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Issue Brief

Bodo, Karbi and Dimasas Peace Agreements in Assam: An Analysis

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S*ummary*

The creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in the hill districts of Assam was a step towards integrating the tribes into the Indian mainstream. However, the poor performance of the ADCs generated disillusionment among the tribal elites who demanded separate states. The Union government tried to resolve the issue through periodic peace deals with the agitators and militant groups, which provided incremental autonomy to the ADCs in Assam. These pacts however did not address the interests of the smaller tribes and non-tribals who reside in the Council areas.

In the past five years, Assam witnessed the signing of several peace agreements with different insurgent groups. These insurgent groups had espoused a spectrum of political goals ranging from greater autonomy to secessionism with an avowed objective to ‘protect and preserve the socio-political and cultural interests’ of the ethnic communities they represented through armed struggle. The subversive activities perpetrated by these insurgent groups plunged Assam in an unending cycle of violence and despair for decades.

The peaceful resolution of ethnic conflicts was a long-cherished desire for the people of the state. In this context, the signing of the agreements is a positive development as it has injected a sense of hope and peace in the state. This is corroborated by the fact that following the peace accords, number of violent incidents and correspondingly the number of lives lost because of insurgencies in the state have reduced significantly.¹

These comprehensive peace accords which the Government of India and the Assam government signed with various insurgent groups were in making for more than a decade now. However, as has always been the case with the peace processes in the Northeast, no sooner one insurgent group laid down arms and talked peace, a disgruntled faction would crop up and restart the cycle of violence.

It was this very reason that compelled the Union and the state governments to make concerted and sustained efforts over the years to successfully bring all factions of the insurgent groups to the negotiating table. This important step was following by several rounds of tripartite dialogues not only with the armed groups but also with the elected representatives of different ethnic communities as well as civil society groups. The culmination of these peace negotiations was the signing of five comprehensive peace accords over the past five years wherein all the armed groups agreed to abjure violence and join the peaceful democratic process of the country.

The Peace Agreements/Memoranda of Settlement

The first Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) in the series was signed on 27 January 2020 between the union and the state governments with four Bodo insurgent groups—the National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Progressive (NDFB-P), the NDFB-Ranjan Diamary (NDFB-RD), NDFB-Dhirendra Boro (NDFB-DB) and the NDFB-Saoraigwra (NDFB-S), as well as the United Bodo People’s Organization (UBPO) and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). Subsequent to the agreement, the NDFB factions disbanded in March 2020.²

¹ [“Insurgency in the Northeast”](#), North East Division, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2024.

² [Annual Report 2022-23](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2023, p. 18.

The second MoS was signed on 4 September 2021 with various Karbi insurgent groups³ active in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Following the agreement, around 1,000 cadres surrendered. The third MoS was signed on 15 September 2022 with the representatives of eight Adivasi (tea tribe)⁴ militant groups. In fact, these Adivasi militant groups had surrendered in January 2012 and were engaged in peace talks with the government since October 2016. The agreement saw the surrender of 1,182 militants belonging to the eight Adivasi insurgent groups.⁵

The fourth MoS was signed on 23 April 2023 with the Dimasa militant group called the Dimasa National Liberation Army and its political wing—the Dimasa Peoples’ Supreme Council (DNLA/ DPSC), to end the insurgency in Dima Hasao District of Assam. The DNLA was disbanded and 181 cadres surrendered.⁶ Like the Adivasi groups, the Assam government had signed a Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with the DNLA/DPSC on 28 October 2021, who agreed to shun violence and achieve their objectives ‘through peaceful dialogue’.⁷

The final peace agreement in this series was signed with the pro-talk faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) on 29 December 2023. Under the MoS, the ULFA (Pro-Talk) agree to renounce violence, disband their organisation⁸ and participate in peaceful democratic process established by law. The Indian government on its part promised to fulfil the demands of the ULFA (PT) in a time-bound manner and establish a committee to monitor their implementation.⁹

While five peace agreements have been signed, for the purposes of this Brief, only three agreements—the Bodo, the Karbi and the Dimasa agreements—shall be discussed. This is because these three insurgencies sprang out of the movements launched to demand a separate state or an autonomous state within Assam. This Brief will first discuss the course of the movements for a separate or an autonomous state amongst the three ethnic communities. Then it will analyse the salient features of the three peace agreements, followed by a discussion on the factors which challenge the achievement of a sustainable peace in Assam. The Issue Brief will conclude with some observations.

