

## **Ethnic Conflict and Forced Migration in the Areas of *Bodo* Concentration in Assam, India**

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### **Abstract**

*The ethnic situation in India's North-East, especially the Bodo's demand for a separate state continued to be an extremely complex issue for the central government to resolve. The present study aims at putting this problem in its proper spatial perspective by examining relevant historical and census data.*

### **Generalities**

A remarkable fact about India's population is that it continues to subsume within it a fairly sizable tribal component. The tribal segment is far from homogeneous and displays a fairly high degree of diversity in its socio-cultural traits and the stage of their social evolution. An element of commonality is however seen in the tendency of the tribes to cluster and concentrate in a few enclaves in the hilly and the forested parts of the country. The areas of tribal concentration have historically remained away from the main foci of population agglomeration and seem to have suffered from varying degrees of isolation.

The restricted nature of interaction with the non-tribal groups and the operation of endogenous processes of change at a low key have permitted the continuation of the tribal order in varying degrees of intensity. While the anthropologists emphasize that the spatial pattern of population in the sub-

continent suggests 'a bridge and buffer role' which the tribes were supposed to play, separating politically organized territories from one another, the level of economic development witnessed in the tribal enclaves does not suggest their deeper involvement in this process of interaction.

It is in the tribal areas of the country that the process of redistribution of population seems to be taking place at an alarming rate. The process perhaps began during the colonial period itself when the resource-rich tribal areas, particularly in mid-India were exposed to colonial exploitation. This resulted in organized movement of the non-tribal elements deep into the monolithic tribal areas, changing not only the ethnic composition but also bringing about far reaching changes in their socio-economic order. The land-hungry peasants too made deep inroads into the fertile tracts in the tribal habitats, resulting in an unprecedented redistribution of tribal population. Evi-

dences of redistribution of tribal population are spatially contained in the fragmented cores and peripheries of many tribal groups living in central India. The tribal groups who were in any case distributed in “geographically negative areas” were further squeezed into more inhospitable tracts or had to move out to newly emerging towns to work there in the unorganized tertiary sector of the economy.

Such a process of redistribution was experienced in the North-Eastern region of India—a region supporting large concentration of scheduled tribes and a legion of ethnically differentiated tribes—though on a much smaller scale and much different in quality. The most significant aspect of spatial distribution of tribal population in this region is an almost exclusive concentration of the tribes in the hilly region and in some areas of the Brahmaputra valley. It is the latter, which has been subjected to redistribution of population more than the former. The *Bodo* community, which is widely distributed as a one of the few ‘plains tribe’, has been experiencing a massive redistribution of its population both in the past as well as in the present, if the data available in the censuses is any indication.

### The Problem

The ethnic situation in India's North-East has been and continues to cause for concern. The situation is particularly difficult in Assam where the *Bodos* are demanding a separate state to be carved out of Assam where they have ‘majority’. It is true that some of the major tribes living in the North-East have been granted statehood on the basis of exclusive areas of their concentration and have been enjoying a degree of au-

tonomy. However the geographical distribution of the *Bodos* is such that they do not claim numerical majority at the district level in not more than one. Initially the *Bodos* were content with the demand for an autonomous council for greater financial autonomy. But subsequently, due to inept handling of this sensitive issue and political expediency on the part of both state as well as central Government, a much simpler issue turned out to be an extremely complicated one. The *Bodos* no more wanted financial autonomy, but a full-fledged state within the Indian Union and took recourse to violence, creating a situation of gross violation of human rights. The geographical distribution of the tribe became an important issue over claims to statehood and the tribe set before itself a task of evicting non-*Bodo* groups in the areas of their proposed state. Faced with this, the non-*Bodo* groups too consolidated themselves, resulting in the worst ever human tragedy that forced many to find themselves

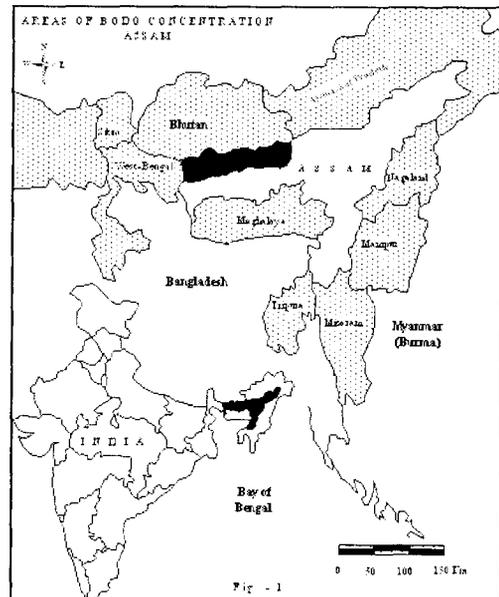


Fig. 1

as refugees in their own land. The present paper makes a modest attempt to take a close look at the changing spatial pattern in ethnic distribution in the *Bodo* areas of Assam by using village level data for the analysis. Though the data for 2001 Census could have thrown a better light on the changes in the geographical distribution of different ethnic groups in the study area, it has not been possible, as village level data was not available till the completion of this report. Hence the study confines itself to the period between 1971-1991.

