The Telegraph*: “I have heard about this for the first time. I will certainly look into it. I am a person who used to do a lot of research before I write something. I don’t intend to harm anyone.”<sup>2</sup> In an email enquiry sent from this author to both the writers, Romila Thapar responded stating: “The concerned paragraph was redrafted and you can check it on the subsequent imprint of the book.” Sanjoy Hazarika, however, did not respond to the author’s queries sent by email.<sup>3</sup>

The case against the two writers was a reiteration of the same issue that has already been highlighted—the habit of referring to the Bodo as a terrorist outfit that had left a bitter taste among the Bodo people. Moreover, the use of Bodo as a generalized term has not been limited to popular culture and books by the Indian intelligentsia but continues to be a customary choice among journalists too. Popular regional newspaper, *The Assam Tribune*, and national news channel, *India Today*, have indiscriminately used headlines

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<sup>2</sup> “Students Protest ‘Slur’ on Bodos,” *The Telegraph*, May 30, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Milan Narzary, email to Romila Thapar and Sanjoy Hazarika, July, 12, 2020.



such as “Bodos kill 65 in Assam” and “Instilled fear among Bodos.”<sup>4</sup> The use of the umbrella term ‘Bodo’ paints all Bodos with a negative brush.

## Ambedkar’s Views on Tribal Life

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is one of the most venerated scholars in India, remembered for his pivotal role in drafting the Indian Constitution as secular and liberal in structure, and widely regarded as an inspiration behind anti-oppression movements and used as a symbol for advancement of the downtrodden in India. Ambedkar never wrote explicitly on the tribal system in Indian society, but in a speech prepared for an annual conference of Jat-Pat Todak Mandal (1935), which he later published in written format as *Annihilation of Caste*, a few remarks on the tribal communities of India and their relationship with the Hindu community can be found:

The recent [constitutional] discussion about the excluded and partially included areas has served to draw attention to the position of what are called the aboriginal tribes in India. They number about 13 million, if not more. Apart from the question of whether their exclusion from the new Constitution is proper or improper, the fact still remains that these aborigines have remained in their primitive uncivilized state in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old. Not only are they not civilized, but some of them follow pursuits which have led to their being classified as criminals. Thirteen millions of people living in the midst of civilization are still in a savage state, and are leading the life of hereditary criminals!! But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it. This is a phenomenon which in my view is quite unparalleled. What is the cause of this shameful state of affairs? Why

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<sup>4</sup> “Bodos kill 65 in Assam, 3 die in police firing,” *The Tribune*, December 24, 2014; and *India Today*, June 9, 2015.

has no attempt been made to civilize these aborigines and to lead them to take to a more honourable way of making a living?<sup>5</sup>

Later, in his address to the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation, held in Bombay on May 6, 1945, he provides the following argument:

My proposals do not cover the Aboriginal Tribes although they are larger in number than the Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians and Parsees. The Aboriginal Tribes have not as yet developed any political sense to make the best use of their political opportunities and they may easily become mere instruments in the hands either of a majority or a minority and thereby disturb the balance without doing any good to themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Ambedkar appears to have borrowed these stereotypical views from the public consciousness because in the 1940s there was no lack of journals being published or absence of any political party pontificating on the circumstances of North East India. The first Bodo journal had already been published by 1924, but public opinion was shaped by non-Bodo, mainstream journals. There was indeed a lack of communication with the representatives of North East India. Ambedkar's beliefs led him to formulate protective policies, specifically through the provisions made under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution that allows tribal majority areas, mostly in North East India, to live in a quasi-autonomous interrelation with the state government. The states were often run under the leadership of a Hindu majority, as was the case in Assam. Assamese leaders who exhibited evidence of a Tibeto-Burmese past had enough Aryan assimilation to be legitimized

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<sup>5</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, section 8,

[https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc\\_print\\_2004.pdf](https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf), accessed on July 30, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Arundhati Roy, *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014,) 248.





as ‘civilized.’ The non-Aryan tribes of Assam, that were not in a minority, had to form districts under the mainstream umbrella. Was the Sixth Schedule a success or failure, could there have been a better alternative, and did the Bodo leaders do enough to be heard—I will leave such arguments out of this article because the prime focus is of a philosophical nature and the use of literary tools.

The hegemonic perspective that denounces as ‘uncivilized’ the communities living within forests, which did not fall under the major races of the world, diminished the Bodo Kingdom into a diminutive category of ‘tribe’ that had, in actual fact, ruled the Brahmaputra Valley prior to the advent of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century. The current system of autonomous regions within a federal state (Sixth Schedule) creates a quandary by legalizing aboriginal communities as immature people who are stuck in a historically static state. It was the ‘immaturity’ of the ‘tribals’ that justified the actions taken in order to prohibit their self-governance. The Indian nation state offered to hold the tribe’s hands and guide them towards enlightenment. The Adivasi leader from Jharkhand and member of the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh, had argued on December 19, 1946: “What my people require, Sir, is not adequate safeguards . . . We do not ask for any special protection. We want to be treated like every other Indian.”<sup>7</sup>

The reductionist knowledge claim of the Indian intelligentsia was limited to labeling the concerned communities as primitive without any inclusion of their history and culture into the debate, which was being provided at the time by ‘tribal’ leaders. It seems that the lawmakers were infatuated with the idea of primitivism and no logic could change the direction of the wind. It bore the classic symptoms of Saidian Orientalism and the irony of the White Man’s Burden. In *Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar accused the Hindu Brahmins of not sharing the zeal of Christian missionaries in spreading knowledge amongst the tribes, to redeem their

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 249.

ignorant lives.<sup>8</sup> The above discussion provides a proper segue towards ecocriticism.

