



Tribal Land Alienation in Assam: A Study of the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), Assam

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Abstract:

Land alienation among the tribes has been the dominant political issue in the state of Assam. Among the tribes, Bodos are the dominant and largest plain tribe of Assam who has been most severely affected due to the issue of land alienation. Land issue has remained the central theme that has shaped the political history of Bodos leading the formation of BAC to BTC and BTC to BTR. Land issue has also equally triggered a series of ethnic conflicts in the region. Land alienation in BTAD has become so complex that it often involves in law and order situation. Land alienation as a contentious issue is responsible for numbers of factors. But migration is the principal reason behind the massive land alienation in Bodos' heartland. The impact of land alienation is multifaceted affecting both political and civil life of Bodos in the region. Hence, the article intends to study the historical roots of tribal land alienation in the state. The article also attempts to investigate the magnitude, causes and consequences of tribal land alienation in the region.

Keywords: Land alienation, Tribe, Bodos, BTAD, Migration.

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Introduction

The Bodos are the earliest and largest plain tribal community of Assam. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman family group who are spread in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and other Northeastern states of India (Basumatary, 2021, p.1470). The word 'Bodo' was first coined by B.H. Hodgson as an ethnological term to indicate the Bodo speaking people of Darjeeling district in 1846 (Basumatary, 2021, p.1470). G.A. Grierson (1903) also used the term 'Bodo' in generic context to refer the Bodo speaking people. The Bodo tribes are known as different names in different places. In the Brahmaputra valley they are known 'Bodo or Boro' in Goalpara district of Assam and in North Bengal they are called as 'Mech', in Barak valley and upper Assam areas Bodos are known as "Kachari" (Basumatary, 2021, p.1470). However, presently majority of them are found in west-northern part of Assam- Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirand and Udalguri districts of Assam where they are known as 'Bodo or Bodos' and the administrative region is known as Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) which is recently renamed as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

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Objectives:

The paper attempts to study the following research objectives:

1. To understand the historical roots of tribal land alienation in Assam
2. To investigate the magnitude, causes and consequences of land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD, Assam

Methodology:

The research work has followed descriptive method to understand the historicity, trends, factors and consequences of land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD. The paper is prepared with the help of secondary method of data collection. The secondary sources of data collection include books, research articles, memorandum of understandings, census data, news papers and different government websites.

Origin of the Problem:

Bodos, as an agrarian and earliest plain settled tribal group of Assam, practiced shifting cultivation and followed community ownership of land (Sharma, 2001, p.4792). In addition to shifting cultivation, they practiced hunting, food gathering, animal husbandry, fishing and moved from one place to another in search of better livelihood (Sharma, 2001, p.4792). They did not have individual land management system and hence, they fully depended on forest and common use of land. But, their community land and the traditional land management system have been disrupted with the advent of British who brought all kinds of forest and agricultural land under the control of colonial government (Sharma, 2001, p.4792). The British government introduced various land policies e.g., Wastelands Settlement Rules 1854, the Prohibition of Opium Cultivation in 1860, Farming of Settlement Rules 1870, the recasting of the settlement Rules in 1883, the Promulgation of the Land and Revenue Regulation in 1886, and also introduced Cash Crop Cultivation and the policy of immigration that have extensively affected the tribal agricultural and land management system (Brahma, 2021, p.2880). Through the policy of wasteland settlement British able to occupied more land and through the cash crop cultivation they generated more and more revenue from agriculture (Brahma, 2021, p. 2880). The British migrated large numbers of agricultural workers from the then East-Bengal (present day Bangladesh) and tea garden workers from Chota Nagpur Plateau to cultivate in the waste land, grazing land and forest land to generate more revenue (Brahma, 2021, p.2880). The British policy of immigration and cash crop cultivation have pave the way of losing the tribal land in the region. The land hungry non-tribal peasants started to penetrate in the forest land, grazing land, waste land and tribal land to exploit the economic resources of the tribal people (Sharma, 2001,

p.4792). Besides, by 1840 when the British monetized the land revenue system through the process of cash crop cultivation, the tribal people (Bodo) started to sell, left or leased their agriculture land in the hand of non-tribal people due to high rate of interest. Thus, with the advent of British raj the tribal people (Bodo) started to lose their land and gradually alienated from their land in the hand of non-tribal land hungry peasants.

