



From ethnic mobilisation to political negotiation: Conflict transformation in Bodoland

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Abstract

The Bodoland question represents a significant case of ethnic mobilisation, insurgency, negotiated settlement and institutional accommodation in Northeast India. Existing scholarship has extensively examined the emergence of the Bodo movement, the nature of ethnic conflict and the successive peace accords that attempted to address Bodo political aspirations (Sarma & Choudhury, 2024; George, 1994; Nath, 2003) ^[2, 8, 10]. However, greater attention is required to the transformation of the conflict arena itself: from mobilisation and armed confrontation towards institutionalised political negotiation, autonomous governance and post-conflict political participation. This article examines the Bodoland peace process through the theoretical perspective of conflict transformation. Rather than treating the signing of peace accords as the endpoint of conflict, the article investigates whether the institutional arrangements created through the 2003 and 2020^[5, 6] settlements have altered the political, structural and relational dimensions of the conflict. It argues that the Bodoland process represents a significant but incomplete transformation. The establishment and subsequent strengthening of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), the demobilisation of armed cadres, recognition of cultural and linguistic claims, development initiatives and mechanisms for political participation demonstrate a shift from violent contestation towards institutional negotiation (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021) ^[3, 4]. At the same time, scholarship on territorial autonomy indicates that autonomous institutions can themselves generate new tensions where competing communities perceive exclusion or unequal access to political power and resources (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017; Suykens & Vandekerckhove, 2008) ^[1, 11]. The article therefore conceptualises Bodoland as a case of continuing conflict transformation in which the principal challenge has shifted from negotiating the existence of political institutions to making those institutions inclusive, legitimate and capable of addressing structural grievances.

Keywords: Bodoland, Bodo movement, conflict transformation, ethnic mobilisation, political negotiation, autonomous governance, BTC, peacebuilding

Introduction

Ethnic conflicts are rarely produced by a single grievance. They generally emerge from the interaction of identity, political representation, territorial claims, resource distribution and perceptions of exclusion. In the Northeast Indian context, these factors have repeatedly shaped movements seeking recognition, autonomy and institutional protection. The Bodo movement represents one of the most important examples because it developed from identity-based mobilisation into an armed conflict and subsequently entered a prolonged process of political negotiation (George, 1994; Kherkatary, 2020) ^[2, 5].

The historical development of the Bodo movement and the signing of the successive accords have already been examined in detail in the author's earlier study, which analysed the emergence of Bodo conflict and the attempts made through different settlements to address the political demands of the movement (Sarma & Choudhury, 2024) ^[10]. The present article deliberately moves beyond that historical account. Its central concern is not why the Bodo conflict emerged or when the accords were signed, but how the political nature of the conflict changed through negotiation and institutionalisation.

This distinction is important because the signing of an agreement does not automatically mean that a conflict has been transformed. A peace agreement may terminate or reduce immediate violence while leaving underlying political, economic and relational structures relatively

unchanged (Lederach, 2003) ^[6]. In the Bodoland context, therefore, the relevant question is whether the successive settlements altered the mechanisms through which political grievances were expressed and negotiated.

The creation of the BTC in 2003^[6] represented a particularly important institutional shift. The 2003^[6] Memorandum of Settlement established an autonomous council under the Sixth Schedule framework and connected political autonomy with socio-economic development, education, language, land and cultural identity (Government of Assam, 2003) ^[3]. This transformed the political arena by providing a formal institutional mechanism through which many Bodo political aspirations could be pursued.

The 2020^[5] Bodo Peace Accord extended this process by seeking to strengthen the BTC, address the concerns of Bodo people outside the territorial council area, protect Bodo cultural and linguistic identity, provide safeguards concerning tribal land rights, promote development and rehabilitate members of NDFB factions (Government of India, 2021) ^[4]. The Government of India subsequently reported the surrender of 1,615 NDFB cadres, demonstrating an important movement away from organised armed activity towards demobilisation and political mainstreaming (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024) ^[7].

The central argument of this article is that the Bodoland conflict has undergone a shift in its mode of political contestation. Ethnic mobilisation and armed resistance have increasingly been replaced by institutional negotiation,

electoral politics, autonomous governance and development-oriented political claims. Nevertheless, this transformation remains incomplete because territorial autonomy can itself create new questions concerning representation, minority rights, land and access to resources (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017^[1]; Suykens & Vandekerckhove, 2008).

