CHAPTER I

Understanding Ethnicity and its Context

Ethnic strife has increased in many countries in recent years. To begin with, the political context of ethnicity; apart from specific demands, the articulation of ethnic claims in Asia represents a contest over the definition of the essence of a state. Is it to be a secular state? Or is it pursuing its mission to serve a particular faith? Is it envisaging its goal of political modernization of society and the development of economic rationality or the preservation of oriental culture and values with deference to authorities by inculcation of obedience? Is it a nation state (requiring conformity to or at least the dominance of the culture and interests of the majority community) or a multi-ethnic state? Various answers were given to these questions during the independence struggles and alliances. These answers were provided largely by western educated leaders, imbued on the whole with ideas of liberalism, modernization and economic rationality in the context of a common national purpose. They are being questioned by a new generation and acceptance or rejection of these ideas are mediated through a much more politicized, and also fragmented and competitive society. Possibility lies in the society looking for alternative sources of mobilization and legitimacy. Ethnicity has been woven into this complex and uncertain tapestry.

Today politicization of ethnic communities has become very common and it has reduced mutual tolerance which has led to sharpened ethnic consciousness among various communities. At this juncture, the processes of socio-economic change, the dimensions of the power structure, and the policies, strategies as well as tactics adopted by various governments in response to the urges and aspirations of different ethnic groups provide a ground for a clear understanding of ethnic conflict and its dimensions.
The personality of an individual is predetermined by the family he/she is born in and also the environment, social and ethnic group, which influence him/her to adapt and adopt culture and practices. Mankind, in the course of adaptation to various natural, social and historical conditions, formed culture that varies among the multitudes of race/tribes/nations and all together they comprise a global community. The ethnic groups may differentiate from one another and affirm their existence by enumerating on symbolic differentiation of cultures. The lesser is the representation of ethnic group, in size or volume, the more it needs caring and tender treatment.

*When an ethnic group asserts its existence strongly by demanding its due recognition, it may mean that it is threatened. This mode of assertion is what the social scientists have often term as ethnicity. Very often, ethnicity is drawn from some real or felt sense of deprivation and denial. However, ethnicity necessarily involves feelings of solidarity and loyalty towards fellow members and nominal detachment and difference, if not hostility, towards others.*

**Ethnicity and Usages**

The word "ethnic" (adjective of ethnicity) has come into widespread usage in its modern sense only in the post-World War II period. The word "ethnic" has been derived from the Greek word "ethnos" and has been used differently by different scholars. Still, most of the scholars define ethnicity taking a hint from the definition "groups in an exotic primitive culture". 28 According to Anthony Smith, an ethnic community is a named human population with a myth of a common ancestry, shared memories, and cultural elements, a link with a historical territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity. 29 Smith says six criterias must be met before a group can be called an ethnic community. First, the group must have a name for itself. He says this is not trivial; a lack of a name reflects an insufficiently developed collective identity. Second, the people in the group

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28 Phadnis Urmila, Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia, Sage Indian Publications, P. 13, New Delhi, 1989
must believe in the common ancestry. This is more important than genetic tie, which may exist, but are not essential. Third, the members of the group must share historical memories, often myths or legends, passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. Fourth, the group must have a shared culture, generally based on a combination of language, religion, laws, customs, institutions, dress, music, crafts, architecture, and even food. Fifth, the group must feel an attachment to a specific piece of territory, which it may or may not inhabit. Sixth and last, the people in a group have to think of themselves as a group in order to constitute an ethnic community; that is, they must have a sense of their ethnicity. The group must be self-aware.30

Recent debates on the nature of ethnic identity has moved incrementally towards the recognition that while the boundaries and cultural resources of ethnicity change dynamically over time, there remains at the core of the ethnic group a broadly recognised corpus of shared socio-cultural values and identity referents31. The enduring salience of this ethnic solidarity, despite the statist orientation of the broader socio-political environment in which the group exists, invests ethnic communities with an autonomous apprehension of affective, collective personality32. For ethnic minorities, in particular, the historical experience of discrimination and exclusion serves to heighten the shared perception of a core commonality and shared values, which may serve as the foundation for collective action to resist such threats. While other forms of group affiliation such as citizenship, class and occupation may also call upon individual loyalties; the affective ties of ethnic kinship remains a persistent and paramount determinant of group solidarity, particularly, in post-colonial Asia and Africa.