In the context of tribal land alienation, the role of the Sadullah government has to be taken into account. The worst thing was happened with the tribal land under the Sadullah's scheme of "Grow more Food" policy where grazing land were opened for the immigrants. In August 1943 the Sadullah Ministry also adopted a new resolution on land settlement that provided to open up wasteland and grazing reserved forest areas of tribal people in Darrang, Nowgong and Kamrup districts to the immigrants from East-Bengal as a part of the "Grow More Food" programmed (Buragohain, 2024, p.147896). S P Desai, a senior ICS (Imperial Civil Service) officer was appointed to ascertain what area of professional grazing reserve could be recognized as surplus land for immigrant settlement (Buragohain, 2024, p.147896). Desai's concluding remark was that forcible occupation of grazing lands by the immigrant had already taken place to a huge plot of land and there was no grazing land available for new settlement of immigrant both in Assamese and tribal inhabiting areas (Buragohain, 2024, p.147896). But Sadullah Government did not give any attention regarding the Desai's report and opened up vast area of grazing land for immigrants. As a result of such political patronization from the then Sadullah government, tribal people were continuously alienated from their land mostly in the western and central part of Assam.

In 1946 when Congress led by Gopinath Bordoloi ministry came into power the Bordoloi Ministry gave importance regarding the issue of tribal land alienation (Sonowal, 2013, p.26). The Bordoloi Government amended the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, and included the chapter X in it (Sonowal 2013, p.26). By incorporating chapter X in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 Act, Bordoloi Government created 33 tribal belts and Blocks in the tribal dominated areas and ensured some rules and regulation on sale, purchase, transfers of land under the belts and blocks (Sonowal 2013, p.26). The chapter X prohibits the settlement of non-notified class (notified community: Tea Garden Tribes, Santhals, Scheduled Castes and Nepalese cultivator-graziers) of people under these Belts and Blocks and those who are the non-notified people settled in the tribal belts and blocks would be evicted as soon as possible (Sonowal 2013, p.26). The tribal people along with the Bodos assumed that these belts and blocks would safeguard their land from alienation by the non-tribals and immigrants. Despite of these safeguard mechanisms, land alienation in tribal belts and blocks continued in massive scale. The tribal people believed that the Assam government intentionally allowed the non-tribal people to occupy the land of the tribal people. As a result, the tribal belts and blocks were continuously occupied and encouraged by the non-tribal people and thousands of hectares of land had been transferred to non-tribal and non-eligible illegal encroachers (Sonowal, 2013 p.28).

Land Alienation in Assam and BTAD: Magnitude

The alienation of tribal land is a dominant socio-economic and political issue in Assam. The encroachment of tribal land was rampant in the tribal belts and blocks of Assam. Land alienation among the tribal is mainly occurred due to illegal occupation and encroachment of tribal land by the outsiders in different tribal belts and blocks of Assam. There are in total 17 tribal belts and 30 blocks in Assam and total area is around 85.80 lakhs and out of which around 5 lakh bighas of land is still under encroachment (The Sentinel, 19th January, 2025). According to another estimation, a total of 1,24,47,355 bighas of tribal land is under encroachment in different tribal belts and blocks of Assam (Daimary, 2012, p.75). Under the South Kamrup Tribal belts around 7,72,864 bighas of

land alienated by the government due to expansion and urbanization of the capital city of Guwahati (Daimary, 2012, p.76). There were thousands of illegal transferred of land detected by the Tribal Sangha in the district of Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Nowgaon and Goalpara districts, and several memorandums were also submitted by District Tribal Sangha for the evection from tribal inhabiting areas, but the government did not give any action for evection (Daimary, 2012, p.76). Migrants who entered in Assam mostly settled in different tribal belts and blocks and other parts of Goalpara, Barpeta, Kamrup, Naggaoon, Mongoldoi and Darrang districts of Assam (Sharma, 2001, p.4793). With the Muslim immigration, the percentage of Muslim population increased from 0.1 per cent to 49percent, in Nagaon areas the percentage increased from 100 percent to 294 percent (Sharma 2001, p.4793). Along with the Muslims the Nepali traders also entered in the Assam and they settled down in the tribal areas and forest areas of Assam where the tribal people used to cultivate.

According to Assam state BJP (2012) there are around 4 (four) lakhs bighas of land are under illegal occupation in 8 (eight) districts of Assam (Narjinari, 2017, p.177). In another statement given by the then Home State Minister, Mr. Mullappally Ramachandran in parliamentary that there are around 25,707 bighas of land in Goalpara district; around 5,258 bighas of land in Dhubri district; around 12, 433 bighas of land in Hailakandi district; around 2,909 bighas of land in Nagaon district, around 24, 404 bighas of land in Darrang district, around 19,839 bighas of land in Marigaon district; around 17,890 bighas of land in Borpeta district; around 22,824 bighas of land in Nalbari district; around 20,191 bighas of land in Tinisukia district; around 13,687 bighas of land in Sivsagar district; around 13,769 bighas of land in Sonitpur district and around 16,323 bighas of land in Jorhat district under the illegal occupation of suspected citizens (Narjinari, 2017, p.177). This large track of illegal encroachment occurred both in tribal belts and blocks and other general parts of aforesaid districts of Assam.