The article therefore asks: How has the Bodoland conflict transformed from ethnic mobilisation and armed confrontation into political negotiation and institutionalised governance, and what challenges remain for sustainable conflict transformation?

From Conflict Settlement to Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding post-accord societies than approaches concerned only with conflict settlement. Lederach (2003)^[6] argues that transformation involves changes in relationships, structures and patterns that generate conflict. The objective is consequently not simply to stop violence but to create conditions in which the relationships and structures associated with conflict can be altered.

This conceptual distinction is particularly relevant to Bodoland. If the signing of an accord were treated as the endpoint, the analytical focus would remain on whether the state and armed organisations reached an agreement. A conflict-transformation approach instead asks whether the agreement changed the political system, the distribution of authority, relationships among communities and the mechanisms available for addressing grievances (Lederach, 2003)^[6].

The Bodoland case provides a useful example because the successive settlements have progressively expanded the scope of political accommodation. The 2003^[6] agreement established an autonomous institution, while the 2020^[5] settlement added provisions relating to cultural recognition, development, land rights, people living outside the territorial area and rehabilitation of former armed cadres (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021)^[3, 4].

Conflict transformation can therefore be examined through three interconnected dimensions in Bodoland. The first is behavioural transformation, represented by the reduction of armed mobilisation and surrender of cadres. The second is institutional transformation, represented by autonomous governance and political participation. The third is relational and structural transformation, represented by efforts to address identity, land, development and relationships among different communities (Lederach, 2003)^[6].

From Ethnic Mobilisation to Institutional Politics

The early Bodo movement was fundamentally a mobilisation around identity and political recognition. The All Bodo Students' Union played an important role in articulating demands concerning Bodo identity, political representation and territorial autonomy during the late 1980s and early 1990s (George, 1994)^[2]. The movement therefore initially operated through mass political mobilisation rather than through a permanent institutional framework.

The subsequent emergence of armed organisations changed the nature of political contestation. Political objectives were increasingly pursued through insurgent activity, creating a cycle in which the state, armed organisations and affected communities became interconnected actors in the conflict

(Nath, 2003)^[8]. The transformation of the movement into an armed conflict also increased the significance of security-oriented responses.

The emergence of negotiated settlements gradually altered this pattern. Instead of treating political demands exclusively as security problems, the state increasingly incorporated them into institutional arrangements for autonomy and development (Government of Assam, 2003)^[3]. This was an important shift because it created a legitimate political arena in which demands could be articulated without relying exclusively on extra-constitutional mobilisation.

The significance of this change lies not in the disappearance of ethnic identity from politics but in the transformation of its political expression. Ethnic identity remained an important component of Bodo political mobilisation, but the institutional context in which that identity was represented increasingly shifted towards elections, autonomous governance and negotiations over policy and development (Kherkatary, 2020)^[5].

Thus, the movement from mobilisation to negotiation should not be understood as a transition from ethnic politics to non-ethnic politics. Rather, it represents a transition from predominantly contentious ethnic politics towards institutionalised ethnic representation.

The BTC as an Institution of Conflict Transformation

The 2003^[6] Memorandum of Settlement established the Bodoland Territorial Council as an autonomous institution within the Sixth Schedule framework (Government of Assam, 2003)^[3]. The agreement was significant because it provided an institutional mechanism through which political authority could be exercised at the regional level.

The BTC was not designed merely as an administrative body. The 2003^[6] settlement connected the autonomous arrangement with the development of infrastructure, education, cultural identity, language and land-related concerns (Government of Assam, 2003)^[3]. The institution therefore represented an attempt to address several dimensions of the conflict simultaneously.

From the perspective of conflict transformation, the creation of the BTC altered the structure of political opportunity. Political actors gained access to an institutional mechanism through which demands could be negotiated and implemented. This represents a substantial change from a situation in which political demands were expressed principally through mass mobilisation or armed resistance (Lederach, 2003)^[6].

However, territorial autonomy is not automatically synonymous with conflict transformation. Research on the BTC has highlighted the limitations of territorial approaches to ethnic conflict, particularly where minority safeguards and competing territorial claims remain inadequately addressed (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017)^[1]. The existence of an autonomous institution can therefore reduce one dimension of conflict while producing new questions concerning representation and inclusion.

Suykens and Vandekerckhove (2008) similarly caution that the institutionalisation of Bodo political control could potentially create new forms of exclusion for other communities. Their analysis demonstrates why post-accord transformation must be assessed from the perspective of all affected communities rather than only the principal movement that negotiated the settlement.