While political elites can and do manipulate symbols and myths of an ethnic past, and deploy calculated strategies to appeal the mass sentiment, the resonance of these appeals relies upon the ethnic recognition of socio-cultural particulars and historical discontinuity with the state. It is this collective consciousness and not the specific strategies and actions

30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
of elites which sustain ethnic nationalism, even in circumstances of violent conflict with the state.\textsuperscript{33} This is, to use Anthony Smith's characterisation, to posit the importance of the 'ethnic-genealogical' character of sub-state nationalist mobilisation, particularly for cases of post-colonial ethnic nationalism.\textsuperscript{34} The analytical emphasis here is on the ethnies's demotic perception of its autonomous existence as a self-defined and self-determining social, political, cultural and economic unit. In this sense, while the protection and maintenance of ethnic autonomy is a primary ideological aim of nationalism, nationalist mobilisation is itself defined and shaped dynamically by the nature of that ethnic autonomy and its historical confrontation with the state.\textsuperscript{35}

**Ethnic Conflict and State Politics**

Connected to ethnicity, there are various forms of expressions which one comes across in discussions and debates; one such often used term is 'ethnic conflict'. Ethnic conflict, in the recent years, has become the most fatal form of collective violence in the world. It means conflict among groups who differ from one another on the basis of their religion, culture, physical features or language. There are also non-violent conflicts today, but which may turn into open conflicts and violence.\textsuperscript{36}

Hence the term 'ethnic conflict' is often misused or used loosely to describe a wide range of intra state conflict that may not be, in fact, ethnic in character. Conflict, that is ethnic in nature, may involve dispute about important cultural, social, political and economic, or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities. In addition, ethnic conflicts are powerfully shaped by the twin processes of state formation (with its homogenizing

\textsuperscript{33} Our subaltern focus here is on the political implications of nationalist ethnicity at the sub-elite level. It should be noted, however, that this factor produces mass mobilization more often when combined with the shared experience of deprivation and delegitimation at the hands of the state (Ahmed 1992; Gurr and Harff 1994)\textsuperscript{34} Smith Anthony op cit: 123 - 1991\textsuperscript{35} The term 'genealogy' is used here in both its post-structuralist meaning (subjugated and discontinuous forms of popular historical knowledge) and its sociological meaning (presumed common ancestry and shared historical memories as key elements of ethnic identity), the latter being analytically subsumed as an aspect of the former. See Foucault (P. 82-3, 1980) and Smith (P. 12, 1991)\textsuperscript{36} Austin Dennis; Democracy and Violence in India and Sri Lanka, Pp.39-40, Pinter Publishers, London, 1994
conflicts. The form that the claims have taken has often been determined by the reaction of the state, as relatively modest claims of a share in or some re-distribution of power have escalated into demands of autonomy or secession under an intransigent state. The state's ability to respond in particular ways is itself determined by its own character as, for example, a democracy or military dictatorship, each with its specific set of constraints.\footnote{Ibid.}

But it can be said that almost everywhere there are challenges to state sovereignty, with assertions of self-determination and a search for greater degrees and forms of pluralism. The liberal values that underlay the nationalist ideologies and the Constitutional systems have lost their hold on the imagination of the people. Federalism all over the democratic countries have been one of the solutions to accommodate various demands by ethnic groups as it is based on the principles of pluralism.

**Managing Ethnicity - The Federal Solution:**

The challenge of ethnicity to federalism has found expression in the form of autonomy movements, insurgency, ethnic conflicts and riots\footnote{Singh Jagpal in Challenge of Ethnicity to Federalism, Discourse on North East India in Majeed Akhtar ed, Federal India: A Design for Good Governance, p. 76, Manak Pub. New Delhi, 2005}. Federal arrangements are particularly appropriate for a multi-ethnic state as they enable ethnic communities to exercise a significant degree of autonomy; can accommodate diverse cultural and linguistic traditions; can provide for parity among ethnic groups; and establish a pluralistic basis for their relationship with the Center. Federalism provides a venue, however flawed, for expressions of cultural distinctiveness, and it also serves to compartmentalize friction. The cultural conflicts of one state rarely spill over into another, and the Center can thus more effectively manage and contain them.