Like the other tribal belts and blocks of Assam, land alienation in BTAD has also been taken placed in rampant due to illegal occupation or encroachment of Bodos' land by the non-tribal or non-protected class of people in BTAD. According to a news report, there are around 3.85 lakh bighas of land in tribal belts and blocks under BTAD have been occupied by the non-protected class of people (The Sentinel, 29th January, 2021). According to Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), there are around 3,49,505 bighas, 04 (four) kothas and 08 (eight) lessas of land has been illegally encroached in the tribal belts and blocks and sub-plan areas of BTAD (The Telegraph, 4th July, 2014). According to All Assam Tribal Sangh (AATS), around 80,000 bighas of land is under encroachment in Bodoland Territorial Region (The Sentinel, 27th May, 2023). All the districts of BTAD have been almost equally affected due to the illegal encroachment of tribal land which leads land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD. In Chirang district around 299 bighas of land has been encroached by non-protected class of people (Yanthan, *et al.*, 2024). According to the government Notification No. & Date RD69/45/20 Dated 5th December 1947, large numbers of villages including No.1 Garubasha village, Mojabari village, Choto Mojabari village, Deborbil village, Nepalpara village, Hatipota village, Amguri village, Dakhin Amguri village, Banduguri village, Padmapur village, Bilaspur village, Pachim Ankarbar village etc., occupied by the non-protected class of people in Chirang district of BTAD, Assam. Again, in Bijni tribal block under Chirang district around 1,000 bighas of land was encroached by the immigrant from East Pakistan in 1961 (Daimary, 2012, p.75). Again in 1964, around 11,253 bighas of land was curtailed from same tribal block for the refugee's settlement (Daimary, 2012, p.75). A part from the residential areas, land encroachment has also been taken place in forest areas also. In addition, around 1,132.5 acres land in Chirang district was given to Ramved Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust to save it from Muslim immigrants (The Siasat Daily, 26th August, 2016). A large track of forest areas in Ripu-Chirang Reserved Forest have been encroached by which

leads to deforestation. In Baska district also, around 15,298 bighas of land has been occupied by non-tribal people and the villages which are occupied by the non-protected class of people includes Bihalpara revenue village, Senimara Revenue village, Khandikar revenue village, Dhulabari revenue village, Dhapergaon revenue village, Madoikata revenue village, Barghuli revenue village, Bagaribari revenue village and Chinakhundi Revenue village. (Govt. Notification No.& Date RD 74/46/161 Dated 22nd August 1949). According to a government record, around 5842 bighas government khas land and around 503 bighas Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) land in Baksa district are under illegal encroachment (The Sentinel, 24th December, 2016). Besides, in Tamulpur tribal belts under Baksa district around 1000 bighas of land was allotted for the settlement of immigrants (Daimary, 2012 p.75). Similarly, in Kokrajhar district around 14,891 bighas of land alienated by the non-eligible persons and village includes Modati Pahar part II revenue village, Modati Pahar part III revenue village, Modati Pahar Part IV revenue village, Jaoliapara revenue village, Hekaipara revenue village, Maujibari revenue village, Duramari revenue village, Horinaguri revenue village, Bajbarilalmati revenue village, Debitola part I revenue village, Debitola part II revenue village, Debitola Part III revenue village etc. (Govt. Notification: RDS/5/82/43 Dated 23rd November 1984). In addition, large area in Ultapani, Laopani, Saralpara and Lumsung area of Chirang Reserve Forest under Kokrajhar and Chirang district have been illegally occupied (The Sentinel, 8th April, 2024). In Udalguri district around 65,713 bighas of tribal land have been illegally captured by non-tribal people such as in No.1 Udalguri Jungle revenue village, No. 2 Udalguri Jungle revenue village, Dev Pukhuri revenue village, Dakhin Chuba revenue village, Mazar Chuba revenue village, Chuba Chubri Pathar revenue village, No.2 Jungle Block Revenue village, Benganbari revenue village etc. which are occupied by Muslim people (Govt. Notification No. & Date RD 74/46/119 Dated 12th July 1984).