### **Ecocriticism and *Mwihur***

An animal with higher intellect,  
more noble, able—one to rule the rest:  
such was the living thing the earth still lacked.

Then man was born. Either the Architect  
of All, the author of the universe,  
in order to beget a better world,  
created man from seed divine.<sup>9</sup>

– Ovid, Book I

Anthropocentrism has long been a companion of human consciousness—the figure of man as god, his all-knowing human gaze, and nature reduced to a state of property and resource. The American author Aldo Leopold conceived the idea of Ecocentrism to emphasize the interrelationship between all species of life in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*. In his essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” he argues for the need to look at the world from a perspective beyond human imaginations, not anymore as a higher species but as an element of the larger biosphere where all species are interdependent for harmony and longevity of life on earth.<sup>10</sup> Leopold propounds what he calls Land Ethics—for a person to look at soil, water, plants, and animals as members of a community, not as separate entities because these natural resources had been legitimizing their exploitation: “A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management and use of these ‘resources,’ but it does affirm their right to

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<sup>8</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, sections 7 and 8.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Mandelbaum, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 77.



continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.”<sup>11</sup>

What has Ecocriticism got to do with an analysis of the Bodoland Movement? The link between these two aspects is the word ‘savage,’ which Ambedkar did not shy away from using himself, and neither did Oliver Goldsmith when he dedicated his poem, “The Rising Village,” to the glorious ‘discovery’ of Canada by ‘Great Britain’:

Behold! The savage tribes, in wildest strain...  
... hideous yells announce the murd’rous band,  
whose bloody footsteps desolate the land.<sup>12</sup>

Ideas of Ecocentrism that highlight the prejudices of Anthropocentrism can help us look at the word ‘savage’ differently, where being savage might not be entirely terrible. ‘Savage’ has a Latin root that simply means ‘woods,’ but it gradually came to encompass a wider meaning—of those who live in the woods. The current usage of savage carries a negative connotation of being primitive and uncivilized. Because nature is beastly and dangerous, so should the people who live in the woods, be like animals. The root of discrimination that ‘tribal’ people face is in the conception of human progress, which is to evolve beyond the animal instincts inherent in humans, to distinguish oneself as a superior species, to see a human figure as the creator of the world, therefore justifying that humans are indeed the masters of nature, not a part of it. Evolution has made humans afraid of nature and the creatures that lurk within its shadows. Therefore, when Ambedkar was calling the tribals “hereditary criminals” who may disturb the balance, he was expressing a similar fear—danger from

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<sup>11</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 204.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *The Rising Village with Other Poems* (Wyoming: Creative Media partners, 2015).

humans who co-habit the shadows. The pre-colonial period in Assam had already witnessed the emergence of a similar notion of dichotomy between the 'civilized Hindu' and the 'wild tribes.'

There was nothing wild about the tribes; they were self-civilized. In North East India the predominant mode of religion was animistic among a majority of communities. The rise of the Ahom Kingdom introduced a shift in tradition. The Ahom kings, who desired the title of the 'Kshatriya,' invited Brahmin scholars from the subcontinent to perform the *Ashvamedha yagna*.<sup>13</sup> Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in India, the ritual of *Ashvamedha yagna* or 'horse sacrifice' was a common practice among kings to demonstrate their strength and to be entitled as 'Kshatriya.' The Brahmin scholars also accompanied the Ahom kings in other rituals and fulfilled their duty of acquainting the kings with the knowledge of Sanskrit texts. It eventually led to Hinduism gaining popularity and a phenomenon of aboriginal communities converting in large numbers, for example the Sonowals, whose lineage has been traced to the Bodo (Kachari) kingdom. Not only did the Sonowals forego their Kachari past but also embraced the Assamese language, which was a creation of the introduction of the Sanskrit knowledge system.