Political Negotiation as a New Mode of Conflict Management

Political negotiation represents one of the most important transformations in the Bodoland case. Under conditions of armed conflict, the relationship between political actors and the state is characterised by coercion, insecurity and distrust. Negotiation changes this relationship by creating a process through which competing actors can articulate demands and bargain over institutional arrangements (Lederach, 2003) ^[6]. The 2003^[6] settlement illustrates this transformation because the Bodo Liberation Tigers entered into a formal agreement with the Government of India and Government of Assam, resulting in the creation of the BTC (Government of Assam, 2003) ^[3]. The settlement thereby converted an important component of the conflict from a security issue into a question of institutional governance.

The 2020^[5] settlement further expanded the negotiating agenda. Rather than focusing exclusively on territorial autonomy, the agreement addressed the concerns of Bodo populations outside the territorial area, cultural and linguistic identity, land rights, education, development and rehabilitation (Government of India, 2021) ^[4]. This expansion is important because it demonstrates the movement from a narrowly territorial conception of the conflict towards a multidimensional political settlement.

The process consequently demonstrates that negotiation can transform the content as well as the method of conflict. The political question gradually moved from “who controls the territory?” towards broader questions concerning how political authority, identity, development and rights should be institutionalised (Government of India, 2021; Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1, 4].

Demobilisation and the Transformation of Conflict Behaviour

The surrender of armed cadres represents one of the clearest behavioural indicators of transformation. The Ministry of Home Affairs records that 1,615 cadres belonging to NDFB groups surrendered following the 2020^[5] Bodo Peace Accord, with the organisations subsequently disbanding (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024) ^[17].

Demobilisation changes the relationship between armed organisations and the political system. Actors who previously sought political objectives through armed means are provided an opportunity to participate in civilian political and social institutions (Government of India, 2021) ^[4]. In conflict-transformation terms, this represents a movement away from coercive political behaviour.

Nevertheless, disarmament should not be equated automatically with reconciliation. Lederach (2003) ^[6] emphasises that transformation requires changes in relationships and structures as well as changes in behaviour. Former combatants therefore require meaningful opportunities for social and economic reintegration if demobilisation is to contribute to sustainable peace.

The 2020^[5] settlement's emphasis on rehabilitation is consequently important. The agreement did not simply require the surrender of arms; it incorporated rehabilitation and mainstreaming into the broader political settlement (Government of India, 2021) ^[4]. This indicates a shift from a purely security-centred approach towards a more comprehensive peacebuilding framework.

Transformation of Identity Politics

Identity remains central to the Bodoland political process, but its institutional expression has changed. The earlier movement articulated identity primarily through demands for recognition, autonomy and political territory (George, 1994) ^[2]. Subsequent agreements increasingly incorporated identity into formal governmental policy.

The 2003^[6] settlement recognised the need to fulfil Bodo linguistic, educational and cultural aspirations and to preserve Bodo socio-cultural and ethnic identity (Government of Assam, 2003) ^[3]. This institutional recognition represents an important shift because cultural demands became part of the formal agenda of governance.

The 2020^[5] settlement further strengthened this dimension by providing for recognition of Bodo as an associate official language of Assam and the establishment of a separate directorate for Bodo-medium schools (Government of India, 2021) ^[4]. These provisions indicate that some identity-related demands moved from contentious political mobilisation into the domain of public policy.

Such institutionalisation does not eliminate identity politics. Instead, it can transform the way identity is negotiated. Cultural recognition becomes something that can be debated, administered and implemented through institutions rather than pursued exclusively through contentious mobilisation (Lederach, 2003) ^[6].

Land, Territory and Structural Transformation

Land represents a particularly important structural dimension of the Bodoland conflict. Territorial movements are inherently concerned with the relationship between political authority, land and collective identity. Consequently, the creation of autonomous institutions does not necessarily resolve competing claims concerning territory and resources (Suykens & Vandekerckhove, 2008). The 2003^[6] settlement incorporated land rights among the issues requiring institutional attention (Government of Assam, 2003). The 2020^[3, 5] settlement further provided for legislative protection of tribal land rights, indicating that land remained a significant component of the political settlement (Government of India, 2021) ^[4].

At the same time, land policies have implications for communities beyond the principal Bodo constituency. Suykens and Vandekerckhove (2008) demonstrate that changes in control over land and productive structures can alter the livelihood opportunities of different communities. This suggests that conflict transformation must consider not only the restoration or protection of Bodo rights but also the broader consequences of institutional change.

