CHAPTER - III
RESOURCE BASE AND
INTERCOMMUNITY COMPETITION
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3.1. Historical background of Kokrajhar district:

Kokrajhar district is perhaps the gateway to the Northeastern region of India. The National Highway 31 (c) and the railway network touches the district at Srirampur before passing through other districts of Assam and the other Northeastern states. Kokrajhar is located in the western most part of Assam, on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river that divides the state of Assam into two halves, identified as the north and south banks.

The district Goalpara as an administrative unit can be traced only from the time of its annexation by the British. It was originally included in the British kingdom of Kamrupa mentioned in the Mahabharata (Barooah, 1979). The district Goalpara was constituted by the British comprising the areas of Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and southern part of Kokrajhar district under the Commissioner of Cooch Behar in 1821 (Taher, 2002).

After the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the area was brought under British rule. There were geopolitical changes during the period 1843-1865 and the northern part of Kokrajhar district comprising the Bijni duar, Chirang duar, Sidli duar, Ripu duar and Guma duar areas were annexed by the British and constituted as a district. These areas were under the control of Bhutanese king and Koch feudal lords. This district was however dissolved in 1867 and made a part of Goalpara district (Taher, 2002).
During the post independence period, the administrative set up of Kokrajhar district changed on several occasions (Brahma, 2006) particularly changes to its boundaries during the later half of the 20th century.

Kokrajhar was originally a part of the undivided Goalpara district. Prior to the creation of the sub-division carved out of the northern part of Dhubri sub-division and some parts of Goalpara sub-division, Kokrajhar was merely a small village with a railway station that connected it with rest of the country (Barooah, 1979). In 1957, the then Chief Minister of Assam had to accede to the demand of the Bodos led by Rupnath Brahma, a minister in the Chaliha ministry for the creation of Kokrajhar sub-division. Goalpara district was divided into three sub-divisions of which the Kokrajhar sub-division with an area of 4176.5 sq.km. was the largest (Barooah, 1979) The area covered by the then Kokrajhar sub-division consisted of five tracts of eastern duars namely Bijni, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu and Guma. Twenty-six years later, Kokrajhar was upgraded to a full-fledged district on 1st July 1983 with its headquarters at Kokrajhar town. There were four police stations in the new district i.e. Bijni, Sidli, Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon and the area of the district extended from the Sankosh river in the west to the Manas river in the east both rivers formed the natural boundary of the district (Anonymous, 2008).
In 1989, there was further reorganization of the districts and some new districts were formed. After the reorganization of districts, Kokrajhar lost about 40% of the total geographical area and the said area went to the newly created district of Bongaigaon. The area delimited from Kokrajhar district to Bongaigaon covered the entire Bijni revenue circle along with about 347.50 square kilometers of Sidli circle. Later some 20 villages of Nayak Gaon gaon panchayat with a total area of 40.22 square kilometer under Chapar revenue circle of Dhubri district were transferred to Kokrajhar district. Presently, the geographical area of Kokrajhar district is estimated to be 3169.22 square kilometer with two sub-divisions namely Kokrajhar (2093.25 sq. Km.) and Gossaigaon (1035.75 sq.km.) respectively (Anonymous, 2008).

The administrative reorganization did not come to an end but continued even after independence. There were about 15 districts in Assam before 1947 with the headquarters in Shillong. Many smaller districts were created even after independence of the country. The planning process, which was introduced in the country, facilitated the creation of new smaller districts from within the existing districts of Assam and the number of districts increased to 17 between 1981-1987, and the districts of Dhubri and Kokrajhar were carved out of the erstwhile Goalpara district (Taher, 2002).

Another re-organization of districts occurred after 1987. By 1989, the number of districts in Assam had increased to 23. The aim behind the
creation of new districts was to bring administration closer to the people so that the opportunities of socio-economic development offered to the region might reach the people quickly and directly. After the creation of Bodoland Territorial Area District on 10th February 2003, the number of districts in Assam increased to 27.

A new administrative change was brought in Assam in the 1990’s by providing autonomy to the plains tribes having large population in respect of certain civil administrative aspects following the agitation by the Bodos, Rabhas and Mishings who are not only socio-economically backward but also occupied the relatively backward areas (Taher, 2002).

3.2. Recent political history of Kokrajhar District:

The state of Assam is comprised of various ethnic groups who have been agitating for protecting their identity and rights. At one point of time, Assam had 2, 27,281 sq.km. geographical area, which was reduced to 78,543 sq.km. following the reorganization of the composite states. Once again the state of Assam came under threat when the Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley particularly in the northern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra started the movement for a separate state, spearheaded by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) (Jacob, 1994). During the time of British rule itself the movement for the rights of the community by the Bodos originated and the genesis of its demand lay in their economic and socio-cultural aspirations. The reorganization of states of Assam started from
1963 onward when Nagaland was declared as a full-fledged state. The idea for separate geographical entity, which the Bodos had, got further accentuated when Mrs. Indira Gandhi decided to further reorganize Assam on a federal basis before the Mizo delegation on 13th January 1967 (Sharma, 2007). Depending on the announcement made by the then Prime Minister of India, the Bodos felt the necessity for the formation of a political wing to fight for the cause of the Bodos (Pathak, 1995). The idea led to the formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1968 at Kokrajhar. Since its inception, the PTCA has categorically demanded for a Union Territory for the plains tribal called Udayachal (Bodo, 1994). This demand however did not receive any sympathetic consideration.

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) a literary organization of the Bodos spearheaded the movement for the recognition of Roman script for the Bodo language and literature in 1974. The stand of the PTCA was not clear on the movement for the Roman script, as it did not come out openly on the issue. The Bodo leaders started the movement for the Roman script as they thought that Roman script was easier and more amenable to the peculiar phonetic sound of the Bodo language. Another factor, which attracted the Bodo leaders to move for Roman script, was that all the mongoloid groups in and around Assam adopted Roman script for their language.