The Ahoms originally spoke in a branch of language known as *Tai-Ahom* and practiced a unique script in which their famous *Buranjis* were maintained. *Buranjis* were made from strips of bark of the Saci tree and were passed on as heirlooms from generation to generation. The subjects they dealt with were numerous—histories, methods of divination, specimens of folklore.<sup>14</sup> The present-day Assamese language and culture is a product of ancient Aryan influence and has minimal similarity to the Ahoms who were an offshoot of the *Tai* or *Shan* of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan, who are believed to have wandered into the Brahmaputra Valley during the thirteenth century. Although, the Ahom language has still survived within a small population, it has spread

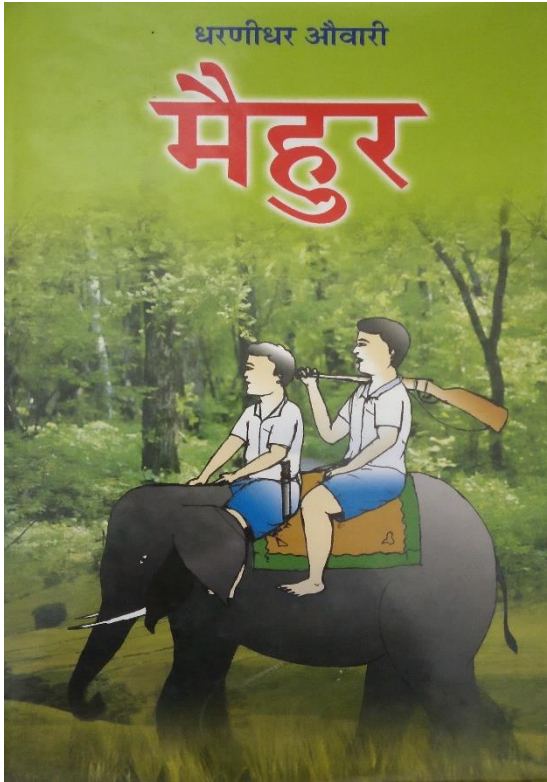
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<sup>13</sup> Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1906), 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 67.



predominantly in Upper Assam. The advent of British officials in Assam with their scientific worldview began cementing the idea of primitive ‘tribes.’ The Aryanized Ahoms were familiar to the British, but the dispersed population of others, who were unknown to them, were to be feared. The unknown was tagged as tribal.



Bodo language edition of *Mwihur*.

Dharnidhar Oowary in *Mwihur* shows that by the twentieth century the tribals had internalized such a portrayal of their culture. Golo, the novel’s protagonist says to Dodere, the girl he eventually falls in love with, when he meets her in the middle of the jungle while she was running from the forest rangers: “Even in this modern day and age our Bodo people don’t desire beyond the wild fish, deer, fruits, vegetables, and timber. It was only last year that a quarrel had ensued with the rangers for collecting *Lonthi* [a bitter

herb] vegetables.”<sup>15</sup> What becomes apparent here is a tendency to leave behind the ancestral traditions under external duress. The non-capitalistic, hunting-gathering-farming mode of existence that comes so naturally to people—which remains relevant to them as long as they stay close to nature and depend on it day and night for sustenance until their population grows large and complicated—becomes a major factor of prejudice between races. The ‘civilized’ race exerts pressure over the other by defining them as inhuman and justifies their actions as a part of the civilizing mission.

Owary published his first and only novel, *Mwihur*, in 1980 based on the displacement of the forest dwellers. Post-independence, Indian policymakers were realizing the importance of forest lands and a National Forest Policy was enacted in 1952. The national interest at an abstract level was taken into consideration, which was prioritized over the communities who inhabited the forest lands and had been dependent on its resources for generations. The following statement in “The National Forest Policy of India 1952,” by the Government of India, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, summarizes the government’s view:

Village communities in the neighborhood of a forest will naturally make greater use of its products for the satisfaction of their domestic and agricultural needs. Such use, however, should in no event be permitted at the cost of national interests. The accident of a village being situated close to a forest does not prejudice the right of the country as a whole to receive the benefits of a national asset . . . Restrictions should be imposed in the interests not only of the existing generation, but also of posterity.<sup>16</sup>

Owary’s novel is a story of complaint, although not directed at the government but the Bodo community. It is the failure of his people to leave

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<sup>15</sup> Dhwrnidhwr Owary, *Mwihur* (Baksa: Nilima Prakashani, 1980), 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Indian Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission, 1960-61, Volume 1* (Simla: The Manager Government of India Press, 1961), 129.



their age-old habits, their failure to motivate themselves and rise like other communities, their inability to embrace western education, to be more 'civil'. Bodo literature in its initial phase had a huge corpus of characters undergoing an inferiority complex. The characters were both educated and uneducated. Employing the trope of *Hari Phonsongnai* (uplifting the society), Bodo writers often appealed to men and women to walk in step with modernity, in their poems and short stories published in journals. We find the same emotions in *Mwihur*, as Owary writes: "The few educated youth, instead of guiding the naïve villagers themselves get engaged in picking fruits and vegetables, and catching fish . . . How long will the Bodo society need to open their eyes?"<sup>17</sup>

This does not mean the Bodo and other aboriginal communities lived in complete disarray or state of ignorance. There were Bodo kings who ruled over a large area, governing a community of people, who are referred to as 'tribes,' that lived in relative freedom with no permanent settlements. Hunting-gathering and agriculture were the main modes of survival, and as there were ample resources for the small population, there was no need to depend on the capitalistic economy yet. The formal structure of Owary's novel replicates the western social realism genre, which he uses to depict the Bodo social structure. His novel shows the importance of the village governance system, where meetings were regularly organized by a village elder who sends a *Halmazi* (messenger) to spread the news of a forthcoming gathering. Discussions on issues of social significance, village laws, religious rituals and customs were a part of such meetings. What Owary's novel helps to argue against is the lack of civilizing structure amongst the 'savage.' If anything, what the aboriginal communities lacked was exposure to western culture that dominated the politics and psychology of the subcontinent at the time. It should be remembered that most of the prominent Indian leaders had returned home after pursuing education abroad.