India has remained secular and pluralistic with a preferred position for no particular community, although its politics, especially in recent years, have been much concerned with assertions of Hindu dominance. The Hindus, although they share a common religious tradition, are themselves divided into a myriad of sects and are socially segmented by thousands of castes and sub castes, hierarchically ranked according to
tradition and regionally organized. The geographic regions of India are linguistically and culturally distinct. There are more than a dozen major languages, emanating from broadly the Dravidians and the Indo-European or Aryan races. Hindi, an Indo-European language, spoken by 30 percent of all Indians, is recognized by the Constitution of 1950 as the official language (along with English). In addition to the many Indo-European and Dravidian languages and dialects, there are various tribal languages spoken by people across India, most notably in southern Bihar and in the seven states of the North East.

The Indian Political Federal System:

India is a federal system with a strong central government. The Constitution also lists state and concurrent powers, but provides the center with a capacity to intervene in state affairs and even to dismiss elected state governments and impose its own authority through "President's Rule." Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1966-77; 1980-84), centralization of power increased dramatically, both within government and in the structure and operation of the ruling Congress party. The results were an increasing, almost pathological, imbalance in the relationship between the center and the states and growing demands for autonomy voiced by non-Hindi states. In Tamil Nadu, for example, anger at the status of Hindi as the national language besides the non Brahmin Dravidian ideology became the catalyst for the rise to power of ethno-regional parties; similar discontent was seen in Andhra, resulting in the victory of the Telugu Desam party; and in West Bengal, where the Communist Party (Marxist) functions as a regional party. Most notable, however, is Punjab, where in 1982 the Sikh-dominated Akali Dal pushed demands for greater state autonomy and Sikh militants launched a campaign of terrorism for an independent nation of Khalistan.

Regional Parties in Indian Political System

At the state level, national parties compete with parties that are wholly regional in their base of support. In a number of states, regional parties that identify itself with particular ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups are the major political forces. In the southern state

55 The 1988 Sarkaria Commission Report on Center-State Relations made a number of recommendations that would enhance "cooperative federalism," but its measured proposals have been largely ignored.
of Tamil Nadu, for instance, Tamil nationalist parties have ruled since 1967; in Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam party is the major rival to the Congress; in Punjab, it is the Sikh party, known as the Akali Dal; and in the Northeast, Asom Gana Parishad in Assam and Mizo National Front in Mizoram are noteworthy as ethnically based regional parties and compete with Congress in various states. Ethnically or religiously based parties serve as vehicles of regional identity within a united India, but can also threaten cultural minorities by wielding nativist appeals to the local indigenous population, i.e. "sons of the soil" (Assam, also to some extent Shiv Sena in Maharashtra). The indigenous interests are also supposedly being endangered by migrants from other parts of India or religious and linguistic minorities for which they claim against. Such appeals dramatically expose the tensions that underlie the multicultural surface of Indian democracy.

**Is Federalism the Answer to Ethnicity?**

Federal arrangements may also diminish the significance of various factors, like religion, equity, etc. which are otherwise deeply disruptive to ethnic harmony in a unitary state. Short of secession, federal arrangements would constitute the most extensive of ethnic claims, and experience has shown that once they are conceded, they can rapidly defuse much ethnic tension. However, this device is only possible if the ethnic groups are geographically concentrated. Even then it is likely that there will be ethnic minorities in that area or may become so as a result of the new arrangements, which may limit the applicability of the federal principle or require special provisions for them. Federalism establishes new dialectics among the ethnic groups, and between them and the center. These require constant attention to prevent serious institutional grievances and conflicts, as for example, in India, there has been lot of dissatisfaction over the federal arrangements provided. Furthermore, many states, dominated by an ethnic community at the center, are suspicious of federal claims, fearing the attenuation of their power and influence, and anxious about the eventual fragmentation of the country. In such circumstances, ethnic claims of decentralizations, which fall short of constitutionally entrenched division and allocation of powers and are within the overall control of the
center, are better options. So far federalism in India has been able to solve many regional demands and has worked well for the Indian political system.

Before the advent of colonialism, customary laws governed the populations of territories that now constitute the Indian states. These were largely the traditional laws of the localities where they lived and they also included important principles of religious laws. They thus covered matters like marriage and divorce, relations between children and parents, inheritance and succession, and various religious practices. As for example, unlike other Indian sections, the Khasi's of Meghalaya, follows matrilineal customary laws. Thus, these laws and the application of religious laws to religious property and corporations ensured a measure of group autonomy, limited the scope of official intervention in the lives of the people of a community and maintained the values, culture and institutions of the different ethnic communities. In this sense federalism provided that space where even traditional systems worked in the same framework.