The available records show that the *Bodos*, before Independence, were extensively distributed on both sides of the Brahmaputra River as well as in the **char** areas (river islands). After the partition of India, influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) created problems of shelter and settlement in large parts of the state. Gradually the immigrant groups captured the tribal lands. Internal migration too took place from various states and this had a debilitating effect on the availability of land for the tribals as a whole and particularly for the *Bodos* who were squeezed rapidly towards the north (fig. 1). The process continued much after the partition and it 'threatened' the *Bodo* identity owing to continued influx of people of non-*Bodo* origin into the already shrunk areas of their habitat.

It is thus clear that as in some other parts in mid-India, the tribal population in Brahmaputra valley has witnessed substantial redistribution of its population in the past. Of particular importance that warrants research is the *Bodo* population, which is now largely confined to a few districts on the northern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra.

As a consequence of their redistribution, the *Bodo* people have been demanding separate statehood on the same lines as many other tribal groups in the North-East have been granted. The demand ostensibly flows from their real or perceived fear of loss of their land, culture and identity. The demand for statehood has transformed into a political movement, culminating not too infrequently into violence in many areas. The formation of *Bodo* Autonomous Council in the year 1993 has not helped much to improve the situation either.

It is in this context that the present problem assumes significance. It is clear that the redistribution of tribal population has been an ongoing process for quite sometime. It is not the purpose here to examine this long drawn process of redistribution out, but only to confine our study to the recent period of political and ethnic unrest, when the process of redistribution of population acquired a qualitatively new dimension since it longer is no confined to the *Bodo* segment alone. The violent nature of the demand for a separate *Bodo* land state has unleashed a process of redistribution, which encompasses in its fold not only the *Bodos*, but also the non-*Bodo* tribes as well as the other non-tribal groups. It is this process of redistribution and its spatial manifestations as well as its consequences, which form the core of this research. The all pervasive nature of the redistribution of population cutting across ethnic boundaries, makes the process of redistribution not only quantitatively different from the earlier trend, but also makes it unprecedented both in quality and quantity.

The research aims at identifying the spatial patterns in this process of redistribution and examines if the patterns are becom-

ing more ethnically homogeneous in certain areas of *Bodo* concentration. The research also makes a modest attempt at getting an insight into the consequences of such a possibility in the context of human rights.

### Choice of the Study Area

For the purpose of the study the areas where the *Bodo* tribes constitute a significant proportion of the population of Assam has been selected. Needless to say the quantum and quality of population redistribution has been different in this part of the state as compared to others. As has been mentioned earlier, the areas of *Bodo* concentration are more towards the north of Brahmaputra (fig.1) and the proportion of the *Bodos* is low or insignificant elsewhere.

As a whole, the tribal zone extends from Assam-Bengal Inter-state Boundary in the west to Darrang district of Assam in the east, and in the north Indo-Bhutan International boundary to Brahmaputra River in the south. The *Bodo* people mainly predominate in this tribal zone. Ethnically it has great significance. There are occurrences of riots between *Bodos* and non-*Bodos* (especially Santhals) in this area. Riots are playing a major role in redistributing people from this belt.

The *Bodos* as the most numerous communities cover the widest area are found in every district, but occur in greatest numbers in the Lower and Middle parts of the Brahmaputra Valley, namely in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup and Darrang. According to 1971 census, the Scheduled Tribes (hereafter S.T.) population was 10.98 per cent whereas in 1991 census it increased

to 13.27 per cent. The *Bodo* population constituted 33.21 per cent and 40.21 per cent of the total S.T. population in the respective census years.

*Bodo* people are demanding *Bodoland* as a separate state from Assam. Partially acceding to their demand, the Assam Government declared a *Bodoland* Autonomous Council in 1993. For the purposes of the present study, only the district of Kokrajhar has been selected as a case study as this is the district which has the highest concentration of *Bodo* people and has witnessed large-scale violence in the recent past.