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<sup>17</sup> Owary, *Mwihur*, 31.

Another prominent feature of western civilization, and of present-day India, is the idea of property. As Bodos did not live in permanent settlements, it caused a significant setback for their culture after the East India Company's intervention in the politics of Assam. They had no 'legal' bonding to their land. Multiple voices in *Mwihur* express the sentiment of loss. The restrictions that government policy laid down for the Manas National Reserve brought sweeping changes to their lifestyle. The government could take over their land and impose laws as it saw fit because it became a part of public property; it was no more a land of community sharing, free from ownership. As a forest reserve official says in *Mwihur* to girls who trespass onto government property: "Do you know how profitable this forest is for the government? Why aren't your people willing to understand the importance of annual revenue that is generated for the government?"<sup>18</sup> Aldo Leopold wanted nature to be not just managed but protected, but the words of *Mwihur's* forest rangers convey only a greed for profit.

As many Bodos became educated in the western system over time, they understood the importance of static, measurable, mathematical units as evidence in the western knowledge system. In the cultural movement, one such calculable element to prove legitimacy is history, which Owary succeeds in achieving: In the introductory section of the novel, Manoranjan Lahary, a prominent Bodo novelist himself notes: "The story in this novel isn't an imaginary narrative, it's as if, a living reality."<sup>19</sup> Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry becomes apparent in *Mwihur* when we look at the use of history by Owary. The colonized learns and adapts to the colonizers' tool, "as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite."<sup>20</sup> In *Mwihur*, history is interspersed with dialogue that goes back to a nostalgic past, filled with stories, memories and legends. But these memories take on a new form;

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1994).





they become more static and permanent in nature. The ambiguity of oral stories with heroes from legends is transformed into historical figures. The colonized are forced to 'historicize' their collective memories in order to showcase a legitimate ancestral proof, to be able to reclaim the land over which new colonial demands had been made.

The Bodos had created an almost perfect idyll within the wilderness of the jungle. The intermingling of this community's past with new methodologies of western literature produced an art where nature narrates their history, as the writer finds his people on the verge of losing their link with their ancestors, and as new stories are told to them in foreign languages. The narrator in *Mwihur* reminisces: "How melodious was the Siphung (Bodo flute), and the music of the Serja (a Bodo Chordophone), played during those days."<sup>21</sup> There is no massive structure of ancient monuments left behind, only the flowing of a river stream. Owary effortlessly adds history to the biosphere surrounding his characters: "Barsi [river] is a flowing history. Running down the Northern Gongar<sup>22</sup> hills even now it gathers the news of the Bodos who inhabit the hills... In the past the hill Bodos fought bravely against the Gongars. The commanders of Gongar army thought that our Lady Gambari<sup>23</sup> was a female ghost."<sup>24</sup>

### **An Alternate Battle in *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai***

As the traditional cultures were fading, foreign cultures were imposed upon the tribals. They found themselves on the brink of extinction not only because of the restriction of freedom, but also due to the loss of land for those who were heavily dependent upon agriculture and forest products. The threat of government takeover pushed many towards action which often

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<sup>21</sup> Owary, *Mwihur*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> 'Gongar' is the word used in Bodo to refer to the people of Bhutan. There would often be clashes between Gongars and the Bodos.

<sup>23</sup> Gambari Shikla was a Bodo princess of Bijni, Assam.

<sup>24</sup> Owary, *Mwihur*, 17.

took a violent turn, covered extensively by the national media. Although not everyone agreed with the adoption of aggression as a tool, there were those who believed in a more radical approach. Tiren Boro's novel speaks on behalf of the latter group.

Located at a point when the Bodoland movement was in full swing, Boro's *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai* (*Bigrai and Dwisrai*, 1992) concentrates on the ABSU's side of the struggle. The novelist creates a binary between the ruled and the ruler but this time it is from below, it is the subaltern speaking. As binaries are always susceptible to stereotypes and generalizations, *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai* runs on a thin line between propaganda and social realism. The two leading characters in the novel fall in love with each other during their college years but they refrain from maintaining any relationship. Both of them believe that working for the welfare of the Bodo community is the need of the hour. A substantial portion of the novel is dedicated to the exchange of violence between the state and the revolutionaries, and the repercussions it had on the livelihood of the general public. The Bodoland movement had strayed from its path, but the ABSU was adamant about following the Gandhian model of non-violent resistance. The President, Upendra Nath Brahma, had always reiterated these principles, arguing that the Bodos were only demanding their constitutional right.