**Autonomy of an Ethnic Community**

Let us here deconstruct the meaning of autonomy and integration. In federal discourse, they are symbiotically treated. Thus, autonomy never means complete independence leading to the break-up of nations. Rather nations from within are institutionally pluralized where attributes of state's (central authority) sovereignty (usually internal) is dilated and diluted among the institutions of self-governance. It is through these institutions that society exercises its *self*. The first component of *self* is identity – its maintenance, retention and promotion. The other aspect of *self* is development i.e. economic progress and material well-being. To realize this, society may seek control over local resources, and a socially controlled mode of development through local planning.\(^{56}\)

The North Eastern region in India is a pointer to the above hypothesis. Greetz and Shils\(^{57}\) are of the view that when groups bound together by primordial ties confront a political or

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\(^{57}\) Ibid.
social threat they organize themselves for political action and (try to) become nations. Nationalism as a form of consciousness (self) and the nation as a political category are therefore, an enlargement of sentiments and organizational units found together earlier in history.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{The Language Question and Ethnicity in India}

The question of language is fundamental to ethnicity. Language is often a point of ethnic distinction. Language is a powerful social tool, capable of arousing strong emotions. It is intimately connected and intertwined with the culture of a community, and is basic to its survival. At the same time a multiplicity of languages is seen as an obstacle to national integration.\textsuperscript{59} The use of a particular language as the official language either privileges or disadvantages ethnic groups since the designation of a language as the official language has important implications for access to and the distribution of national resources. The alternative to an indigenous language, as the official language, is the colonial language, English, which is generally considered unacceptable, and general populace does not understand and use the colonial language.

The question arise that, what status should other local languages get since they do not qualify as the official languages? These issues raise emotions that can tear a state apart. India had agreed, on independence, to establish Hindi as the official language, replacing English from that role. This policy encountered fierce opposition from non-Hindi speaking groups, who would be considerably disadvantaged. They demanded the continued use of English as the official language, and the re-organization of states on the basis of regional languages. The linguistic principle for states was conceded in the 60s, though not all major regional languages were so accommodated until much later. Each state is to have its own official language, with provisions for minority languages, while English would continue as the national official language until such time as the non-Hindi states agreed for its replacement by Hindi. English is the medium of communication between the center and the states, and as between states, unless they agree otherwise.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
English, Hindi and regional languages may be used in parliament or public service examinations. Moreover, service examinations may be taken in languages listed in the eight schedule of the Constitution, if not a state language.

With independence, the old princely states were integrated into the Indian union, but the newly created federal states were linguistically and culturally heterogeneous. Long before independence, the Congress party had organized its provincial branches along linguistic lines, and with independence demands for the reorganization of states on a linguistic basis brought the issue before the Constituent Assembly. Nehru and the Congress leadership feared that linguistic states would have a "sub national bias" that would retard national integration and unleash "fissiparous tendencies." Moreover, they argued, most states, however their boundaries might be drawn, would still have linguistic minorities. But the democratic logic behind the call for linguistic states; the notion that state administration and judicial processes should be conducted in the language of the local majority was compelling. Political pressure for the reorganization of states ultimately proved irresistible. Beginning in 1953 with the creation of Andhra Pradesh as a Telugu speaking state, and then in 1956, with a more general reorganization on a linguistic basis, the principle of language as the basis for state boundaries was broadly accepted.

Attaining Statehood on Linguistic Diaspora

The federal reorganization of 1956, however, did not quell demands for the creation of new states. In 1960, following widespread agitation and violence, the state of Bombay was bifurcated to form the linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat; in 1966, the Sikhs secured a Punjab state; and in the following years, several tribal states were carved out of the Northeast. In 1987, India's twenty-fifth state was created, as the former Portuguese colonial enclave of Goa was elevated to statehood. Since then four more states have been created and language played an important part if not the sole factor for the birth of a state.