Land Alienation in BTAD: Causes

Land is an integral part for every tribal community in general and Bodos in particular. Bodos used to cultivate collectively for their survival. Besides economic values, they consider land as their social and cultural identity. Bodo people consider land as their religious symbol that makes them emotional attachment with land (Easawaran, 2013, p.296). Despite of their emotional attachment with land, they have lost their land due to several factors. Some of the factors that have been contributed for land alienation among the Bodos could be highlighted as follows:

a) Migration: Migration is the fundamental cause of land alienation in BTAD. Both internal migration as well as external migration to the land of Bodos occurred both during colonial as well as post-colonial periods have tremendously contributed to the alienation of tribal land among the Bodos in BTAD. Internal migration mainly other parts of the country and Assam itself and external migration mostly from neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal who have settled in BTAD and outnumbered Bodos in their own land. As a result Bodos constitute only 31.5% population in BTAD (2011 Census).

b) Tribal Land Management System: The traditional land management system that exists among the Bodos is also responsible land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD. The Bodos practiced community land system where private ownership of land system was not encouraged. They moved from one place to another place to practice *jhum* cultivation and left the land for future cultivation. But they could not reclaim their previous land due to lack of land records as these lands were occupied by others where they used to cultivate *jhum* cultivation earlier.

c) Development Projects: Development project initiated by the government is another factor of land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD. The construction of dams, railway, road and towns has triggers losing of their land. The development project like National Thermal Power Cooperation (NTPC) is constructed in Salakati, Kokrajhar district of

BTAD which is spread over 964 acres of land (Business Standard, 2015). The present day the Guwahati city which is now the capital of Assam once was the inhabitant place of Bodo-Kachari and plain Karbi tribes (Sharma, 2001, p.4793). Similarly, the Chhilapathar area of Lakhimpur district originally belongs to the Mishing tribes (Sharma 2001, p.4793).

d) Ethnic Conflicts: BTAD often occupied newspaper heading due to continuous ethnic or communal conflicts in the region. The region is witnessed with series of ethnic conflicts between Bodos and immigrant Muslims (1993) in Bongaigaon district, Bodos and immigrant Muslims (1994) in Borpeta district, between Bodos and Santhals in 1996 in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon district, between Bodos and Santhals in 1998 in Kokrajhar district, (Adivashi), between Bodos and immigrant Muslims in 2008 in Udalguri and Darrang district, between Bodos and immigrant Muslims in 2012 in Chirang and Dhubri. Due to these conflicts, the Bodos had to leave their place and move to other place where they felt safety. As a result, the places which were left by them were captured by the non-Bodo which led to landlessness of thousands of Bodo people.

e) Lack of Awareness: Lack of awareness about the preservation and protection of land is also another cause of land alienation among the Bodos in BTAD. Bodos, who believe in simplicity, hardly realized for the need of maintaining proper documents and land records for the future protection of their land. As a result of the ignorance, many non-tribes especially the immigrants occupied thousands acres of Bodos' land. Even, they sold their land at a minimum price to non-tribal people due to illiteracy and lack of awareness.

f) Drinking Habits: The habit of drinking (wine, rice beer) is a common habit in most of the tribal societies across the state which is not exceptional to the case of Bodos. This drinking habit is one of the influencing factors of land alienation among the Bodos. Bodos used to sale their land to non-Bodos to fulfill the desire of drinking. In many cases, Bodos agreed to accept one or two bottle of wine in exchange of their land and later on they could not get back of their land because of stagnant economic condition which is mostly prevailed among the poor Bodos.

g) Marriage to non-tribes: Although presently it is strictly prohibited to sell land to non-Bodos in BTAD but still the non-Bodos can possess land in BTAD through the process of marriage. If a non-Bodo person marries a Bodo woman in BTAD, still the Bodo woman can purchase land in BTAD and the children of the couple can possess the land as their parental (mother) land.

h) Economic Backwardness: Economic backwardness is the fundamental cause of land alienation among the Bodo in BTAD. Because of poor economic condition they either sell their land or give their land in mortgage to the non-tribes. In most case, Bodos either sell or give their land in mortgage to fulfill the economic needs for the purpose of medical and educational expense, and also to perform marriage and other social rituals. Due to extreme poverty they neither can re-purchase nor return back their land which were already sold or given in contract or in mortgage.