### Objectives

*The broad objectives of this research are*

- To get an insight into the ethnic dimension of population redistribution in Kokrajhar district of Assam; an area of very high *Bodo* concentration,
- To identify changing spatial patterns in the ethnic distribution of population, and
- To assess the consequences of the redistribution of population in *Bodo* areas of Assam

### Data Base and Methodology

Much of the data required has been obtained from secondary sources particularly those published by successive census enumeration and records available with the *Bodo* Autonomous Council. Census publications pertaining to population data have been used to analyse patterns in the distribution and growth of population at district and village level. Data available from the *Bodo* Autonomous Council has also been profitably utilized to identify areas of *Bodo* domination.

## Methodology

As has been mentioned earlier, the main objective of the study is to assess the extent of spatial distribution of population and its consequences, following the demand for *Bodoland* during the last couple of decades. Given this scope the period of investigation is confined to the three decades, starting with 1970. The 1970s' are chosen as the base decade as not much is known for inter-ethnic strife resulting in forced ethnic redistribution before this. The decades of 1980s and 1990s have witnessed large scale ethnic violence in many parts of the *Bodo* areas and strong redistribution tendencies characterize this period. Thus data pertaining to the period in 1970s have been profitably used to describe the earlier pattern of population distribution, while the data pertaining to the later years indicate the pattern of redistribution.

The distribution of population in areas of *Bodo* concentration has been understood by dis-aggregating the data into four sets: total population, total non-tribal population, total non-*Bodo* population, and total Scheduled Tribe population. Distribution of these categories of population has been examined at the district and village level. The village level analysis has been done by identifying villages, which are dominantly inhabited by (a) the *Bodos*<sup>1</sup> (b) the non-*Bodo* tribe<sup>2</sup> and (c) the non-tribal segment. The redistribution tendencies have been examined for all the three categories of population; at village level (i.e. the three groups identified).

The three ethnic dominated areas and clusters of villages (i.e. the *Bodos*, non-*Bodo* tribes and non-tribal) have been compared to examine if a greater homogenization in

ethnic composition is taking place in spatial terms.

## Displacement in North-East India

Throughout the Northeast violence and displacement continue in many areas. The level of violence, number of displaced, and the conditions for the displaced vary from state to state in the Northeast. A conservative estimate of the displaced in the Northeast at the end of the year 1998 puts the figure between 170,000 and 230,000. That figure included 80,000 ethnic Santhals (and a small number of ethnic Nepalese) in Assam; from 3,500 to 60,000 Bengalis in Assam; more than 20,000 ethnic Paite, Kuki, and Naga in Manipur; 39,000 ethnic Reangs displaced from Mizoram into Tripura; 25,000 Bengalis in Tripura; and 3,000 ethnic Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh.

In Assam, the displaced Santhals, Bengalis, and ethnic Nepalis were largely displaced by *Bodo* (or Boro) insurgents seeking greater autonomy or independence. In the mid-1990s, *Bodo* attacks on Bengalis and ethnic Nepalis aimed at increasing the proportion of *Bodos* in the area displaced more than 60,000 people, mostly Bengalis. It is difficult to know how many of the Bengalis who became displaced remained displaced in 1998. Some or many of the Bengalis displaced during that time have settled elsewhere, but thousands remain in camps. In May 1996, *Bodos* mounted large-scale attacks on ethnic Santhals that displaced more than 250,000 persons, mostly Santhals. Santhals too organized themselves, got armed and fought back, causing the displacement of several thousand *Bodos*. During 1997, most of the displaced Santhals and all of the displaced *Bodos* returned to their

homes. However, the Assam state government prevented some 40,000 Santhals from doing so, saying that the land they had lived on was "forest land" protected by law (*Bodos* living in the same forest areas were, however, able to return home). In May 1998, further *Bodo* attacks displaced another 25,000 Santhals, many for the second time. The displaced population again grew to between 65,000 to 80,000, living in 33 camps. *Bodo*-Santhal clashes in September left 30 dead and resulted in the displacement of another 2,000 people.

### ***Bodo* Problem: the Antecedents**

Since 1966 the *Bodos* have struggled for a separate political identity for themselves. Starting off modestly, they now demand, among other concessions from the Central Government, the creation of a separate State on the north bank of Brahmaputra as well as autonomous districts for their Rabha and Tiwa tribal cousins on the south bank, so that these plains tribes are all able to achieve a measure of self rule. They also demand restraints on unlawful habitation in "*Bodoland*"; the allocation of a bigger share of planned development expenditure (as has been enjoyed by other tribal states); the driving out of "undesirable human elements" either lawfully or by force; complete control over the economic, social and political life in their state; and effective measures to tackle unemployment.