The movement for Roman script turned violent because of the opposition of the Assam government to the demand. The Assam
government was in favour of allowing the Bodos to use Assamese script. During the course of agitation more than 18 lives were lost (Telegraph, 1989). Finally the movement ended with the Devanagri script, which is currently being used by the Bodos. Although it was accepted, a section of the masses persisted with the original demand for the Roman script. But the controversy on the issue came to an end when the Bodo Sahitya Sabha took a final decision to retain the Devanagri script in its annual session held in 2000 at Maidangsri Nwgwr, Simborgaon in Kokrajhar district (Pegu, 2004). The Bodo language could not develop for long due to the controversy that had cropped up among the Bodo leaders on the issue.

After having participated in the parliamentary and legislature assembly election in 1977 and 1978 respectively, the PTCA forgot its objectives. They had even given up the demand for the creation of Udayachal instead suggested for the autonomous administrative unit in the form of a district council. Once the PTCA was looked upon by the Bodos as their own political party but later it lost its credibility due to the self-centered and opportunistic nature of its leaders.

The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed on 15th February, 1967 and just after its formation the ABSU voiced for a separate state and submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India on 9 November, 1972 demanding for a separate state. In the beginning the ABSU and the party worked together to fulfill the aspirations of the Bodos
but later on the ABSU withdrew its support to the PTCA in 1979 as it failed to achieve the goal of the ABSU during the reorganization process. The PTCA itself got split in 1984 with Mr. Binai Khungur Basuamtari forming a new party named United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front of Assam (UTNLF). The ABSU and the UTNLF started to work unitedly and blamed the PTCA for sacrificing the interests of the tribals.

Thereafter, the year 1980 witnessed a mass movement in Assam by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) for the detection and disenfranchisement of the foreign nationals from the state. The six years Assam movement was supported and joined by the ABSU as it expected that their demands would be fulfilled if the movement becomes successful. Disturbed conditions prevailed in Assam till 1983 in which many lost their lives including those of police personnel. The movement reached its peak during the campaign for the assembly election in February-March, 1983. In widespread violence more than 5000 persons lost their lives and about 3,00,000 people were rendered homeless. During the 1979-85 movement, economic development, trade, agriculture, industry etc. virtually came to a standstill. The loss of property exceeded several crores. Considering all these, the AASU suspended its agitation in April 1983 and work for the relief and rehabilitation of the displaced and enabled the students to continue their studies (Bhan, 1999).
The Assam movement ended with the signing of the accord on 15th August 1985 with the central government and the regional party called Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed to take part in the assembly election slated to be held in December 1985. The regional party AGP won the election with absolute majority and formed the state government in 1986 with Sri Parafiulla Mahanta as the Chief Minister. It was expected that the regional party would look into the problems of the ethnic groups. The Bodos who supported the movement with full strength expected the fulfillment of their long-standing demands. But after the formation of the government, the AGP failed to understand the true aspirations and hopes of the Bodos. This led to the dissatisfaction among the Bodo leaders and the ABSU took over the leadership of the Bodos and started the agitation for greater autonomy on March 2nd, 1987 with the demand for the creation of full-fledged statehood outside the state of Assam. The Bodo dominated areas such as Kokrajhar and Udalguri became the main centre of this struggle. When the ABSU launched the movement, it released a 92-point charter of demands (Pegu, 2004), but over time the movement remained centered around three political issues namely- (i) formation of a separate state on the northern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra river (ii) creation of autonomous district council in the tribal dominated areas in the southern bank and (iii) inclusion of the Bodos of Karbi Anglong in the S.T. (Hills) list under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution.
3.3. Principal causes for the demand of Bodoland:

There are many factors, economic, political, linguistic related to their identity, which coerced the Bodos to go for a mass movement. These were as briefly noted below:

3.3.1. Economic:

The Bodo Kacharis form the largest part of the plains tribe of Assam. They constituted 49% of Assam's population in 1947 but their percentage came down to 29% in 1971 due to internal and external migration and disintegration of Assam over the years. But now the situation had changed and the Bodos had gradually become conscious about their identify after the successive agitations launched by the Bodos as it has brought awareness among the population. The increase in population among the Bodos was mainly due to re-tribalization process among the Bodos (Das, 2003) The percentage of Bodo population is increasing year after year due to the movements by the Bodos and the people who got displaced in the past due to switching over to other religions and their registering themselves as Bodo speakers in the recent past. Today the Bodo economy has come under tremendous pressure due to the influx of population from present Bangladesh. Many protective measures have been adopted by the government such as creation of tribal belt and block, line system etc. but all these have failed to achieve any desired result. The Assam government too
chalked various settlement policies but it only increased the number of non-tribals in these areas.

During the time of Assam movement, the ABSU and the AASU jointly voiced the demands for the eviction of foreign nationals from the state especially from the tribal belts and the blocks. Accordingly the clause 10 of the Assam accord reads “it will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment on the government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws” (Priyadarshini, 2006). With the introduction of modernization in the state having compelled the tribal to move towards the forest, the AGP government after coming to power promulgated a law for the eviction of illegal encroachers from the forestlands and started eviction of the people of which ironically the tribals were the most adversely affected.