The land question therefore illustrates why post-accord transformation is more complicated than institutional autonomy. Sustainable peace requires mechanisms capable of reconciling group-specific protections with the rights and security of other communities sharing the same territorial space (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1].

Development and the Political Economy of Peace

Development has increasingly become part of the language of peace in Bodoland. The 2003^[6] settlement linked autonomous governance with economic and infrastructural development, while the 2020^[5] settlement provided a special development package of ₹1,500 crore for projects in Bodo areas (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021) ^[3, 4].

The inclusion of development in peace agreements reflects the recognition that political accommodation alone may not produce sustainable peace. Economic insecurity and unequal access to resources can reinforce perceptions of marginalisation, making development an important component of post-conflict reconstruction (Lederach, 2003) ^[6].

However, development must also be understood politically. Suykens and Vandekerckhove (2008) show that changes in control over economic and productive structures can redistribute opportunities among communities. Development policies can therefore contribute to peace only when their benefits are perceived as legitimate and sufficiently inclusive.

The central issue is consequently not simply the amount of development expenditure but the distribution, participation and legitimacy of development. A conflict-transformative approach requires development institutions to reduce structural inequalities rather than merely reproduce existing patterns of political advantage (Lederach, 2003) ^[6].

The Non-Bodo Question and Inclusive Governance

One of the most important challenges in the post-accord period concerns communities that do not identify as Bodo but reside within the territorial area governed by the BTC. The institutionalisation of Bodo autonomy necessarily creates questions concerning how the interests of other communities are represented and protected (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1].

The 2003^[6] settlement included institutional provisions concerning representation and safeguards for non-tribal communities within the autonomous area (Government of Assam, 2003) ^[3]. These provisions demonstrate that the peace process recognised the need to balance Bodo political aspirations with the rights of other populations.

Nevertheless, research has pointed to the limitations of territorial autonomy as a mechanism for managing ethnic conflict where minority safeguards remain contested (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1]. The existence of an autonomous council can therefore transform the political structure without automatically transforming inter-community perceptions.

Suykens and Vandekerckhove (2008) similarly caution that the political empowerment of one community can potentially create new forms of insecurity among others. This makes inclusive governance a central criterion for assessing whether the Bodoland process has moved from conflict settlement towards genuine conflict transformation.

Women and the Social Dimension of Transformation

Conflict transformation should not be evaluated solely through the actions of political elites and armed organisations. Conflict affects social groups differently, and women in particular have experienced displacement, insecurity and multiple forms of structural and social domination in the conflict-affected Bodoland region (Saikia, 2023) ^[9].

Research on women in the BTC region demonstrates that women from Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Adivasi communities have experienced conflict in different ways and have also developed forms of resistance within family, community and state structures (Saikia, 2023) ^[9]. This indicates that post-conflict transformation must be examined at the social as well as institutional level.

The inclusion of such perspectives broadens the meaning of peace. If political institutions are transformed while everyday inequalities and social exclusion remain unchanged, transformation remains incomplete. Lederach's (2003) ^[6] relational approach is particularly relevant because it emphasises the need to examine changes in relationships and social structures rather than merely elite-level agreements.

Consequently, a fuller assessment of Bodoland's transformation requires attention to groups whose experiences are often less visible in formal peace negotiations, including women, displaced populations and communities that do not belong to the principal ethnic constituency of the movement (Saikia, 2023) ^[9].

From Insurgency to Democratic Political Competition

The most significant transformation in the Bodoland political process may be the increasing relocation of political contestation from armed spaces to democratic institutions. The establishment of the BTC provided a formal political arena, while the demobilisation provisions of the 2020^[5] Accord sought to facilitate the transition of former armed actors into civilian life (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021) ^[3, 4].

This does not mean that political competition has disappeared. Rather, competition increasingly takes place through elections, political parties, autonomous institutions and negotiations over development and representation. Such a transformation is significant because democratic competition provides institutional mechanisms through which disagreements can be expressed without necessarily escalating into violence.

Yet the success of democratic institutionalisation depends upon the perceived responsiveness of institutions. If communities consider formal institutions ineffective or exclusionary, contentious politics can re-emerge (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1]. The challenge for the BTC is therefore to ensure that autonomous governance remains sufficiently representative and responsive to competing political interests.