The basic plot of Boro's novel circles around its male protagonist, Bigrai, who is a member of the ABSU and lives in a hideout camp inside the forest, along with other volunteers. They are under the constant radar of the police who accuse them of causing violence, setting off explosives and disrupting public life. Unfazed, Bigrai continues to assert, what Upendra Nath Brahma had always maintained: "Our movement is republican and constitutional. This movement has been run under Mahatma Gandhi's ideologies of 'Ahimsa'."<sup>25</sup> The narrator's voice in Chapter One says: "Sucked up and trampled upon, when a depressed community opens their mouth for

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<sup>25</sup> Tiren Boro, *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai* (Kokrajhar: Onsumoi Library, 1992), 69.



rights, they are labeled as unconstitutional terrorists.”<sup>26</sup> Boro has tried to voice the perspective of ABSU, that their struggle had never been to choose the path of violence and they had never used any firearm. Premananda Mochahari in his book, *Political Identity Crisis of the Bodos and their Bodoland Movement*, has traced the first violence back to the year 1987. On June 12, 1987, Surjit Narzary—who had participated in a rally organized at Guwahati where thousands of people lined up demanding the division of Assam—was killed while returning by bus and was marked as the first Bodo martyr.<sup>27</sup>

Boro’s characters are primarily divided into two linguistic groups, Bodo and Assamese. On the one hand are the oppressed Bodos—poor villagers, old men and women, youth labeled as lawless individuals, and helpless children. The battle cry is for their protection and for their rights. On the other hand are the Assamese who form the superstructure as they control law and order. The policemen in Boro’s novel speak only in Assamese even though the entirety of the novel is in Bodo. A prominent boundary of difference and power struggle is represented when an Assistant Commissioner of Police, K.C. Sharma, says: “*Eitu amar Sarkar. Ami ji icha take koribo pare. Kachari bilake ki jane? Jodhamurkh eko bujhibo napai. Hei karoneto aji ei obostha.*” (This is our government. We do as we wish. What do the Kacharis know? You dimwits can’t understand a thing. Therefore, you are in such a petty condition).<sup>28</sup>

Boro depicts the nature of the police as more aggressive in comparison to the revolutionaries. He addresses the prevalent sentiments of his people in those years of struggle, when there was a complete distrust between the Assamese and the Bodos. The dominant Hindu Assamese had an Orientalist view of the Bodos. Consequently, the Bodos began viewing the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Premananda Mochahari, *Political Identity Crisis of the Bodos and their Bodoland Movement* (Guwahati: N.L.Publication, 2011), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Boro, *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai*, 40.

Assamese as oppressive rulers, as they felt suffocated under their dominance and misrepresentation. How all of this came to pass, and how it played out in twentieth century history are questions that I have kept to the end.

When the Simon Commission, a group of seven British Members of Parliament, landed in Bombay on February 3, 1928, it was greeted with chants of "Simon go back!" Several political organizations in India overwhelmingly boycotted the commission. The North Eastern part of India, however, was less skeptical and more welcoming towards the "all white" commission that had been created under the Government of India Act of 1919 (Part V, Section 41) which declared that at the expiration of ten years from the passing of the act, parliament was to appoint a commission to report on the functioning of the "system of Government, the growth of education and the development of representative institutions, in British India," and "to what extent it is desirable to establish the principle of responsible Government."<sup>29</sup> As proposed, on November 8, 1927, Sir John Simon was appointed the chairman of this Royal Commission.<sup>30</sup>

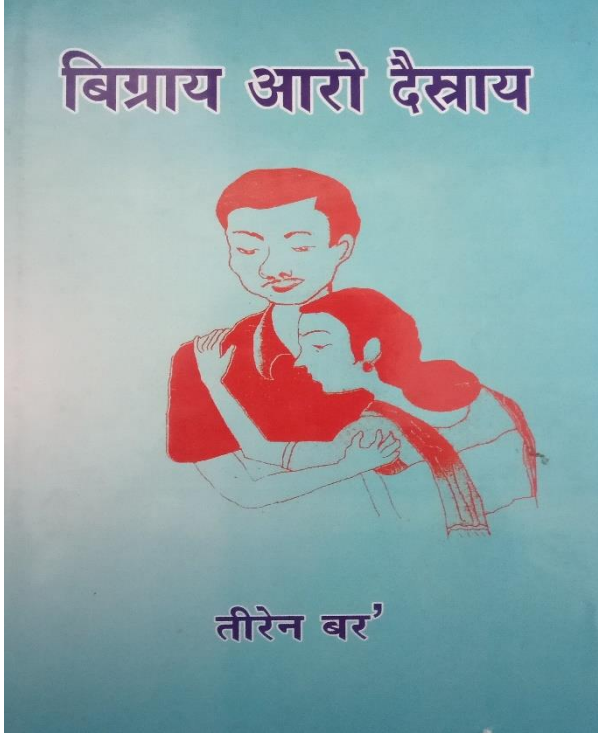
When the Simon Commission visited Shillong in 1929 many organizations in the North East saw it as an opportunity to attract the authority's attention towards some of the issues that had been worrying them. Representatives of several tribal communities sent memorandums to the commission. Actually, it was not only the North East that welcomed the Commission, as the leader of the Kayastha Sabha from Bihar had earlier sent a memorandum in December 1928 expressing "cordial, loyal and hearty welcome to the Statutory Commission." Among the issues that the Kayastha Sabha raised were the crises of decreasing tribal population in the Chota-Nagpur division and the Orissa division due to increasing deforestation, lack of forest product supplies, and oppression by the zamindars.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> H.N. Mitra, *The Government of India Act 1919 & Government Reports 1920* (Calcutta: N.N. Mitter Annual Register Office, 1921), 30.