Land Alienation in BTAD: Consequences

The BTAD has been witnessed with massive land alienation because of different socio-economic and political factors. However, there is no exact figure of land alienation in BTAD. Different sources provide different volume of land alienation. But it is the fact that land alienation in BTAD has been taken place in a gigantic extent either legally or illegally. Undoubtedly, land alienation in BTAD has an adverse impact on the overall life of the Bodo people of BTAD. Some of the impactful consequences of land alienation can be highlighted in the following ways:

a) Violent Conflicts: Ethnic conflict is both a cause and consequence of land alienation in BTAD. Land alienation among the Bodos has been the potential source of ethnic conflicts and social unrests in BTAD. There have been series of ethnic conflicts in BTAD which were directly or indirectly associated with the issue of land in the region. The ethnic conflict between Bodos and immigrants Muslims in 1993 in Bongaigaon; between Bodo and Muslim communities in Barpeta district in 1994; between Bodo and Adivasis in Kokrajhar district in 1998; between Bodos and Muslim in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri districts in 2012 (Sarmah et al. 2019 P.104); between Bodo and Santhals communities in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon district in 1996; between Bodos and migrant Muslims in Udalguri and Darrang districts in 2008 (Banerjee, 2011, p.50) are some of the notable ethnic conflicts in which land was the key factor that perpetuated such conflicts. In all these conflicts thousand of thousands people were displaced.

b) Displacement from Ancestral Land: Displacement and Curtailment from the ancestral land rights of Bodos are the worse consequences of land alienation. Due to the encroachment of their land they have lost their ancestral rights over land and were displaced from their own land. Thousands of Bodo people have been displaced from their place of residence due to land alienation in the hand of encroachers.

c) Poverty and Economic Marginalization: Land is one of the pertinent components of economic development. Due to the encroachment of Bodos' land by the outsiders, they have been facing economic hardship with varied degree. As a result of losing of their land, they have to change their traditional livelihood, agricultural practices and *jhum* cultivation which compel them to search an alternate way livelihood. They had to migrate to new place and to search new source of livelihood which often expose them to a wide range of economic exploitation and push them in the condition of extreme poverty.

d) Political Development: The political development in BTAD from BAC to BTR is a result of unabated land alienation in the region. The land alienation among the Bodos had reached so peak that they need to form organization such as Plain Tribal Council Association (PTCA) in 1967 and All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in 1967 to protect their land, language, culture and identity who demanded a separate Union Territory named as Udayachal for the tribal people in the northern part of Brahmaputra River (Sonowal, 2013 p.47).. Later on, in 1987 ABSU demanded a separate state for first time i.e. Bodoland for Bodos in Bodo inhabiting areas (Daimary, 2012, p.77). The movement continued for six years through rallies, demonstration, hunger strikes, protests and thousands of lives and properties were lost. Finally, on 20th February, 1993 the first Bodoland Accord was signed which is known as Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) for the protection of land and cultural identity of the Bodos (Memorandum of Settlement, 1993; Banerjee, 2011, p.50). The BAC could not stop land alienation, and therefore, ABSU questioned the ability of BAC in protecting their land. Hence, ABSU launched Bodo movement freshly with supports of underground outfits such as Bodo Security Force (BSF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF). After a decade long violence and turbulence second Bodo Accord was signed on 2003 10th February, 2003 which was known as Bodoland Territorial Council Memorandum of Settlement, 2003). The BTC Accord practical provided all the safeguard mechanisms to protect the tribal land and to stop further land alienation in BTAD. However, to strengthen and to enhance the political jurisdiction another Bodo Accord was signed on 27th January, 2020 which is known as Bodoland Territorial Region (Memorandum of Understanding, 2020). Hence, it can be said that the issue of land alienation among the Bodos was directly or indirectly associated with all the political development that took place in present BTR.

e) Shifting to Interior Place: Land lost by the Bodos due to immigration and violence

and ethnic tension, has pushed them to migrate to interior or remote places. Due to forceful encroachment of their land, some of them left their home and moved to remote places like forest, hill areas, river bank to avoid living with the unknown immigrant strangers (Sharma, 2002, p.4793). Many of them have not only changed the place of residence but also livelihood. Hence, they bound to migrate to isolated place like forests, hills and interior villages which disconnects them from the mainstream development process.

Conclusion:

Land alienation is a serious socio-economic and political turmoil in BTAD. The problem of land alienation in BTAD is rooted in the colonial policy of immigration but the problem has been aggravated due to the post colonial migration to the heartland of Bodos. Land question in BTAD is so complicated that it results many up and down in the region ranging from series of ethnic conflicts to the development of a separate politico-administrative unit called Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Although several safeguard mechanisms have been taken to protect the tribal land especially with the BTC accord which prohibited sell or purchase or any kind of transfer of tribal land to non-tribal or ineligible persons yet the suffering from land alienation has not been ended. The land that has already been alienated could not be taken back or the people who have already settled there could not be removed. Albeit, eviction notice has been served several times to illegal settlers but many of them could not be evicted due to strong political protests. What is more important for the time being is to tighten the land rights laws, make them aware and empowered and promote community harmony through dialogue and negotiation among the different communities residing in BTAD.

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