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50 Ibid.
The pressure continues even today. In the late 1980s, Nepalis in West Bengal's Darjeeling District raised the demand for a separate "Gorkhaland" state from West Bengal. After two years of violence, in which more than 300 people were killed, the Gorkha National Liberation Front accepted a proposal for what would be, in effect, an autonomous region within the state of West Bengal. Lately, however, it has renewed its demand for a separate Gorkha state. The Bodo tribal of Assam have been pursuing a violent struggle--thus far unsuccessfully--for the creation of a separate Bodoland. More formidable was the demand by tribal in mineral-rich southern Bihar and the contiguous Districts of neighboring states for a Jharkhand state which was created recently along with Chattishgarh and Uttranchal. These demands have been voiced with varying intensity since 1947, but in the recent decades it re-emerged with new militancy, as strikes and bombings were directed to an economic blockade of the region.

The organization of states on a linguistic basis provides the framework for expanded political participation. It permits people for more effective access to government but with the drawback that these practices, may all too often, reflect the parochialism of language and region. The creation of linguistic states has reinforced regionalism and stimulated demands for increased state autonomy. India's Constitution guarantees freedom of movement with only a few qualifications, yet almost every state outside the Hindi heartland of central India has spawned a militant nativist movement directed against outsiders and it has been most vociferous in North East where a heterogeneity of tribes have been waging different movements because of their historicity sought freedom, autonomy and separate statehood. The fundamental issue has been employment for local people, and many state governments, either officially or unofficially, have supported the protection of jobs for the "sons of the soil." Among the most virulent is the Shiv Sena, a regional party in Maharashtra. Exploiting local grievances and economic frustration, the Shiv Sena, under the banner "Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians," had directed both verbal and physical attacks at South Indian immigrants and Muslims.

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Varying Approaches to State Reorganisations

However, the trajectory of state reorganization in India does not prove any systematic explanation to the problem. One fails to discern any clear-cut practice in this regard. If the Government of India has formed or reorganized a particular state on the basis of specific objective and subjective consideration, the same principle has not been extended to in other similar cases. In other words, the approach of the government in this regard has been varying. The focus on the state and the larger political context ought not to be read as endorsing the actions of state elites at the expense of the rights of ethnic movements. On the contrary, established states often trample the rights of their minorities, sometimes ruthlessly. But nonetheless it is clear that linguistic issues were generally utmost on the minds of the Centre while creating new states.

The ethnic states such as Punjab and some states of north-east have been formed mainly on the basis of synthesis of more than one objective markers of identity. Thus, in the case of Punjab, language was fused with religion; and in the north-east, distinctive combination of racial, ethnic, tribal and exclusivity of separate sub-regional identities were accorded priority in granting statehood to the territorially-spaced ethnic groups like Mizos, Nagas etc. Similarly, Dravidian nationalism revolved around exclusiveness of Tamil language and culture and hence Tamilnadu also serves as one of the important examples of ethnic states.

Ethnicity and North East

The North East States of India has seen almost perennial demands for autonomy, statehood and secession from the Indian Union. In North East, Assam is the biggest state and the issues for the Assamese were not only employment or land encroachments by migrants, but also the preservation of the Assamese language and culture in the face of a demographic shift that threatened to make the Assamese a minority, in their own state. Bengalis have been migrating into Assam for more than a century, but since 1971, the influx of "foreigners" (Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh) deepened ethnic insecurity and served as the catalyst for a movement that engulfed Assam in violence. In a six-year long agitation (1980-86), more than five thousand people were killed in ethnic conflict. In
1986, the Central Government under the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reached a settlement with the movement leaders and Assam Accord was signed. By the terms of the Assam Accord, the central government promised that in addition to commitments for the deportation of illegal immigrants and enhanced economic development, it will provide "legislative and administrative safeguards to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people". It also promised preservation of culture, language and identity of minorities.

Discord in Accords

Assam's agony did not end with the Accord, which is still largely unfulfilled. Like other states in the ethnically turbulent Northeast, it continues to suffer from violent convulsions. The Assam Accord led to rising demands by Bodos as they realized that their aspirations cannot be met by the Assam Accord. Among the tribal peoples of the Northeast, more generally, the aspiration for independence from India has been met by a renewed Indian determination to secure the territorial integrity of the union.