Another problem is that of unemployment, which is also one of the economic problems of the society. The constitution of India has provided job reservation for the tribal people but the provision was not implemented in a true sense. Only 10% of the jobs were reserved for the tribal people including the Bodos. One of the prime requisites for getting a job in the state is to know the Assamese language, which again becomes a barrier to employment opportunities for the Bodo youth, as they are not conversant with the language.
The Bodos were rather late to take to western education in the schools and colleges. When they started learning in the school, their progress was very slow. There was no record of any graduate degree holder among the Bodos until 1936 and the progress at the secondary level was also not satisfactory. The number of schools in the Bodo-dominated areas was very less as compared to other areas and the poor villagers were also not interested to send their children to the school. They used to think that sending a child to the school meant losing a helping hand in the agricultural field (Roy, 1995). The Bodos who lived with the Assamese as neighbours could speak Assamese very fluently but they were totally ignorant of the Assamese alphabet and written Assamese language. Children were sent to the school for learning. When the children came back from the school, they never used to get any help at home as their parents were not at all familiar with the Assamese alphabet. Other general students could learn in the school and even at home so they fared relatively better. Thus the Bodo students could not compete with the general students and most of the time, Assamese became as much a foreign language as English for them.

In this modern age for getting a job in the government departments and other sectors in the state, education and degrees are very important. As the Bodos could not excel in education, they did not get employment under the government. Therefore, the Bodos remained neglected for decades and
the opportunities provided to the community were also cornered by the middle class elites, which forced the poor villagers to remain backward.

The developmental opportunities offered to the region remained in the hands of a few. It was expected that the creation of BAC and BTC after the long agitation by the Bodos would be able to solve the problem of the Bodos but the situation has remained more or less same.

3.3.2. Language and Identity:

Language is another principal cause for the alienation of the Bodos and other tribals in the state. The Bodos got alienated when the Assam official language Act 1960 made Assamese the official language of the state and the efforts by the successive governments to impose the language on all the people. Since then the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) and the ABSU have been demanding for the inclusion of the Bodo language in the Eight Schedule of the Indian constitution to protect the interests of the Bodos. But recently the Bodo language has been included in the Eight Schedule of the Indian constitution with the singing of the BTC accord. When the official language Act 1960 was passed by the Assam government, not only the Bodos but other non-Assamese speaking linguistic groups also vehemently opposed the decision of the government. The various hill tribes of the region formed a common political platform called All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) to fight the issue jointly. Gradually it led to the demand for the separate administrative set up for various tribes of the
region. Ultimately it created the state of Nagaland on 1st December 1963. Up till now the demand for the creation of separate state is still there in the minds of the people. Of course the demand for the creation of Bodoland was one of them (Roy, 1995).

The Bodo language is spoken by 48 lakh people in the North East India and it is spoken by about 3, 64,481 persons in the Kokrajhar district alone. Although it was spoken by such a huge number of people it did not have a written script of its own till 1974. The point of conflict between the Bodos and the Assamese was the question of using Assamese script for writing the Bodo language. The Bodos had the feeling that their language and culture would become extinct if they continued to write their language in Assamese script. There is no threat for the Assamese identity rather it has been enriched as most of the tribals have adopted it as their own language. Right from the beginning, different tribal groups of the Brahmaputra Valley have been historically contributing in the enrichment of the Assamiya nationality. The tribal of the Brahmaputra valley are therefore sub-nationalities within the Assamiya nationality. If any group in Assam has been facing the problem of identity crises- it is the Bodos and other smaller tribal groups (Hussain, 1993).

Another major cause of the Bodo movement is the preservation of Bodo identity. The successive governments in the state adopted the policy of complete assimilation rather than integration, which made the Bodos feel
that they would not be able to preserve their heritage and culture in these circumstances in the state. Another feeling was that the hill tribes were given separate geographical entity to look after their own affairs and these hill tribes have been making advancement in various fields. The Bodos feel that despite their larger population they have been ignored and a deaf ear was given to their demands.

3.3.3. Political:

The spread of education among the Bodos made the Bodos politically conscious. The formation of different states during the sixties and seventies in Assam compelled the Bodos to think that their demand for the creation of separate state on the northern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra was legitimate as the population of the Bodos was larger than others who were either granted statehood or other forms of autonomy.

The famous Indian revolutionary M.N.Roy, once described democracy as mobocracy means that in a democracy the head count only mattered and not the brain inside the head. In parliamentary system it makes it almost impossible for the S.T. candidates to command a majority of seats in the Assam assembly even by securing 100 % constituency votes. Today ST candidates cannot even win the election in the reserved constituency because of crafty drawing of the constituency boundary. Whatever may be the allegations, it has to be admitted that several assertive aspirations and repulsive impulses worked together to alienate the tribals of
the Brahmaputra valley from the main stream Assamese society, which was enriched by diffusion of tribal language and culture. Today most of the reserved ST constituencies have only 30% of ST population. This is mainly because of clubbing of the non-tribal with tribal constituencies and non-stoppage of the entry and settlement of people from other states as well as across the international border.

The then AGP government in power tried to suppress the movement by using the forces of the state on the agitators, which further fuelled the movement after 1987. During the time of movement, more than 3000 ABSU and BPAC supporters were detained and lodged in jails and several thousand agitators were booked under various anti terrorist acts. During the time of Bodo movement, the Government of India signed many accords such as accord with MNF (1967), TNV (1988) and the signing of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council pact with Gorkha National Front of West Bengal (1988) increased the hopes and aspirations of the Bodos for a separate state of Bodoland.(Jacob, 1994).

The AGP rule in the state came to an end in 1990 and the Congress came to power in 1991. The Bodo leaders expected much from the Congress government but ultimately that government also could not expedite the process pertaining to the Bodo issue.