As is the case with many other tribes in the North-East, in the post Independence era the *Bodos* too began their agitation in the late sixties, mainly to demand the inclusion of the *Bodo* language as the medium of instruction in their schools, and followed this up with a movement for their own script in

1972. The *Bodo* Autonomous Council (BAC) has only recently adopted the Roman script for the BAC areas, replacing the Devnagari script (used in Hindi) that was allowed to them earlier.

A movement for the recognition of the *Bodo* language as an official language of Assam followed the script movement. The Assam Government granted<sup>3</sup> associate official language status to the *Bodo* language after four years of continued struggle. Until 1987, the *Bodos* were content to demand an autonomous council along the lines of the other hill tribes of Assam<sup>4</sup>. This demand was originally put up also by a *Bodo* regional party, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam. They were however not successful in achieving even this limited degree of autonomy.

Insensitivity to the problems of the *Bodos* in Assam was largely responsible for escalating an avoidable and manageable problem into a major one. The Central Government's intelligence agencies are also believed to have played a part in promoting the militancy of the *Bodos*<sup>5</sup>. After several years of violent agitations, the Indian Central Government and the State Government of Assam negotiated an accord with some major *Bodo* groups. The *Bodoland* Autonomous Territory Accord was signed in February 1993. The accord has however not worked because some of its essential provisions have not been implemented and severe infighting among the *Bodo* factions and their competing populist leadership made it impossible to achieve stability within the *Bodo* Autonomous Council (BAC). In the five years since the accord was signed, no elections were held for the BAC. No proper boundary was drawn, marking the autonomous tribal region (comprising the contigu-

ous geographical areas between the rivers Sankosh and Mazbat.) The Central and Assam Governments also complicated matters to avoid implementing the accord, particularly the financial provisions that had devolved powers to the Council to mobilize resources while fixing plan and budgetary accountabilities on the Assam Government exchequer.

Consequently the All *Bodo* Students Association (ABSU), which had signed the agreement in the 1993 accord, hardened<sup>6</sup> its stand for a separate state by the year 1998. Political parties too further complicated the matter. In September 1997, before the tripartite talks were to begin, the Congress party demanded that adequate safeguards for non-*Bodos* living in the *Bodo* Autonomous Council areas must be incorporated in any negotiated settlement of the *Bodo* issue. The party felt that the *Bodo* leaders must remove the apprehensions among non-*Bodos* as their democratic rights may be curtailed under the BAC and that the *Bodos* and Non-*Bodos* will have equal status in all matters under the BAC set-up.

As a consequence, five years after the *Bodoland* accord was signed, nearly all influential *Bodo* groups, including the ABSU, which were signatories to the agreement, resumed the movement for a separate state. The merciless killings of non-*Bodos*, particularly the Santhals, began and the more extremist *Bodos* are bent on ousting Bengali and other minority settlers from what they perceive is their homeland. Since the eastern and northern borders of *Bodoland* were not delineated to their satisfaction they started driving out "outsiders" for their new state of *Bodoland*.

The outbreak of this war between the *Bodos* and the Santhals has added another deadly dimension to the conflicts already raging in Assam that turned itself into a problem of human rights. The militant *Bodos*<sup>7</sup> as recourse to convert the areas of their proposed *Bodoland* started the process of "ethnic cleansing" through violent means. The two major non-*Bodo* land-owning segments are the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims from Bangladesh. The Muslims have settled only in the char or the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and there is no immediate conflict between the *Bodos* and the Muslims over land rights. Even so, scores of Muslims were killed in the 1993-94 riots. The Santhals, on the other hand, had encroached on prime reserve forestlands, had cleared them, and had set up permanent habitations.

Severe tensions exist between Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrant, Koch-Rajbanshis as well as Nepali settlers and the *Bodos* in the same disturbed region. While the violence between the Bangladeshi immigrants and the *Bodos* has been of relatively long standing, the recent violent clashes between the *Bodos* and the Santhals demonstrate the heavy price that failed political arrangements extract from the most vulnerable and poorest households who are usually defenseless.

The Santhals in Kokrajhar district, who had eked out a living from the forests before the violence began, are now believed to be getting help from their fellow tribesmen in West Bengal and Bihar. Santhals outfits, such as the Birsa Commando Force (BCF), Adiulfa and the Cobra Force, are trying to counter the *Bodo* onslaught by retali-

ating with acts of grue some violence themselves.

The *Bodo* groups feel that their bargaining power in demanding a separate state of *Bodoland* has been subverted by migration into this region, which has decisively changed its demographic composition to its disadvantage. While these areas were traditionally *Bodo*-majority regions, the influx of migrants over the past few decades has reduced them to barely a third of the total population of the area.