³ These Karbi insurgent groups are: Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF), People’s Democratic Council of Karbi (PDCK), United People’s Liberation Army (UPLA), Karbi People’s Liberation Tiger (KPLT) and its various factions—KPLT-C (Ceasefire), KPLT-R (Ran Rongpi) and KPLT-M (Mensing Kramsa). See [“Memorandum of Settlement”](#), Government of Assam, India.

⁴ The Adivasi militant groups and their factions are: Adivasi Cobra Military of Assam (ACMA) and ACMA factional group, All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) and AANLA factional group, Bircha Commando Force (BCF) and BCA factional group, Santhal Tiger Force (STF) and Adivasi People’s Army (APA). See [“Centre, Assam Sign Peace Accord with 8 Adivasi Rebel Outfits”](#), *The Shillong Times*, Guwahati, 15 September 2022.

⁵ [Annual Report 2022-23](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, no. 2.

⁶ [“Insurgency in the Northeast”](#), no. 1.

⁷ [“Memorandum of Settlement”](#), Government of Assam, India.

⁸ [“Pro-talk Faction of ULFA Formally Disbanded; End of a 44-year Struggle”](#), *The Week*, 24 January 2024.

⁹ Rahul Karmakar, [“Understanding the Peace Pact with ULFA”](#), *The Hindu*, 3 January 2024.

Brief History of the Movements for a Separate/Autonomous State

The Karbi-Dimasa Movement

During the time of India's independence, the tribal elites of undivided Assam had raised apprehensions regarding joining the Indian Union. They argued that if the tribal communities joined the Union, their land rights and socio-cultural identity would be jeopardised. To assuage these fears of the tribes, the political leadership in New Delhi promised decentralised self-governance in the form of Autonomous District Councils (ADC) to the tribals so that they can safeguard their culture and tradition.

Accordingly, five ADCs were established under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in the hill districts of undivided Assam. Two of these ADCs were established in the tribal dominated United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district in November 1951 and April 1952 respectively. These were known as the Mikir Hills District Council and the North Cachar Hills District Council.¹⁰ In 1970, the district was bifurcated into two separate districts named the 'Mikir Hills' district and the 'North Cachar Hills' district. In October 1976, the Mikir Hills District was renamed as Karbi Anglong and the Council was named as Karbi Anglong District Council.

The dissatisfaction with the ADCs among the educated tribal elites soon became apparent when within two years of their establishment, demands for autonomous states were raised before the States Reorganization Committee in 1954. Interestingly, leaders from the Mikir and Cachar Hills did not put forward any such demand either in the 1950s or in the 1960s when clamour for separate states intensified following the imposition of Assamese language as the official language in undivided Assam. It was only after separate states and union territories were formed in the region in 1972 that the leaders of the two hill districts started their demands for a separate state in 1973. While the demand for a separate state was not accepted, the union government made provisions for increasing developmental funds for the two districts.

This arrangement suited the leaders for some time, but they again revived their demand for an autonomous state under Article 244 (A) of the Constitution¹¹ in 1980. The demand for an autonomous state was in response to the call of the All Assam Student Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parisad (AAGSP) during the Assam Agitation to revoke all privileges extended to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the state.¹² This demand for separate state got a fillip in 1986 with formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and the Karbi Anglong North Cachar Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee (KANCHASDCOM) following the

¹⁰ “[United Mikir and North Cachar Hills](#)”, District Census Handbook, Census of India, 1961, p. 7.

¹¹ Article 244 A allows the Parliament to enact a law to establish an autonomous state comprising certain tribal areas within the state of Assam.

¹² P.S. Dutta, *Autonomy Movement in Assam*, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1993, p. 35.

installation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) led government in the state. The ASDC along with several Karbi and Dimasa students’ organisations intensified their agitation. The agitation gradually turned violent with the involvement of militant organisations such as the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and the Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF).

Significantly, the return of Congress government in Assam opened up avenues for dialogue with the ASDC and other organisations and on 1 April 1995, a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the union and the state governments and the ASDC and other organisations.¹³ The government did not accept the demand for a separate state but provided more autonomy to the Councils by transferring 30 subjects from the State List. Further, the government upgraded both the District Councils as Autonomous Councils. Thus, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and North Cachar Hills Autonomous Councils came into being.

The agreement, however, was not acceptable to KANCHASDCOM as well as a section of the youths, who were frustrated by the denial of a separate state. Inspired by other militant organisations in the region, they took to the path of violence and formed militant groups such as the United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) in Karbi Anglong and the Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) Nunisa & Jewel Garlossa factions in the North Cachar Hills. After a decade and half of mindless violence, these militant organisations eventually surrendered.