During the course of discussion the Bodo leaders gave up the demand for a separate state and agreed to the offer made by the centre and
the state government and the BAC accord was signed in 1993. The signing of the accord led to the feeling among the Bodo population that they would have control on the developmental affairs now. The historic Bodo accord failed due to non-demarcation of boundary of the council and not holding the election to the council in time. If the government could have arranged the BAC election in time, the accord signed between the Bodo leaders and the Assam government would have gone a long way in removing the Bodo discontentment. Pending elections to the council intensified group and individual competition for grabbing power in the council among the Bodo leaders. The government also took the advantage of the situation to weaken the movement of the Bodos for separate state.

The state government was successful in its mission and the Bodo leaders got trapped by the state and the ruling class ideology. It is alleged that the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the Bodos was a policy to make the BAC area tribal majority (Hussain, 1995). It is true that the riots broke out in some of the places of the proposed BAC areas in Kokrajhar and Barpeta district. But the allegation leveled against the Bodos as a whole seems unjustified. Riots, which broke out in some of the areas of the BAC, were not necessarily related to the idea of making the BAC tribal majority territory. There was a feeling among the non-tribals that their political rights and other rights such as right to land etc. would be curtailed in the BAC. After the creation of the BAC, some of the non-tribals while interviewed in
Kokrajhar reiterated that now they would have seek out lawyers to clarify whether they would be permitted to use titles of the Bodos or not (Pathak, 1995). Such feelings were there in the minds of the people after the creation of the BAC and some like Mr. Phani Medhi, a leader of the Janagastiyia Sangram Samittee vehemently opposed the creation of the BAC.

The conflict, which erupted between the Bodos and non-Bodos in the BAC area, was not related with ethnic cleansing, but due to a deeper malaise. The reason was that the successive state governments had formulated certain policies and measures to protect the tribal lands but in reality they had failed to protect the tribal areas from encroachment by non-tribals. Had the state authorities been interested in the protection of the tribal areas in the past, the present conflict, which erupted, could possibly have been averted. Thus it would be misleading to hold that the riots which broke out in 1993, 1994 and 1996 was a part of the policy of the Bodos to make the BAC areas tribal majority.

As the other political parties of the Bodos like the PTCA, UTNLF, UBNLF etc. could not fulfill the demands of the Bodos, the ABSU prepared itself in the year 1987 for launching a mass democratic movement for demanding separate state for the Bodos on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. The ABSU formally declared the democratic movement on 2nd March 1987 (Pegu, 2004). The movement was purely democratic and non-violent in the beginning but later on it turned violent due to the police
atrocities on the agitators. The ABSU strengthened its units in the schools and colleges and asked the units and the anchalik committees to spread the message of united democratic movement among the Bodo masses. The movement received full support from all quarters including the Bodo masses and the ABSU kept up the tempo of the movement since its commencement. At first the demand for Bodoland “was dismissed as the demand of a small, lunatic fringe of Bodos who would duly meet their comeupance at the hands of the more established plains tribal council of Assam, whose relations with the Assam Gana Parishad government were not adversarial. This however was not to be” (Sharma, 2007).

The state government treated the movement as a mere law and order problem and tried to crush the movement by force. There were protests against the police atrocities, which invited more stringent police action against the agitators.

In the beginning of the movement, the ABSU received moral support from various tribal organizations within and outside Assam but the support did not last long due to the suspicion that the Bodos being the largest tribe would try to assert their hegemony over the smaller tribes. The support, which was extended to ABSU by various organizations like the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU) and the United Minority Front (UMF), withered away as the relationship between the Bodos and the minority communities deteriorated in the proposed Bodoland areas. Another
indigenous community of the state, the Koch Rajbongshi who had racial ties with the Bodos found them alienated by the movement and opposed the movement as it progressed.

The situation escalated as the movement progressed. At first there were clashes between the ABSU and AASU/AGP workers or PTCA activist. Attacks on school buildings, public buildings, markets and bridges paralyzed normal life in the Bodo areas. Till the middle of April 1989, the agitators burnt down as many as 73 schools and college buildings and 53 government buildings and destroyed about 150 bridges (Sharma, 2007). Many lives were also lost during the time of movement. Due to strategic location of the Bodo areas, the agitators could cut off the road and railway networks between the northeastern states and the rest of India. By 1989, attacks on civilian population increased significantly in Kokrajhar district.

Among the victims of the Bodoland movement, there are not only Assamese school teachers, clerks and foresters working in tribal areas, but also members of tribal groups opposed to or differing from ABSU and tribal members of all India political parties like the CPI (M). Indeed there are allegations in certain quarters of the close links between Congress-I leaders of Bodo origin and the ABSU (Sharma, 2007).

As the situation deteriorated in the Bodo inhabited areas, the government was compelled to initiate a peace process with the ABSU leadership. The most powerful organization of the Bodos (at that time), the
ABSU, bargained hard before agreeing to join negotiations. Finally, the ABSU agreed to start the dialogue on the Bodoland issue involving the state and the central governments. Accordingly tripartite talks commenced in New Delhi on August 28, 1989. After having several rounds of discussion, it was agreed upon to form a three member expert committee to study the Bodo issue. The expert committee was constituted by the central government in February, 1991 and the same submitted its findings in the early part of 1992 with a proposal to grant the Bodos more autonomy within the state of Assam but the ABSU leaders rejected the offer saying that they would accept nothing short of a separate state. Finally after a few more rounds of discussions it ultimately came to an end on 20th February, 1993 with the signing of the historic Bodoland accord known as BAC. Several leaders such as Ram Vilas Paswan, Sarad Pawar represented different government in the dialogue with the Bodo leaders (Sharma, 2007). During the course of discussions, the ABSU and the BPAC were both satisfied with the arrangement called Bodoland Autonomous Council and the six year old ABSU movement came to an end with the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) in Guwahati. Though the leaders connected with the movement satisfied with the arrangement, the then Boro Security Force (Br.S.F) now renamed itself as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) could not accept it easily. The NDFB rejected the accord and continued their struggle to achieve their goal. Rejecting the accord, the
NDFB said, "(the) hopes and aspirations of the Boro people are not a commodity for buying and selling" (Narjiniari, 2005). Although the NDFB rejected the BAC accord, it started functioning with its headquarters at Kokrajhar. The government of Assam provided the council with funds to undertake developmental works and other necessary administrative works.