The Assam Accord brought hope to many. But the preceding movement and its culmination had alienated and dismayed others. The assumption of office by the youthful All Assam Student Union (AASU) backed Asom Gana Parshad (AGP) government was viewed with great expectations. These were belied. Social discipline and administrative drive had been severely wounded over the preceding years and needed to be restored with a firm hand. And, of course, the Accord had to be implemented. There was faltering on both these counts. The Centre too had to share the responsibility for the Assam Accord's implementation, but the fact was that after his initial triumphs, Rajiv Gandhi, within a year of its implementation, was already on the defensive mode on a number of issues. In Assam, the new rulers who found political power as luxurious position and even to the same movement leaders as ministers, the provisions of the Accord did not find priority for which they fought for more than 6 years. The inexperience to hold office added indecisiveness in taking appropriate measures to such critical issues including the burning Bodo issue.
The detection and deportation of foreigners, delicate and complex at any time, was not rendered easier during the post-Accord period. The militant outfit that was building its force, called United Liberation front of Assam (ULFA), developed a blind spot with regard to infiltration in view of the sanctuary and assistance it had reportedly begun to get from Bangladesh. Allegations of an unabated influx of foreigners continued. Rumour was that AGP too provided political patronage to ULFA as the high ranking members were part of AASU at one point of time.

The lack of development plans for the tribal were read as the AGP's lack of commitment to equity and justice for the tribal and the Bodos prepared for battle, forming its militant wing, the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) under Prem Singh Brahma. ULFA stepped in to assist the rival Bodo Security Force (BdSF) under Ranjan Daimuri which later got together with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland – Muivah (NSCN (M)). Subsequently, it was alleged that the Congress had moved to build up the Bodo Security Force through Central intelligence agencies to counter both ULFA and the AGP.

The Militancy and the State

The ULFA phenomenon is the product of alienation of Assamese youth from the Indian state. It is the allegory of the vast majority of young people, who find in the Indian Constitution no guarantee of a right to a reasonably decent standard of life. However, in spite of strong support to ULFA in its initial years, the weakness of the Assamese national base has made it impossible for ULFA to formulate a programme for national reconstruction. Given this situation, the Central government was aware of the crisis of the Assamese nationality and so, capable of imposing firmness, tried to find solution to tackle the problem posed by ULFA. The Bodos took many such cues from the ULFA militancy and used the tactics in their battle on the state.

The then Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who in his AASU days often talked sympathetically about the concerns of the extremist, after coming to power, took a U-
turn. Mahanta clearly stated that secession from India was not on the agenda and that the AGP was a 'party with a national outlook'. Thus, Mahanta who only a short while ago had aroused the fears of certain circles that he might stoke up secessionist militancy almost overnight became the custodian of the Indian Constitution in Assam. The ULFA Commander in Chief Arbindo Rajkhowa in turn dismissed Mahanta as other puppet from which Assam could expect nothing. The ULFA phenomenon was thus the product of the total alienation of the aggravated Assamese youth from the Indian State, while the older generation are bound by the memories of the freedom struggle with the rest of India, and the children of the privileged sections are attracted by career opportunities and metropolitan areas. The Bodos took many a lessons from the AASU movement and AGP governance.

Hence, underdevelopment remains at the core of the entire issue. Inspite of the Indian Constitution allowing a certain measure of self-government to the states, the absence of proper strategy of development for neglected regions have many bottlenecks petaining to genuine regional development. The state governments have often let their people down when it came to critical matter such as Bangladeshi immigration and a secure entity to smaller tribes. This is the background for the fairly widespread support for the ULFA among the people in Assam even though independence from India is not a very popular goal. Despite terroristic in the activities, ULFA it still represents a genuine sense of injustice and exploitation. The same goes for the Bodo militancy.

The Bodo and Karbi Angle

There are two major tribes namely Bodos and Karbis in the lower Assam who have been fighting for autonomy and statehood during different phases of their movement's evolution. The two tribal movements, the Bodos and the Karbis are described differently just because of locational advantages and disadvantages. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill Districts are hill Districts, which under provision of Schedule VI of the Indian Constitution and can have an autonomous District council for the Karbi

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62 Gohain Hiren, Economic and Political Weekly, August 1983
population. In contrast, the ‘plains tribes’ of Assam, numbering to about a dozen, the Bodos (or Bodo Cacharis) being the most numerous, have no clearly demarcated area which they can claim as their own. Unlike the hill tribes who were viewed as peripheral to the Brahmaputra valley, the plains tribal were considered simply as just another caste of Assam. Though characterised by different racial features and language from the Assamese caste population, the Bodos were eventually absorbed into the Assamese society, and hence were settled for not requiring any special Constitutional dispensation.