<sup>30</sup> B.N. Pande, *Centenary History of the Indian National Congress* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2011), 146.

<sup>31</sup> Kayastha Sabha, *Memorandum to the Simon Commission*, December 1928.



Bodo language edition of *Bigrai Arw Dwisrai*

The Bodo-Kachari people of Assam (Kachari was the name used by other tribes for Bodo) had concerns which were similar to a certain degree, as well as a set of their own personal demands. One of the earliest social reformers of Bodo society, Kalicharan Brahma, widely known for founding the Brahma Dharma, sent a memorandum to the Commission, along with other signatories on behalf of the Bodo-Kachari people, declaring that Bodo had historically been distinct from the Hindu and Assamese people and therefore they needed to be categorized separately in the population census. The memorandum also argued against the idea of a mixed electorate, and it suggested that each community should be allowed to send at least one of their members as a representative in the local councils. While demanding compulsory pre-primary education and scholarships for higher education, the memorandum insisted that Goalpara, a largely Bodo populated area,

should not be transferred to the dominion of Bengal and should continue being a part of Assam. The Bodos also asked for the creation of a separate Bodo regiment in the Indian army.<sup>32</sup>

By the early twentieth century several groups of English educated Bodo elites had begun coming together to form organizations and clubs to address their socio-political concerns at regular meetings. It marked the first awakening and unification of the consciousness of the Bodo peoples' political interests and rights. Among the most influential organizations were Habraghat Boro Sonmiloni (Habraghat Boro Organization, 1912), Dakshinkul Boro Sahitya Sonmiloni (Dakshinkul Boro Literary Organization, 1918), and Boro Satra Sonmiloni (Boro Student Organization, 1919) which published the first bilingual journal written in Boro and the Bengali language, *Bibar* (Flower, 1920, 1924), and finally the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Bodo Literary Society) was established in 1952. The memorandum submitted by Kalicharan Brahma did not yield immediate results, but it marked the beginning of a long political struggle. The path hewn by these early organizations saw the formation of two entities that participated in tribal politics in pre-independence India—the Assam Tribal League (ATL) in 1933, and the All Assam Tribal Races Federation in 1935, consisting of the Kacharis (Bodos), Mikirs (Karbis), Miris (Mishings), Lalung (Tiwa), and Rabhas.<sup>33</sup>

## Revisiting the History of the Bodo Struggle

The Bodo elites were surprised that they had been categorized as 'Scheduled Tribes' under the Indian Constitution (1950). The Bodo scholar, Premananda Mochahari, even goes to the extent of claiming that the Bodos were stripped of their ruling status. Furthermore, it divided the Bodo people into separate groups as Hill-tribes or Plain-tribes, and those who converted into

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<sup>32</sup> *Memorandum to the Simon Commission*, Shillong, January 4, 1929.

<sup>33</sup> Mochahari, *Political Identity Crisis of the Bodos and their Bodoland Movement*, 23.



Hinduism as Scheduled Caste. Many tribal leaders saw it as a divisive policy.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, the General Secretary of the ATL, Bhimbar Deuri, appealed to the people at the executive meeting of the organization on February 22, 1939 to enlist themselves as 'tribal' irrespective of their religion in the 1941 census.<sup>35</sup>

The fragility of Assam's linguistic communities began showing cracks over which language should be the official one. In April 1960, the Nikhil Assam Bangla Bhasa Samiti submitted a memorandum to the president of India demanding that Bengali be recognized throughout Assam for official purposes.<sup>36</sup> On July 2 and 3, 1960 the Cachar Congress leaders called for an All Assam Bengali Language Conference to be held in Silchar.<sup>37</sup> The Bodo Sahitya Sabha which had already begun its plan to develop the Bodo language by the 1950s now received further impetus to strengthen the process.

A plan to introduce the Assam Official Language Act in 1960 recognizing Assamese as an official language in the state and the medium of instruction in educational institutions, triggered a wave of protests. There were three irreconcilable groups in Assam: one demanded Bengali and Assamese should be the state languages; the second group only wanted Assamese, and the third Hindi. While such intractability prevailed, the Assam government sought permission to introduce the Official Language Bill on October 10, 1960, even though the opposition to the bill was influential. The tribal members of the cabinet of the Chief Minister Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, resigned in opposition to the bill.<sup>38</sup>

The political parties representing tribes from Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Lushai, Mikir, and North Cachar hills formed the All Party Hill Leaders

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasa Samity, *A Case for Bengalis in Assam* (Holai, 1960).

<sup>37</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, July 6, 1960.

<sup>38</sup> V. Venkata Rao, "The Formation of Meghalaya," *Constitutional Development Since Independence*, ed. Alice Jacob (Bombay: N.M. Tripathi, 1975), 365.