There were other organizations, which also played an important role during the ABSU movement such as All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF), which was renamed as All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and All Bodo Employees' Federation (ABEF).

Slightly prior to this, the NDFB was formed on 3rd October 1986 under the chairmanship of Ranjan Daimary at Odla Khasibari village under present Udalguri district. Before the formation of the NDFB, an organization called Young Bodo Nationalist Association (YBNA) was formed in 1983 but it remained inactive for many years. The aim of the NDFB was reportedly "to liberate Bodoland with armed struggle for distinct identity and civilization of the Bodos". (Sharma, 2007). While the ABSU was spearheading the movement to achieve its goal, the perception of the NDFB was that the moderate political leaders would be unable to realize the Bodo cause. The Government of India banned the outfit on 3rd November 1992 due to its involvement in unlawful activities. The ABSU also had its militant wing called Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) during its movement.
period, which was abolished after the signing of the Bodo Accord in 1993. When the accord failed to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the masses, the ABSU disowned the Accord signed on 20th February, 1993 in its 28th annual conference held at Langhin Tiniali, Karbi Anglong from 3rd to 5th March 1996. The ABSU revived its earlier demand for a separate state of Bodoland in the same conference. Some of the members of the disbanded BVF later formed the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) in 1996 to fight for the separate state of Bodoland. The ABSU started its second phase of movement with more vigour, which invited police action from time to time. The then president of ABSU Mr. Swomla Basumatary was shot dead by suspected NDFB militants on 30th July 1996, plausibly due to ideological differences between the ABSU and the NDFB. The difference between the BLT and NDFB was that the BLT stood for a separate state within the Indian union and the NDFB stood for a sovereign state for the Bodos, independent of India (Pegu, 2004).

After the long agitation by the Bodos in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley for the creation of separate state, the historic event finally culminated on February 20, 1993 at Guwahati. The Government of Assam, the President and the Secretary of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Chairman of the Bodoland Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) signed a Memorandum of Settlement with the then Chief minister of Assam and the Union State Minister for Internal Security Sri Hiteswar
Saikia and Sri Rajesh Pilot respectively being the witness to the accord (Gassah, 1995).

However, the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) for the Bodos living in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra Valley could not meet the aspirations of the Bodos. The accord failed miserably and the reason for the failure of the BAC was due to the non-demarcation of boundary and not holding of the council election in time. Later on it became an extremely contentious issue between the ABSU/BPAC leaders and the government of Assam, which led to a division developing among the leaders hitherto associated with the movement. The government of Assam and the Bodo leaders failed to demarcate the boundary due to stiff opposition from the non-tribal population living in the proposed council area. The boundary issue could not be settled as a majority of the villages falling under the Council area did not have the requisite 50% tribal population for which it became a contentious issue between the Bodo leaders and the government (Pegu, 2004).

The year 1996 on the whole remained a distressing one particularly for the Bodo dominated Kokrajhar district because of the fratricidal killings executed both by NDFB and the BLT cadres and the ethnic clashes between the Santals and the Bodos throughout the district including some parts of Bongaigaon and Dhubri districts. There were two rounds of conflict between the two communities, once in 1996 and the other one in 1998. The
conflict within the community was a major hurdle in the establishment of peace in the area (Pegu, 2004).

The Government of India and Assam started a series of talks with the BLT from March 2000 onwards. The ABSU, BPAC, ABWWF and the ABEF extended full support to the talks of the BLT, as the demand of these organizations were the same. The movement for a separate state came to an end with the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the BLT on February 10, 2003 for the creation of an autonomous self-governing body called the Bodoland Territorial Council under the amended Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. The ABSU also supported the arrangement and withdrew its demand for a separate state (Pegu, 2004). The Bodoland Territorial Council was more powerful compared to the BAC as it had constitutional sanction. However there was stiff opposition from the non-tribal people living in the BAC area as the accord signed between the Bodo leaders and the state government did not mention anything regarding the protection of rights of the non-tribals. In the present arrangement, all the communities living in the BTAD were given equal rights as enjoyed by the Bodos. Prior to the creation of BTAD, an arrangement called tribal belt and block was in existence in the BTC areas but now after the creation of the said council it appeared to have been abolished. Thus there was a feeling in
the minds of the tribal people of the area that the protection of tribal land in the belt and block would not be there anymore.

The formation of the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) was expected to provide greater autonomy to the local people in all matters relating to development. Four districts constituted the BTAD namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baska and Udalguri. The district Kokrajhar is the largest district of the BTAD and has three sub-divisions namely Gossaigaon, Kazigaon and Kokrajhar. The formation of Kokrajhar district under BTAD led to the curving out of certain areas of Dhubri district, which were added to the Kokrajhar district (Paul, et al, 2006).

The Kokrajhar district has a total geographical area 3169.22 sq. km. with 9,30,404 population according to the Census of 2001. Out of which 4,78,242 are males and 452162 are females. The decadal growth rate during the year 1991-2001 was 15.05% as against the decadal growth rate of 75.94% during the decades 1971-91. The density of population in the district was 294 persons per square kilometer in 2001 as against 255 persons per square kilometer in 1991 Census (Hazarika, 2001). The sex ratio (number of females per thousand males) of the district was 945, which is higher than the state sex ratio i.e. 932.