The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) was formed in February 1967 with the raising of a demand for a separate state for the Bodos. Initially the students and the regional party, Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), worked in tandem, but as the PTCA could not fulfil the aspiration of the Bodos for a separate state during the reorganization process, the ABSU withdrew its support in 1979. The PTCA itself split in 1984, with one of its militant leaders, Binai Khunger Basumatary, forming a new party named the United Tribal Nationalists’ Liberation Front, Assam (UTNLF). “The UTNLF has been working in tandem with the ABSU and both the organisations have blamed the PTCA for sacrificing the interests of the tribal.”

The Background of the Bodo Movement

From March 1987 to February 1993, the ABSU led the agitation for a separate homeland for the Bodos within the Indian Union that posed a major threat to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government of Assam (1986-91). The AGP leaders, who had launched a mass movement in the state to protect its Assamese identity in the late 1970s and early 1980s were beset with a similar movement by the Bodos for the protection of their ethno-cultural identity.

The Bodoland issue, despite being such a burning one, remained more or less unattended in the beginning which accelerated the degree of violence with every passing moment.

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63 Telegraph (Calcutta), 19 February, 1989.
64 George Sudhir Jacob, Asian Survey, 1994
This is due to the antagonistic feeling of AGP against ABSU, between AGP and the Congress. The avoidance of the issue by the above led to a no-concern attitude of both the Union and the State Governments. This enhanced the problem and prepared the way to lead the movement to a point of perpetual hatred, tension and bloodshed. Any such case delayed for too long means the case is ignored. This then resulted in frustration among the concerned people and the obvious consequence of all this was aggression. Therefore such delays in critical issues for too long a period provided enough time and opportunity for a movement to mature and create difficult situation to manage.

The Bodo Accord

The preamble of the Bodo Accord clearly envisaged that Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) is an administrative institution within the state of Assam with the authority to provide maximum autonomy to the Bodos for their social, economic, cultural, educational advancement. Any talk of political rights and aspirations beyond those in the existing administrative and political organization of the state of Assam is strictly avoided. The Accord stated general council of the BAC will not have the power to make laws in respect to the 38 subjects assigned to it but only have powers to make by-laws, rules, and orders for applications within the BAC area. Even concerns only to the Bodos, the state government retains the power to make laws, the only stipulation being that the general council is to be consulted and its view given due consideration before any law made on the following subjects is implemented in the BAC area: (i) religious or social practices of the Bodos; (ii) Bodo customary law and procedures; and (iii) ownership or transfer of land within the BAC area.

Since 2000 many new dynamics and developments within the Bodo movement have taken place. In 2003, a new Bodo Accord has been signed called Bodo Territorial Council or BTC with the three parties (State government, central government and Bodo leaders) making the previous accords irrelevant. Since then there has been a lull in the militant

65 Bhattacharjee C.; Ethnicity and Autonomy Movements:, Case study of Bodo Cacharis of Assam, P 71 Vikash Publishing, New Delhi, 2000
activities but it is yet to be seen whether the new provision will be incorporated in the Constitution or just remains another Accord. This will be dealt briefly in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

The Dilemma of Accords

The Mizo and the Bodo accords were the result of practical efforts over decades. The agencies contracting them impose a practicality on them. But can two or three parties sign an Accord and intend to implement it without creating a legal framework, how much of it will work and under what circumstances are seldom thought in depth. We move in an effort to understand accords as an institution. An institution perched on a conflict between desire for peace and desire for power. The rules of formation of this body of documents are the key to comprehend the troubled soul of peacemaking in India’s North-East.

Hence, the challenges of ethnic movements have been manifold and so has been the attempts to solve such conflicts which does not challenge the sovereignty of the Indian state. In the last five decades the Indian government attempted various measures from signing accords involving various warring parties to reforming the constitution through amendments. We would see that a Constitutional Reform and amendment is a necessary step towards accommodating the ethnic demands and giving legality to accords. Accords without Constitutional Reform have failed to yield results owing to various inherent constraints. Hence it is important to underline the significance of Constitutional Reform in solving the ethnic problem.