### Redistribution and Ethnic Cleansing in *Bodo* Areas

Fig. 2 reveals that the Scheduled tribe population accounts for a very large share of the total population in two hilly districts of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong where the *Bodos* are by and large absent. According to 1971 census the proportion of the *Bodos* to the total population of Assam was only

4.23 per cent (Table-1). It marginally increased to 5.48 per cent in the year 1991. The share of Scheduled Tribe population to the total on the other hand was 10.98 per cent in 1971 and increased to 12.83 per cent by the year 1991. This means that the *Bodo* population increased at a much faster rate than the other scheduled tribe population. This is evident from the fact that while the share of *Bodo* population to the total Scheduled Tribe population of Assam was only 38.49 per cent in 1971, it increased to 42.71 per cent in the year 1991.

However, this increase is not spatially uniform when the data is analyzed at the district level (fig.3). At the district level, the *Bodo* population is highly concentrated only in three districts of Assam in both the census years of 1971 and 1991. The *Bodo* population accounted for 10.69 per cent of the total population of Goalpara district in 1971 and the proportion increased to 14.13 per

Table 1 Assam: Percentage Distribution of the Scheduled Tribes and the *Bodos*, 1971-91

Districts	Scheduled Tribes		<i>Bodos</i>				% to Total <i>Bodo</i> Population	
	1971	1991	% to total	% to ST	1971	1991	1971	1991
Goalpara	13.84	17.13	10.69	14.03	77.29	81.88	38.52	41.24
Kamrup	10.44	11.46	7.26	8.29	69.53	72.35	33.51	29.73
Darrang	10.69	13.86	7.64	10.60	71.5	76.49	21.46	23.51
Nowgaon	7.44	6.65	0.39	0.38	5.2	5.78	1.05	0.79
Sibsagar	6.82	8.62	0.29	0.39	4.23	4.58	0.86	0.84
Lakhimpur	13.49	16.14	1.33	1.47	9.86	9.11	4.57	3.87
K. Anglong	55.37	51.56	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00	0.00
N.C. Hills	69.15	65.54	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00	0.00
Cachar	0.89	0.75	0.01	0.01	0.93	1.17	0.02	0.02
Assam	10.98	12.83	4.23	5.48	38.49	42.71	100.00	100.00

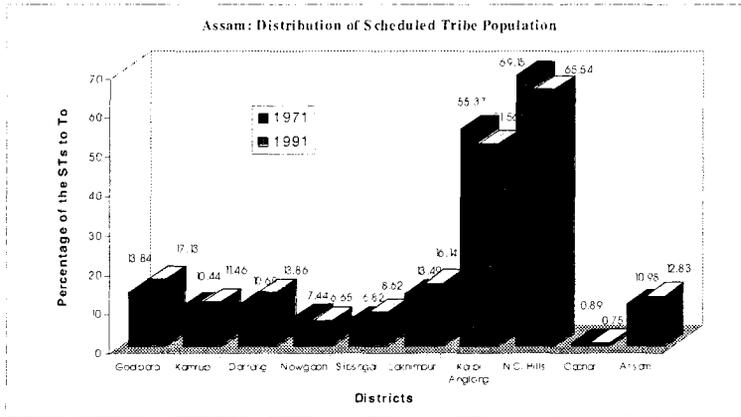


Fig. 2

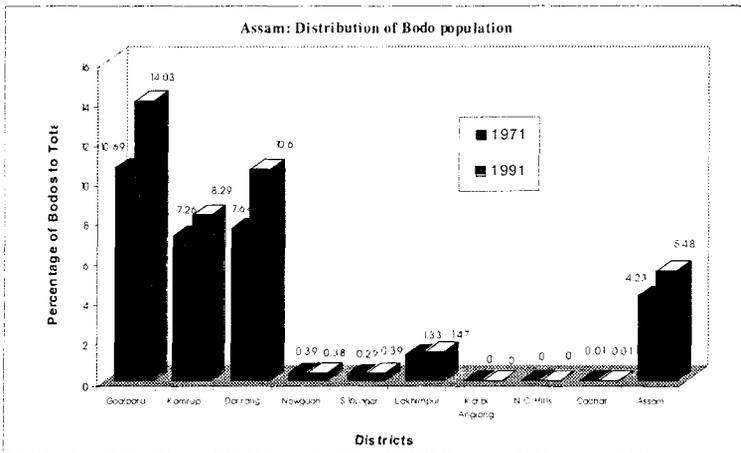


Fig. 3

cent in the year 1991. The share increased from 7.64 per cent to 10.60 per cent in the same period in Darrang. Likewise the *Bodo* population accounting for 7.26 per cent of Kamrup's population in 1971 increased to 8.29 per cent by the year 1991. It is evident that the proportion of the *Bodo* population in the total population showed large increases in all these three districts during the two decades. The increase in the share of *Bodo* population however was the highest