As mentioned earlier that the district Kokrajhar is inhabited by different communities like the Bodos, Santals, Rajbongshis, Rabhas, Bengalis, Muslims etc. As per the Census 2001, the Bodos are the dominant
community in the district with 3,64,481 speakers followed by Assamese and Bengalis with 1,91,140 and 1,81,239 speakers respectively.

The literacy rate of the district is only 52.55% (Census 2001) which is the second lowest in Assam and well below both that of Assam and India which were 64.28% and 65.38% respectively. The percentage of male and female literacy in the Kokrajhar district were 61.90% and 42.65% respectively, far lower than the comparative national rates which stood at 75.85% and 54.16% respectively (Khollar, 2004).

As per the district statistical handbook 2002-03, Government of Assam the Scheduled Tribe population of the district is 3, 82,022 and the Scheduled caste population are 35,373.

The forest cover in the district has been greatly reduced due to timber smuggler and encroachment of people on the forestland. The forest cover of the district has been divided into four forest divisions such as Kachugaon, Haltugaon, Aie valley and Dhubri divisions. According to the ACF, Haltugaon Forest Division, the total forest cover in the district was 163626 hectares i.e. 52.29% of the total geographical area. Among these four divisions, Kachugaon Forest division has the largest area under forest cover at 82,412.55 hectares.

The northern part of Kokrajhar district was thickly covered with valuable trees. Now the glorious past of this forest division is no more. The whole area is degraded to such an extent that the region has been
experiencing ecological imbalances since last few decades. The extent of deforestation is observed when one moves through the National Highway 31 (c). Previously the both sides of the highway were covered with thick forests but now these no longer exist.

Inter-community competition over control of the limited resources has been problematic in Kokrajhar. Ethnic conflict can arise when different ethnic groups in a particular place compete for scarce resources and limited economic opportunities in a society undergoing change. In a system of ethnic stratification one ethnic group tries to move into the economic niches occupied by the rival ethnic group. If they fail to do so, they are likely to protest against the system of ethnic stratification as a whole and attempt to mobilize the ethnic group. On the other hand the privileged group may try to mobilize to defend its interest and may also use ethnic sentiment in doing so. Such mobilization and counter mobilization may lead to ethnic conflict (Gupta, 2005).

The agitation for separate state by one group and the demand for complete secession from the Indian nation by another group of the dominant community in the study area led to bitter conflict between the state and non-state agencies (Goswami, et al, 2005).

The movement for separate geographical entity started by the dominant community of the area was mainly socio-economic and cultural. The Bodos hoped to improve the conditions of their people through the new
facilities that democracy had brought about after the independence of the country. But the Bodos could not enjoy the opportunities provided by the system and they could not compete with the advanced communities (Bhan, 1999). The Bodos feel that their present loss of status is the outcome of a history of deprivation with regard to their land resources; erosion of their linguistic, cultural and political identity over the years, coupled with potent issues such as economic neglect and suppression of their genuine aspirations. All these were humiliating for the Bodos and stoked the fires of dissent and secessionist demands. Such feelings of neglect and deprivation born out of a lack of development and economic opportunities are hardly unique to the Bodos. Similar sentiments were important in movements by various ethnic groups in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram throughout the post independence period history of northeast India.

The hill tribals in undivided Assam enjoyed the protection of their land under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. But the plains tribal did not have such protection. Thus, over the years 37 tribal belts and blocks were created by the government to protect the lands of the tribals. Despite restrictions placed on the transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal, immigrants from across the border took over large tracts of agricultural land. This could have been avoided if the authorities concerned were genuinely interested in the protection of tribal lands. It is estimated that 60% of the tribal land was taken over by non-tribals. It is alleged that the
bureaucrats helped the Bengali immigrants to get land pattas backdated prior to the creation of tribal belt and block by accepting bribe, this legalized their hold on the land (Bhan, 1999). The problem related to the transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal was aggravated further after the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Area District. The BTAD was created with little modification of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. The Sixth Schedule that was given to the Bodos was not the same as in the case of other hilly districts of Assam. The land rights of the tribal people in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills District of Assam are protected as per the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. However, in case of BTAD every person irrespective of their caste, creed, language, religion etc has the right to possess land even in the tribal belt and block. If the lands continue to be transferable from tribal to non-tribal in the belt and block, the plain tribals specially Bodos will lose their lands very easily as they have the habit of selling lands and become landless in their own areas. In a seminar organized on the occasion of the NDFB’s 20th foundation day at Sefanguri on 3rd October 2006, one of the speakers Mr. B. Daimari, pointed out that the alienation of land from tribal to ineligible persons in the belt and block was possible due to involvement of the administrators and the political leaders. He alleged that it would be easier now after the creation of the BTC for the ineligible settlers to own land in the BTAD as the existence of the belt and block had become null and void. He further
alleged that only a few Mandols were working in the tehsil or circle office, and they would aid in-eligible persons to purchase land easily through Citah register and unscrupulous means. Matters are compounded since the Bodos are not conscious in matters regarding their lands and a majority did not have valid land documents. Bodos tend to think that continuous cultivation on the land itself proves that they are the legal owners of a plot. In fact the Santals have become more conscious in such matters regarding their lands after the conflict of 1996.