The transition from insurgency to political competition should consequently be understood as an ongoing process rather than a completed achievement. Its sustainability depends upon whether political institutions can continue to absorb grievances and provide credible avenues for negotiation.

The Limits of Accord-Centred Peace

Peace accords are important political instruments, but they should not be confused with the complete transformation of conflict. The experience of the 1993 settlement demonstrates this clearly. Although an agreement established the BAC, inadequate implementation contributed to continuing dissatisfaction and renewed conflict (George, 1994; Nath, 2003) ^[2, 8].

This historical experience suggests that the effectiveness of a peace agreement depends upon implementation, institutional capacity and political legitimacy. Lederach (2003) ^[6] similarly emphasises that conflict transformation is a long-term process rather than a single event.

The 2003 and 2020^[5, 6] settlements therefore need to be assessed not simply according to whether they were signed but according to whether their institutional and developmental provisions have produced meaningful

changes in the lives and political relationships of affected communities (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021) ^[3, 4].

This approach also avoids an overly state-centric understanding of peace. A government may regard a settlement as successfully implemented while affected communities may continue to perceive problems concerning land, identity, representation or development. Conflict transformation therefore requires attention to both institutional outcomes and community perceptions.

Bodoland as a Case of Continuing Conflict Transformation

The Bodoland case demonstrates that conflict can change its form without completely disappearing. Armed conflict may decline while political disagreements continue through elections, institutional negotiations and struggles over policy and resources (Lederach, 2003) ^[6]. This does not necessarily indicate failure; rather, it may represent a movement towards more legitimate forms of political contestation.

The establishment of the BTC, the strengthening measures contained in the 2020^[5] Accord and the demobilisation of armed cadres all indicate significant changes in the political structure of the conflict (Government of Assam, 2003; Government of India, 2021; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024) ^[3, 4, 7].

At the same time, research on the limits of territorial autonomy demonstrates that institutional solutions can generate new challenges concerning minority protection and political inclusion (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017) ^[1]. The Bodoland process should therefore be understood as a transition from one configuration of conflict to another rather than as the complete elimination of conflict.

This interpretation is also consistent with Suykens and Vandekerckhove's (2008) argument that the post-conflict institutional order can redistribute access to political and economic structures in ways that benefit some communities while generating new forms of insecurity for others.

Conclusion

The Bodoland peace process demonstrates a significant transformation in the mode through which political conflict is expressed. The earlier phase of the movement was characterised by ethnic mobilisation, demands for political recognition and, subsequently, armed confrontation (George, 1994; Nath, 2003) ^[2, 8]. The present political environment is increasingly characterised by autonomous governance, electoral competition, negotiation and institutional mechanisms for addressing political demands (Government of Assam, 2003) ^[3].

The significance of the 2003^[6] BTC settlement lies in its creation of an institutional arena for autonomous governance. The 2020^[5] Bodo Peace Accord subsequently expanded the scope of this transformation through provisions relating to political institutions, identity, language, land, development and rehabilitation (Government of India, 2021) ^[4].

The surrender of 1,615 NDFB cadres provides particularly important evidence of behavioural transformation, demonstrating a movement away from organised armed activity towards demobilisation and political mainstreaming (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024) ^[7]. Yet demobilisation

represents only one dimension of peace. Sustainable transformation also requires institutional legitimacy, inclusive governance and changes in relationships among communities (Lederach, 2003) ^[6].

The Bodoland experience also demonstrates the limitations of territorial autonomy as a complete solution to ethnic conflict. Autonomous institutions can address demands for recognition and political authority, but they can also generate new concerns among communities that fear political exclusion or unequal access to resources (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2017^[1]; Suykens & Vandekerckhove, 2008).

The central contribution of this article is therefore to conceptualise the Bodoland peace process not as a sequence of accords but as a continuing transformation of the political arena. The principal shift has been from mobilisation to institutional politics, from armed resistance to negotiation, and from insurgency to democratic political participation.

Accordingly, Bodoland may be characterised as a case of partial and continuing conflict transformation. The conflict has changed substantially in its behaviour, institutions and political mechanisms, but transformation remains incomplete where structural inequalities, contested territorial interests, inter-community relationships and questions of inclusive governance persist. The future sustainability of peace will therefore depend less on the signing of additional agreements and more on the capacity of existing institutions to deliver inclusive, legitimate and responsive governance (Lederach, 2003; Government of India, 2021) ^[4, 6].

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