in Darrang district. This phenomenal increase in the share of *Bodo* population in these districts, particularly in Darrang could not be attributed to differential natural increase in its population alone. It must have resulted from redistribution of the *Bodo* population itself whereby many *Bodo* people might have migrated into these districts from other districts or due to out-migration of non-*Bodo* people from these districts or both. The changes in the share of *Bodo* popu-

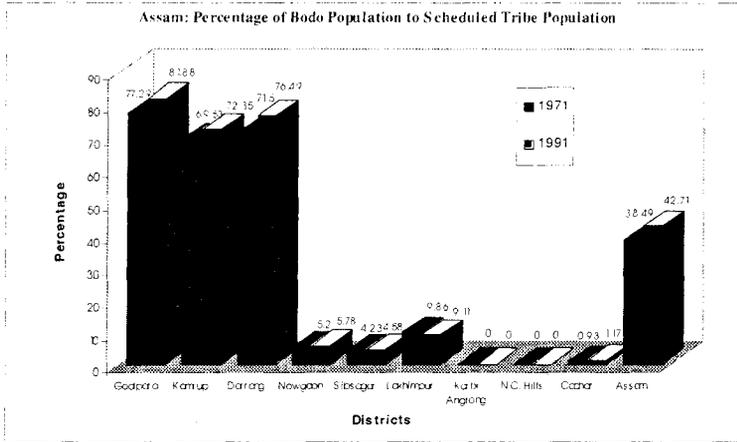


Fig. 4

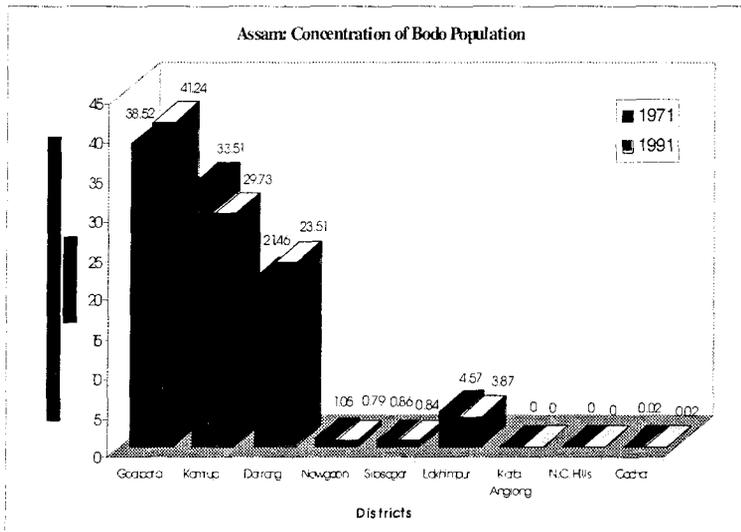


Fig. 5

lation in other districts in these two decades are marginal compared to the changes registered in these three districts.

The pattern remains more or less identical when the proportion of *Bodo* population to the total scheduled tribe population is considered (fig.4). For example, the pro-

portion of the *Bodos* increased to 81.88 per cent in 1991 from 77.29 per cent in 1971 in Goalpara. Darrang district too recorded an increase from 71.5 per cent to 76.49 per cent and in Kamrup districts the *Bodo* proportion in the Scheduled tribe population increased from 69.53 per cent to 72.35 per cent. The changes in the *Bodo* concentra-

Table 2 Kokrajhar District: Changing Ethnic Composition: Village-Level Pattern (1971-91)

% to Total Population	No of Villages 1971			No of Villages 1991			Percentage of villages 1971			Percentage of villages 1991			Change		
	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other
Nil	730	364	109	701	283	147	78.33	39.06	11.7	75.21	30.36	15.77	-3.12	-8.70	4.07
Insignificant 0-10%	140	72	73	151	93	73	15.02	7.73	7.83	16.2	9.98	7.83	1.18	2.25	0.00
Substantial 10-30%	46	97	81	52	89	100	4.94	10.41	8.69	5.58	9.55	10.73	0.64	-0.86	2.04
Significant 30 - 50 %	10	89	87	90	76	97	1.07	9.55	9.33	9.66	8.15	10.41	8.59	-1.40	1.08
High 50-80 %	4	124	160	5	134	139	0.43	13.3	17.17	0.54	14.38	14.91	0.11	1.08	-2.26
Dominant 80-100%	2	103	165	4	118	182	0.21	11.05	17.70	0.43	12.66	19.53	0.22	1.61	1.83
100%	0	83	257	0	139	194	0	8.91	27.58	0	14.91	20.82	0.00	6.00	-6.76
All Villages	932	932	932	932	932	932	100	100	100	100	100	100			

tion in other districts were not as glaring as in these three districts. Among the three districts, Darrang district witnessed the maximum increase in the *Bodo* segment. It is further evident that there was a significant redistribution of the *Bodo* population in Assam.