The study area has two forest divisions such as Kachugaon and Haltugao forest divisions with 104 and 27 villages respectively. The forest villages were set up within the limits of reserved forest areas during the period 1901-05. Every forest villager was allotted 5 bighas of land including homestead land. It may be noted that the forest villagers do not have the rights to transfer the land and they were given only right of use and occupancy over the land. In lieu of the facilities offered by the forest department, the forest villagers were required to render 5 days free labour to the forest department, which entitled them to the privileges of free grazing, 10 cart-loads of firewood annually and house building materials free of royalty (Thakur, 1989). With the passing of time, the number of households increased many fold and the allotted land became insufficient. As elsewhere in Assam and India the land holdings of individual families are gradually becomingly increasingly smaller and less economically viable.
The Bodo economy centers around land and about 90% of the Bodos and other tribals depend upon agriculture for their sustenance. 98% of the Bodos live in isolated villages inaccessible from the main townships due to poor communication network: an indication of the long neglect they have suffered. The Bodos are mainly agriculturists, who have not branched out to any professions other than petty government jobs. A study of villages in tribal areas shows that their market economy centers around a meager sale of vegetables, mustard seeds and jute. Most of the paddy grown is used for self-consumption. Within themselves the Bodos continue to practice the barter system (Sharma, 2007). Poultry, piggery, fishery, sericulture, weaving, cane and bamboo work etc. are practiced by the Bodo and other plain tribal families. There is a practice of private ownership of land on annual patta or periodic patta basis in the district. There is no practice of community ownership of land like other hill tribals (Bhan, 1999).

A majority of the Bodos are wetland cultivators. They cultivate their land with a plough and bullocks or buffaloes. It is true that the Bodos practice the orthodox varieties of rice; their skill of devising irrigational works has helped them in carrying out improved agricultural practices. They cultivate jute, mustard seed, pulses and various vegetables. Most homesteads of the Bodo families have arecanut and betel nut trees. Betel nuts are very common for domestic consumption. They also rear domestic animals like cows, buffalos chickens etc. Another important base of the
Bodo economy is rearing of silk worms by Bodo women, which have immensely contributed towards their family income. The silk thread known as 'endi' is then woven by them in the handlooms to produce warm wrappers, which have had a good market not only in Assam but also abroad. It is to be noted here that these handloom products of Boro women have been able to draw the attention of outside markets and hence a new avenue of employment has opened up for them. A majority of the Bodo women are good weavers and spinners. In the beginning, the production of clothes like Dokhna and Gamocha etc. was meant for domestic purpose but now it is produced for commercial purposes as well adding to the family income. The clothes worn by Bodo women in their daily use and on different occasions clearly indicate their artistic taste and décor. The Bodos are also good craftsmen. They are expert in making Jakoi, Khaloi etc with the help of bamboo and canes, which also contributed to the economy of the Bodos. But today with the introduction of modernization, Bodos are also leaving their traditions, which had been handed over to the present by their ancestors.

The Bodos are agriculturists and they had very little knowledge about business. Their market economy centers on a meager sale of vegetables, mustard seeds and jute. In the beginning the business was based on barter system but gradually to meet the requirements of a monetized economy, the barter system was replaced by monetary transactions. Since
the Bodo traders did not have much capital with them, their transactions remained more or less confined to trade of small volumes.

The Barpetiah mahajans from Barpeta were very hard working people and their excellent business acumen enabled them to fare better in business than any other section of the Assamese people who generally lack in these qualities. The Barpetiah mahajans started their business in mustard seed but gradually expanded to other businesses as well to maximize profits. They often practiced forward trading not only in mustard seed but in other grains too which actually meant giving money to the Bodo cultivators in advance when the crop was still standing in the fields. These were collected after harvesting which helped them in fetching higher price in the market. The Bodos whole-heartedly accepted this system as they were always short of money (Roy, 1995).

But the situation changed drastically. Forward trading had lot of risks as nobody could give guarantees of good crops during harvest, with temperature, sunshine, rainfall and a host of other factors that were beyond the control of the cultivator, being involved. Since it was a ‘guessimate’ as to much crop would be produced from a plot of land, the mahajans frequently covered for such uncertainties and they almost always assessed the quantity of harvest not only at the lowest possible yield but as an additional measure of guarantee would take an undertaking on ordinary paper, keeping the land or a part thereof as mortgage towards compensation
to cover any shortfall in the contract of the forward trading. The Bodos never objected to this sort of deed as they were forced by circumstances. Most of the lands in Boro areas are covered by annual patta or no patta at all and possession of land was understood by actual cultivation and it was considered sufficient that the land belonged to the person who had been cultivating it for long. Thus when the standing crop failed to give expected yield to the mahajan, the land ultimately went in to the hands of the rich traders as per the deeds carried out at the time of forward trading (Roy, 1995).

The method of transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal did not end here itself. It has been continuing even today in many ways. The Santals and the Adivasi people living in the Kokrajhar district have also experienced such problem. In the beginning the Bodos, Santals, Bengalis, Mohamedans, Telis lived together. Due to poor economic condition of the Adivasis, they used to mortgage or sell their lands to the Benaglis, Telis, Bodos, Mohamedans etc. Most of the lands belonging to the Adivasi community came in to the hands of the Bodos as they lived very close to each other. But the situation did not remain as simple as that. After the ethnic clash of 1996, bitterness between the Bodos and the Santals increased. Taking advantage of the situation, Mohamedans, Telis and others tried to grab the land of the Adivasis by adopting different methods. The method adopted by the Barpetiah mahajans for the transfer of lands of the
Bodos in different parts of the Bodo dominated areas did not end there itself. The Bengalis, Telis, Mohamedans etc were running their petty business and they allow the Adivasis to borrow from them. When the credit mounted and the poor Adivasi was not in a position to clear his or her dues, the businessmen will seek the land in return. Finding no other alternative, the poor Adivasi handed over the land in mortgage or sometime sold directly to ineligible persons. Ineligible persons were those who had not been declared by the state government vide its notification RD.2/47/43, dated 20/4/49 as protected classes of people. The state government vide its section 160(2) of the Amendment Act of the state government notified the following communities as protected classes of people such as plains tribal, hills tribal, tea garden tribal, Santals, Nepali cultivator grazier and scheduled caste people. The Government vide its notification RSD. 1/85/17 dated 29/4/85 had included the Koch Rajbongshis of the erstwhile Goalpara district as one of the protected classes under the purview of section 160(1) of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 (Bordoloi, 1999).