Conference, or APHLC, and sent a delegation to Delhi, which met the prime minister on November 24, 1960.<sup>39</sup> Their central argument was that the declaration of Assamese as an official language was intended to assimilate the tribals into Assamese.<sup>40</sup> The non-Assamese speakers of Shillong staged a demonstration where provocative slogans were used against the Assamese language.<sup>41</sup> On May 19, 1961 the Cachar Sangram Parishad formed by the Cachar Congress called for a complete strike where eleven people were killed and twenty-one wounded in police firing.<sup>42</sup>

The Bodo language, which falls under the Tibeto-Burmese family,<sup>43</sup> had inherited no established written script, however, the musician and writer, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, is believed to have collected specimens of an ancient Bodo script called Deodhai from the Naga tribes. The inscriptions on stone pillars of the Kachri ruins in Dimapur, Nagaland, are said to be written in the same script.<sup>44</sup> The Bodo writers who had been using the Assamese script began to contemplate the adoption of a Roman script after the declaration of the Assam Language Act. A formal proposal for a Roman script was introduced in the sixth annual conference of Bodo Sahitya Sabha on February 22, 1964.<sup>45</sup> The Assam government opposed this proposal stating that, "for cultural integration and development of tribal languages in the state, the Assamese Script is enough and suitable."<sup>46</sup> When dialogue between the two parties failed, the Central Government intervened and proposed an

<sup>39</sup> Kumar, G. and Arora, *Documents on Indian Affairs* (Ahmedabad: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 80-85.

<sup>40</sup> Rao, *Constitutional Development Since Independence*, 336.

<sup>41</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, April 24, 1960.

<sup>42</sup> *Times of India*, May 20, 1961.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Madhu Ram Boro, *The Historical Development of Bodo Language* (Kokrajhar: N. L. Publication), 40.

<sup>45</sup> Satyendra Kumar Sarmah, "Script Movement Among the Bodo of Assam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress V. 75* (New Delhi: Indian History Congress), 1336.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 1337.





alternative in the Devanagari script. On April 9, 1975, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha accepted the Devanagari script for the Bodo language,<sup>47</sup> but this did not mean that the desire for political independence within the Bodo had subsided.

In 1967, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) were formed. The PTCA submitted a memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Hussain, on May 20 of the same year, demanding an 'Autonomous Region' for tribals living in the plains of Assam.<sup>48</sup> The proposal for an 'Autonomous Region' gained significant support from the public by 1972. On January 7, 1973, the PTCA upgraded their demand from the 'autonomous region' to that of a Union Territory under the name 'Udayachal.' Gradually various distinct tribes began forming a union to jointly demand a separate dominion, but it did not last long as they fragmented over time.<sup>49</sup>

In 1986, Upendra Nath Brahma, affectionately known as *Bodofa* (Father of the Bodos) among his people, was elected as the eighth president of the ABSU. The following year he sent a charter of ninety-two demands to both Assam's chief minister and governor mainly concerning socio-economic and educational issues. The last demand was for the creation of a separate state. At the same time, the Bodoland Security Force (BdSF), the first Bodo insurgent group, arose owing to the consecutive failures of the ABSU and PTCA in grabbing the central government's attention. The corresponding decade was a phase of extensive violence and ethnic clashes in the history of Assam.<sup>50</sup>

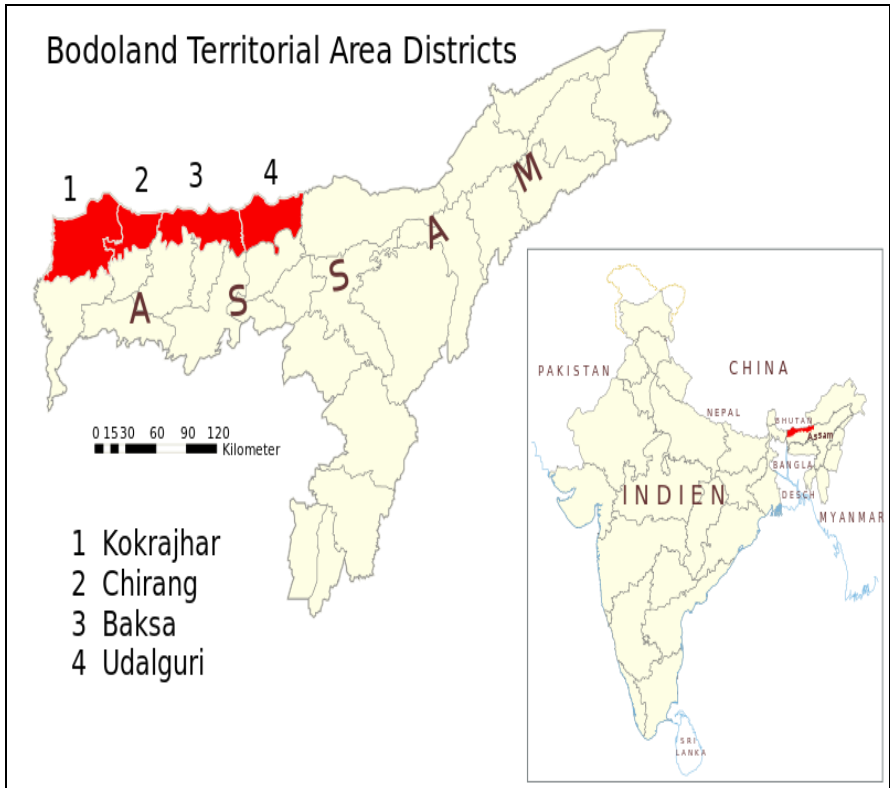
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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> S. K. Mukherjee, "The Reorganization of Assam and the Bodo Movement," in *Reorganisation of Northeast India since 1947*, ed. B. Datta Ray and S. P. Agarwal (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1996), 201.