Following their surrender, the government signed two MoUs—one with the UPDS on 25 January 2011 and the other with the DHD (both factions) on 8 October 2012. The MoUs upgraded the Autonomous Councils into Territorial Councils and provided special economic package for socio-economic and educational development of these areas.¹⁴ These MoUs could not bring peace because disgruntled factions and groups emerged and restarted the demand for a separate state. For example, in the North Cachar Hills, in spite of signing the peace agreement, the Nunisa faction of the DHD as well as the Student Unions and Civil Society Organisations reiterated their resolve to get the separate state of Dimaraji.¹⁵

In Karbi Anglong, several militant organisations such as the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation front (KLNLf), the Karbi People’s Liberation Tigers (KPLT), People’s Democratic Council of Karbi Longri (PDCK) and the United People’s Liberation Army (UPLA) continued their violent ‘struggle’ for a separate state. However, in 2021, all these groups either surrendered before the Assam government

¹³ [“Memorandum of Understanding”](#), 1 April 1995.

¹⁴ [Annual Reports 2011-12 & 2012-13](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2012 & 2013, pp. 20, 13.

¹⁵ [“Separate Statehood Cry Gets Louder in Region”](#), *The Times of India*, 28 January 2011; Mithu Choudhury, [“DHD-N’s Demand for Separate State of ‘Dimaraji’ as Aspiration of all Dimasas”](#), *E-PAO*, 23 November 2012; [“Dimasa Students Demand Creation of Autonomous State in Assam Under Article 244\(A\)”](#), *India TodayNE*, 25 July 2022.

or suspended their armed operations, thus, paving the way for negotiations and peace agreements.¹⁶

The Bodoland movement

While the hill tribes of Assam were given the opportunity of self-governance through the ADCs, the plains tribes such as the Bodos did not get such an opportunity even though the demand for a separate homeland for the Bodos was articulated in the pre-independence period. Post-independence, it was in 1967 that the first demand for an autonomous homeland for the Bodos was articulated by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). This demand was reiterated following the reorganisation of the Northeast in 1973. However, while the PTCA demanded a Union Territory for the Plains Tribes, the ABSU demanded a separate state for the Bodos.¹⁷

In the initial years, the demand for Bodo homeland was relatively peaceful, but the movement acquired an aggressive and violent tenor by the mid-1980s. The Bodos, who had supported the AASU and AGSP during the Assam agitation, had hoped that their demand for a separate homeland will be fulfilled after the signing of the Assam Accord. But when the AGP came to power in 1985, it did not acquiesce to the demands of a separate Bodoland. Consequently, the Bodos relaunched their agitation in March 1987 with the slogan of 'divide Assam 50-50'. The Bodoland movement was led by the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) and the ABSU and supported by militant organisations such as the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) and the United Tribal Nationalist's Liberation Front (UTNLF).

The violent agitation by the Bodos in the late 1980s and early 1990s was brought to an end with the signing of the Bodo Agreement in February 1993. While the demand for a separate Bodoland was not accepted, the Union government facilitated the creation of a territorially defined self-governing Council—the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC).¹⁸ However, a section of disgruntled Bodo youths rejected the peace agreement and formed two militant organisations viz. the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) to 'achieve a separate homeland for the Bodos'.

After a period of six years in 1999, the BLT decided to give up insurgency and enter into a peace dialogue with the government. Peace negotiations between the Union government and the BLT started only after the militant organisation gave up its demand for a separate Bodoland in 2001.¹⁹ The negotiations culminated into the

¹⁶ [Annual Report 2021-22](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2022, p. 19.

¹⁷ Sudhir Jacob George, "The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 21, 27 May 1989, p. 879. Also see Udayon Misra, "Bodo Stir: Complex Issues, Unattainable Demands", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 10, October 1994, p. 1147.

¹⁸ [The Bodoland Autonomous Council Act, 1993](#).

¹⁹ M. Amarjeet Singh, "Ethnic Diversity, Autonomy, and Territoriality in Northeast India: A Case of Tribal Autonomy in Assam", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 6, 2008, p. 1105.

signing of a tripartite MoS in February 2003 between the Union government, the Assam government and the BLT. The agreement enabled the establishment of an autonomous self-governing body called the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule.²⁰

This arrangement, again, did not go down well with the NDFB who continued with their demand for a sovereign ‘Boroland’. Over the next two decades or so, the Bodo Territorial Areas District (BTAD) witnessed numerous cycles of violence as the NDFB continued to target not only innocent civilians but also ex-cadres of the BLT. The NDFB also witnessed series of splits with one faction surrendering to the state government while the breakaway ones continued with their violent activities. It was the sustained counterinsurgency operations by the Indian army and the loss of bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar that forced all the factions of the NDFB to lay down their arms and come to the negotiating table that led to the signing of the MoS in January 2020.