The village mahajans and the businessmen were exploiting the poor villagers taking advantage of their simplicity, honesty and also because of their ignorance due to lack of education. These devious methods of land alienation were propped up additional measures that trapped the impoverished cultivator into the vicious circle of poverty and landlessness.

Evils such as money lending policy also existed. In most cases only
verbal agreements were made that the sum borrowed would be repaid in kind; however, at the time of repayment, the price of paddy would be settled according to the convenience of the moneylender and would be fixed at a rate much below the market price (Roy, 1995). So, the large portion of paddy of the impoverished borrower went to the moneylender. The matter did not end here and, if the borrower could not realize the paddy at the stipulated time, the interest would be fixed at the rate of 50% in terms of paddy. Thus for example, if a borrower had to pay 4 maunds of paddy to a mahajan for one hundred rupees as settled previously, the interest would accrue to two maunds and hence the total paddy to be repaid to the mahajan would amount to 6 maunds including the interest. In this way when an impoverished cultivator failed to repay the loan in time, he would be forced to lose his land to the creditor.

3.4. Resource base and intercommunity competition

Kokrajhar district is very rich in forest and land resources. The district slopes towards the south from the north which helps the rivers and other tributaries of the district to bring silt every year to the low-lying areas and deposits it in the agricultural fields, enhancing the land’s fertility. During the pre-independence period, lands were plenty and the population was also low. However after independence, people started pouring into this region, which created pressure on the existing lands. There were plenty of
khasland (government land), which were occupied by the immigrants coming either from Bangladesh or char areas of Dhubri district.

An aged respondent of about 70 years of age hailing from Ballamguri village under Gossaigaon sub-division stated to this researcher that there was about 650 bighas of khasland in the vicinity of the village, which were occupied by the Muslims coming from char areas in the year 1960. The khasland was meant for grazing of animals but the illegal encroachers turned it into settlement. The government too did not take any initiative to evict the illegal occupants. When the authorities from the Tehsil office tried to vacate the illegal occupants on the government lands, the illegal encroachers on the land protested and demanded that they should be provided with 12 bighas of land per family, as they did not have any land. The authorities refused to accede to the demand of the illegal occupants and offered one bigha of land to each family. Even after that the authorities failed to evict these people from the khasland, which showed the indecisiveness of the government. He further stated that the people from the char areas had occupied the khasland within a single night in the year 1960.

Further, most of the khaslands in the sub-division were occupied by Muslim immigrants. He also pointed out that there were genuine patta holders (among the Muslims) but the majority of them were recent immigrants from Bangladesh or Char areas. The unending flow of migration of people from across the border or other parts of India continued
till the present day and this resulted in the increase of migrant population in the area. The illegal immigrants tend to come to the area as daily wage earner, and live with relatives. Slowly they bring their families and live with relatives for sometime. After having lived in relatives houses for a few years, they purchase land and start living as a separate family. This sort of splitting up and creation of new families and households has led to the formation of new villages in the study area.

Another aged man of Sahajuri village under Gossaigaon sub-division informed this researcher that the lands belonging to the Santals were mortgaged to immigrant Muslims of doubtful nationality. Finding no other alternative to repay the mortgaged amount, impoverished Santals would fail to recover the land from the clutches of Muslims and ultimately it would go into the hands of Muslims. This process does not remain confined to the Muslims only. The Santals also mortgaged their lands to other communities living around them. Thus, most of the lands of the Santals were either sold or mortgaged to others. Many people of the area point to this issue as also one of the factors of the Santal-Bodo conflict.

Due to continuous flow of population from other areas, there has been pressure on the land resources. This has led to the increase of the value of land manifold. The increase of the value of land was mostly experienced after the conflict of 1996 and the creation of BTC in 2003. The cost of land,
which was 1 or 2 lakh per bigha in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon town, now costs more than 20 lakhs within a span of 6 or 7 years.

Another important resource of the district is the forest resources. There are mainly two forest divisions in the district i.e. Kachugaon and Haltugaon forest division respectively. These two forest divisions had valuable trees such as sal, gamari, sisoo etc. during the eighties and nineties. However today, the forest cover of the district has been depleted to a large extent.

The forest cover has been depleted due to illegal felling of trees by the timber smugglers and merchants. They encouraged the local people to cut down the trees and in return local people were paid nominal wages. After the depletion of forest cover to such an extent local people were not benefited at all, rather they had become impoverished and forced to move further north towards the forest to occupy the vacant forestland.

A militant organization of the Bodos, the NDFB tried to control the illegal felling of trees in the jungle, in which many people irrespective of caste or creed were killed while cutting trees in the forest. The local people who went to the forest were either killed or chased out. This led to the feeling among other communities such as Santals, Oraons, Muslims etc. that the Bodos were trying to gain control on the forest resources while depriving the others. While competing to have control on the forest resources, conflict erupted between the Bodos and Santals. There were
recognized forest villages inhabited by 'the Bodos, Santals, Oraons etc. With the passage of time, vast areas of forest department came to be encroached upon by the illegal settlers, and there resulted competition as to who could occupy the degraded forest areas. Previously the area received timely rainfall, nowadays regular and normal rainfall has been adversely affected.
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