Compared to this, it is interesting to note that the proportion of the scheduled tribe population to the total population registered a decrease in other districts containing little *Bodo* population. For example, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, the two districts supporting a very high share of tribal population (more than 50 per cent) did experience a fall in their proportion in the total population. The proportion of the Scheduled Tribes in Karbi Anglong decreased from 55.37 per cent to 51.56 per cent. Similarly the share in North Cachar Hills decreased from 69.15 percent to 65.54 per cent. Both these districts had no *Bodo* population at all.

Going by the concentration index (proportion of the *Bodos* in a district to their total population in the state as a whole) the *Bodos* is by and large confined to only three districts, namely Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang (fig.5). Over 93 per cent of the *Bodo* population is concentrated in these three districts though their share in the total population in each of these three districts is rather low ranging between 10-15 per cent only. Though the *Bodos* have a geographically restricted area of their concentration, they are spatially intertwined with non-*Bodo* communities which they find as an obstacle to their demand for autonomy and a separate state.

Even at the district level which may be too aggregate as spatial units the proportion of the *Bodos* has shown substantial increase during 1971 and 1991 in those districts where they are largely concentrated indicating a process of redistribution that encompasses all the ethnic groups. It is evident that

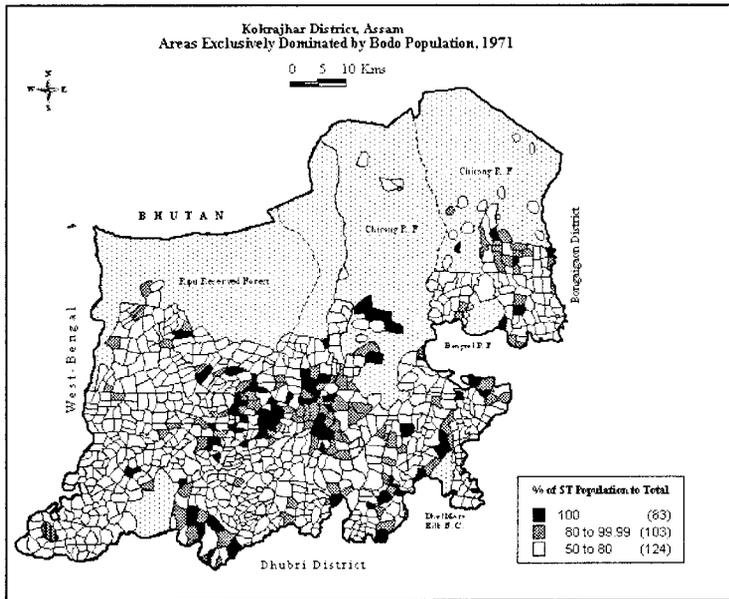


Fig. 6

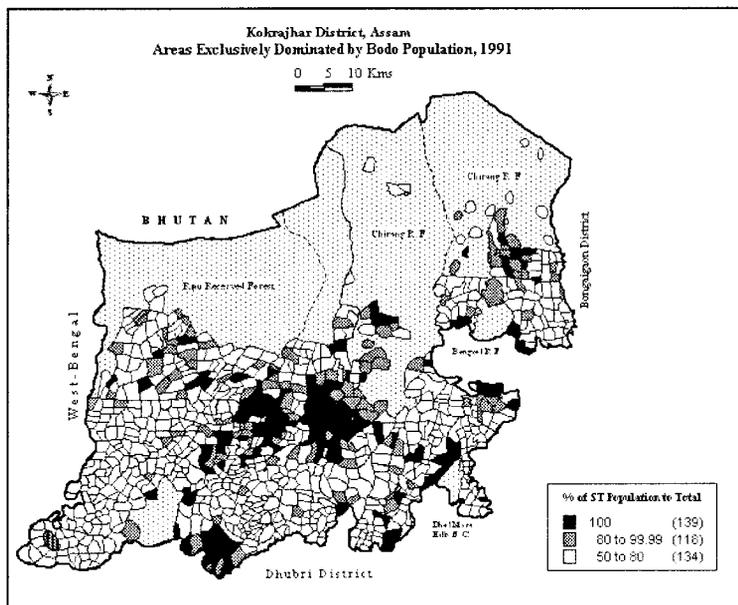


Fig. 7

the *Bodos* have been able to displace a substantial number of the non-*Bodo* ethnic groups through violent means thereby increasing their share in the total population. It is also likely that a section of the *Bodo* people living in the adjoining districts away from the area of their main concentration too have migrated into these districts either to increase their share or in the face of mounting pressure from non-*Bodo* communities as a retaliatory measure.