Salient Features of the Three Peace Agreements

There are four major objectives which could be gleaned from the peace agreement signed with the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas groups. The first objective was to ensure that the territorial and administrative integrity of the state of Assam was not compromised at any cost. The second objective was to fulfil the political aspirations of the tribal political elites by augmenting the area as well as the powers of the Autonomous Councils. The third was to protect and promote the socio-cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity of the tribal communities concerned, both within the Autonomous Council areas as well as outside. And the fourth objective was to bring sustainable peace and rapid development to the areas inhabited by the tribal communities.

As far as political and administrative aspects are concerned, these MoS stipulate the constitution of a Commission in the Assam Legislative Assembly under Article 371 B to which the Annual Reports (including audited annual accounts) of the Councils shall be presented. They also stipulate the renaming of the Autonomous Councils as Autonomous Territorial Councils/Region and alter (read increase) the area of the Territorial Councils/Region by including or excluding villages dominated/not dominated by the tribes concerned. For example, the BTAD shall be renamed as Bodo Territorial Region (BTR), the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) as Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council (KAATC) and the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) as Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council (DHATC).

²⁰ See [The Bodo Agreement](#), February 2003.

The three Memoranda further specify that the number of seats will be increased in all the Territorial Councils/Region. For the BTR, the number of seats will be increased from 46 to 60; for the KAATC the increase will be from 30 to 50; and for the DHATC, seats increased will be from 28 to 40. The Memoranda also require the state government to devolve additional subjects to these three Autonomous Councils/Region. At present, all the three Councils have 39/40 subjects which have been devolved to them. The agreements also specify the creation of Village and Town Councils for improving governance and enhancing development at the grassroots level. The financial allocation for the three Councils will be increased and an independent body like the State Finance Commission is also proposed to be established to formulate guidelines for allocation of funds and sharing of revenue between the state and the Councils. To implement these provisions, the union government is required to amend Article 280 and the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.²¹

For the promotion and preservation of the culture, language and identity of the three ethnic communities, these agreements specify that the Bodo, Karbi and Dimasa languages be notified as the official language of the respective Councils along with English, Hindi and Assamese. They also require the state government to set up committees to promote these three languages at the state and national levels and develop a suitable script for them. For the Bodos, the Karbis and the Dimasas residing outside the Councils' areas of jurisdiction, the agreement requires the Assam government to confer Scheduled Tribes (Hill) status upon them as well as constitute Welfare Councils for their overall development.

For achieving sustainable peace, rehabilitation and resettlement of the armed cadres who surrendered is imperative. For this, the agreements require the union government to rehabilitate the armed cadres according to their age, educational qualifications and area of residence by providing them with financial assistance as well as vocational/skill development training for them to be gainfully employed. The agreement stipulates that cases for non-heinous crimes registered against the armed cadres be withdrawn and those registered for heinous crimes be reviewed on a case-to-case basis according to the existing policy of the state government. The agreements also mention that compensation should be paid to next of kin of the person who lost his/her life during the autonomous state demand movement.

Finally, all the three Memoranda contain a Special Development Package. The Bodo Territorial Region has been given an economic package of Rs 1,500 crores to be spent on several projects and schemes focussed on improving connectivity as well as educational, health and cultural infrastructure in the Council areas. The expenditure on these projects is to be shared equally by the union and the state governments. Similarly, the Karbi and the Dimasa Councils are provided with a Rs 1,000 crores

²¹ A Constitutional 125th Amendment Bill was introduced in the Parliament in January 2019 to facilitate the implement the provisions of the Peace Agreement which were signed by the Government with the Bodo, Karbi and Dimasa insurgent groups in 2003, 2011 and 2012 respectively.

economic package each. To monitor the implementation of the agreements, a joint committee comprising the representatives of the signatories to the MoS is proposed to be established.