<sup>49</sup> Mochahari, *Political Identity Crisis of the Bodos and their Bodoland Movement*, 38-39.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 46.



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On February 20, 1993, the Bodoland Accord was signed to create the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) by the signatories: the Chief Minister, Hiteshwar Saikia, on behalf of the state government of Assam; the Union Home Minister, Rajesh Pilot, on behalf of the Central Government; and the President of the ABSU, Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary, on behalf of ABSU-BPAC (All Bodo Students Union–Bodo People’s Action Committee).<sup>51</sup> But the geographical boundaries were left undecided and no earnest attempts were made to address them. Seeing the failure in implementation of the Bodoland Accord, another insurgent group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 181.



(BLT), was formed on June 18, 1996.<sup>52</sup> The ABSU also restarted their rallies and a third phase of protests for a separate Bodoland began. This phase subsided only with the signing of a Memorandum of Settlement between the BLT and the governments of Assam and India on February 10, 2003, to create the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The districts under its jurisdiction were called the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD).<sup>53</sup> A total of 3,082 villages were included in the BTC and divided into four contiguous districts. A committee comprising one representative each from the government of India and Assam as well as the BLT was to decide by consensus on the inclusion of additional villages.<sup>54</sup>

An insurgent group, the NDFB(S) or the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Saoraigwra), was still active even after the 2003 accord had been signed. This group had split from the NDFB group which was a reformation of the BdSF. When Telangana state was created in 2014, a demand for a separate Bodoland state resurfaced. The ABSU, too, felt that it could become a reality this time. Although Bodoland as a state was never formed, a new peace accord was signed in January 2020 between the government of India and Assam, the chief executive of the BTC, the president of the ABSU, and all the factions of the NDFB. The BTAD was renamed the BTR (Bodoland Territorial Region), an autonomous new territory including the areas contiguous to the BTAD with a majority of tribal population, but giving the choice of opting out to villages under the BTAD with a majority of non-tribal population. The major changes were: an increase in the number of constituencies in the BTR from the earlier forty to sixty, provisions for Bodos living outside of the BTAD, and those living in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao to be recognized as 'Scheduled Tribes,' and promises to establish several educational institutions like a central university and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>54</sup> "Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)," New Delhi, February 10, 2003.

medical college. The government of India also earmarked a sum of Rs. 250 crore (US\$ 37 million approximately) per year for a period of three years for the development of the area, and Bodo youth were to be considered for recruitment into the Indian army. The executive functions were to be exercised by a chief executive.<sup>55</sup> A state of peace prevails across the hills and valleys, but the Bodo community carries the burden of memories of what might have been.

## Conclusion

While there is no justification for the practice of violence and the troubles it created in the lives of thousands, there is a need to clarify the circumstances under which such a condition arose. Yet the collective viewpoint of the administrative, academic and popular culture singles out one community for blame. Furthermore, the Orientalist view—that still holds the Bodos as primitive, underdeveloped and unable to maintain any political stability—leads to conjecture that allows the aboriginal communities only semi-autonomy.

The Bodoland Movement came to a halt in 2020 after a long struggle as all the terrorist outfits finally surrendered, paving the way for the development of the new autonomous territory of the BTR. If the pages of 'history' are left in their current state, the Orientalist view toward the tribal communities will never be reordered.

### *Note on the Author*

**Milan Narzary** grew up in Bongaigaon, a small town in Assam. When the state got embroiled in violent uprisings, he went to a boarding school in Rajasthan. He then obtained a Bachelors' Degree in English Literature at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, and involved himself in the filmmaking industry of Mumbai to hone his skills in creative writing. Afterwards, he took

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<sup>55</sup> "Memorandum of Settlement," New Delhi, January 27, 2020.



admission in the M.A. program at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, having heard about several Bengali writers since childhood, and because Kolkata had always been a part of his plan to experience literature, art and culture. During his M.A. years, he worked for the Centre for Translation of Indian Literature (CENTIL), Jadavpur, as a Translator and Resource Person translating Bodo short stories into English and Bengali. He has presented a research paper on a comparative study of indigenous communities in Canada (Inuit) and India (Bodo) at an International Conference at the Centre for Canadian Studies, Jadavpur. His research interest is Tribal Literature and History, and the representation of the environment and nature in literature. At present, he is working on his own short stories and preparing to enter a doctoral degree program.