Challenges to comprehensive peace in Assam

While these peace agreements have generated hope for sustainable peace in Assam, few challenges continue to mar this optimism. First, the successive peace agreements have not comprehensively addressed the main issue of the demand for a separate state, which has been the root cause of the three ethnic insurgencies in Assam. In fact, these peace pacts have not been able to suppress the sentiments for a separate state which continues to be prevalent among the tribal elites in the state. This can be corroborated by the fact that the ASDC, the Karbi Women Association (KWA) and the Karbi Students' Association (KSA) had expressed their disappointment with the accord arguing that it failed to meet their long-standing demand for a separate state.²²

Even the chairman of the UPLA, Sorjon Loeh, while disbanding his organisation had stated in September 2021 that they have not given up on the demand for a separate state and will continue agitating for it, albeit in a peaceful manner. Further, in January 2023, the Joint Action Committee for Autonomous State (JACAS), a collection of Karbi organisations, had written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to favourably consider their demand for a separate state under Article 244A. It appears that the persistence of the demand for a separate state among the Karbis and the Dimasas can create tension in the state in future.²³

Second, the minor tribes such as the Kukis in Karbi Anglong and the Hmars in North Cachar have been demanding Autonomous Regional Councils and a separate district respectively. The fact that these demands are not accepted by the major tribes have sowed seeds of discord among the tribes which have caused major strife in the region in the past. The involvement of Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) in the 2003–04 Karbi–Kuki clashes²⁴ in which 100 people were killed and the involvement of Hmar People's Convention (HPC-D) in the 2003 Dimasa–Hmar clash in which 50 persons were killed, are cases in point.²⁵ The Rengma Nagas, who are backed by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM), have also opposed the demand for a separate regional Council by the Kuki community. Other ethnic communities such as the Adivasis, Gorkhas, Biharis and Assamese, who reside in

²² Giriraj Bhattacharjee, “[India: Karbi Groups and Peace, Finally? – Analysis](#)”, *Eurasia Review*, 14 September 2021.

²³ Kangkan Kalita, “[Assam: Protests Erupt in Karbi Anglong Over Accord](#)”, *The Times of India*, 6 September 2021; “[Political Divide in Karbi Anglong Over Article 280 & Funding Mechanism](#)”, *The Hills Times*, 26 July 2024.

²⁴ Praveen Kumar, “[Karbi-Kuki Clashes in Assam](#)”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2004.

²⁵ Giriraj Bhattacharjee, “[India: Farewell to Arms in Assam? – Analysis](#)”, *Eurasia Review*, 30 January 2012.

the Council areas have also expressed their concerns of losing political power to the Karbis and the Dimasas.²⁶

Third, the inclusion of villages dominated by a particular tribe in the Territorial Council to define its area of jurisdiction also has the potential to create major conflict. The case of Bodoland is quite instructive in this regard. The 1993 Bodo Accord stipulated the formation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council comprising contiguous geographical area between the rivers Sankosh and Mazbat, but the geographical limits of the BAC was left open. The Accord specified that villages with more than 50 per cent or more of Bodo population will be included in the BAC. However, to give the BAC a contiguous area, 515 villages with less than 50 per cent of Bodo population had to be included.²⁷

The issue became a bone of contention between the Assam government and Bodo leadership as the former refused to acquiesce to the demands of the Bodos. In response, the Bodo militant outfits started systematically attacking the non-Bodos (Santhals, Muslims, Biharis, Nepalis and Bengalis) so that these communities would flee leaving the Bodos as the major tribe in the area. Such was the fear of ethnic violence among the non-Bodo communities that 18 organisations formed the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS) to oppose the proposed map of BTC after the 2003 Accord.²⁸ The non-Bodos also opposed the accord stating that the government had given political powers to 20 per cent of the population.

Conclusion

While the creation of ADCs in the hill districts of Assam was a rational step towards integrating the tribes into the Indian mainstream, the poor performance of the District Councils soon generated disillusionment among the tribes, especially the educated elite. The disaffected tribal elite started clamouring for greater autonomy in the form of an autonomous or a separate state. These demands, which started as peaceful agitations, soon turned violent with the involvement of militant groups.

The Union and the state governments, on their part, tried to resolve the issue through periodic peace deals with the agitators and militant groups, which provided incremental autonomy to the ADCs in Assam. Thus, the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills District Councils and the Bodo Autonomous Council got substantial autonomy over the years. However, these peace agreements have not conclusively resolved the demands for a separate state—the root cause of the insurgencies. These pacts also did not address the interests of the smaller tribes and non-tribals who reside in the Council areas. Unless these issues are decisively settled, sustainable peace in Assam might remain elusive.

²⁶ Amarjyoti Borah, “[New Groups in Assam Protest Karbi-Anglong Peace Accord](#)”, *The Federal*, 8 September 2021.

²⁷ Banajit Hussain, “[The Bodoland Violence and the Politics of Explanation](#)”, *Seminar*, 2012.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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