The village level data may now be profitably used to examine the extent of ethnic redistribution taking place in Kokrajhar district- an area that has been the scene of intense power struggle for the control of land by the *Bodos* in their strive towards achieving statehood.

Available data at the village level shows that there have been tremendous inter village transfers of population among the three different ethnic groups namely the *Bodos*<sup>8</sup>, the Santhals<sup>9</sup>, and others<sup>10</sup>. Kokrajhar district has a total of 932 villages. Table-2 clearly brings out the widespread changes in the distribution of diverse ethnic groups in the period of 1971-91. The Santhali as well as the *Bodo* population seem to have dispersed over more villages over the period of twenty years. The real decline in the presence of the non-Santhali, non-*Bodo* presence is rather alarming. The 'others' had a much wider presence in the villages of the district in 1971 (they were found in 823 of the 932 villages), but in 1991, their presence was restricted only to 785 villages indicating substantial erosion to their widespread presence in the district. The *Bodos* substantially increased their presence in an additional 81 villages where they had no presence at all in 1971. Likewise the Santhali

population added 29 villages in the list of their presence in this period. It appears that the vacuum created by the Bengalis, Nepalese and Assamese people was filled by the *Bodos* and the Santhali people in this period.

The most glaring fact about *Bodo* consolidation and control over the area and ethnic homogenization is revealed from the fact that the *Bodos* by the year 1991 had exclusive presence in 139 villages from only 83 in 1971. This is a clear indication that in 56 villages the *Bodos* have been successful in evicting the non-*Bodo* population with whom the *Bodos* had been living for centuries. The fact that there has been a corresponding decline in the exclusively dominated villages of the Santhals clearly indicates that it is this segment of the population which has been evicted from their traditional habitations. The *Bodo* segment has been able to proclaim its supremacy in 310 villages (where they accounted for over 50 per cent of the total population) which was only 310 in 1971. The Santhali and the other ethnic groups seem to have lost the battle and have redistributed themselves in a manner to protect themselves in fewer villages within the district or have taken shelter in the Relief camps. The spatial patterning in this process of redistribution of ethnic groups is presented in the series of maps (below) that reveals greater homogenization of ethnic areas within the district. The maps do reveal a step towards ethnic cleansing though the pattern would certainly be clearer when the village level data for 2001 census would be made available.

Fig 6 and 7 present the changes in the spatial pattern in the distribution of *Bodo* population. It is evident from these figures

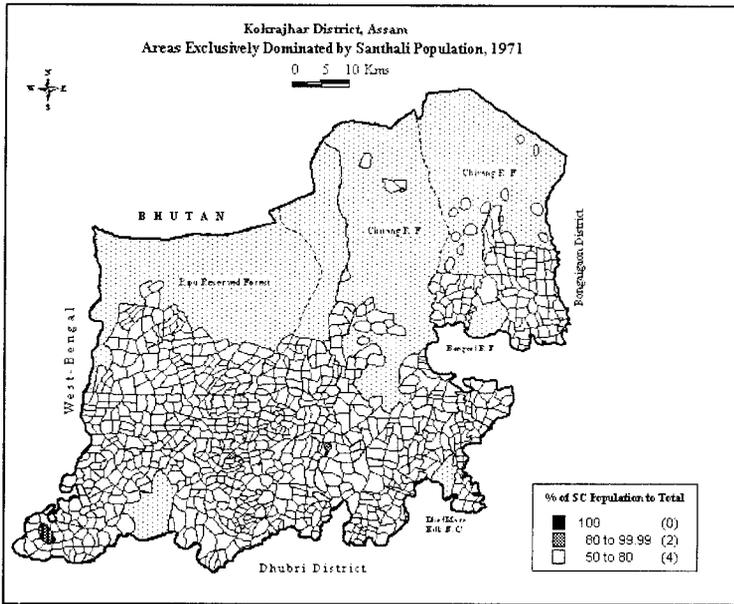


Fig. 8

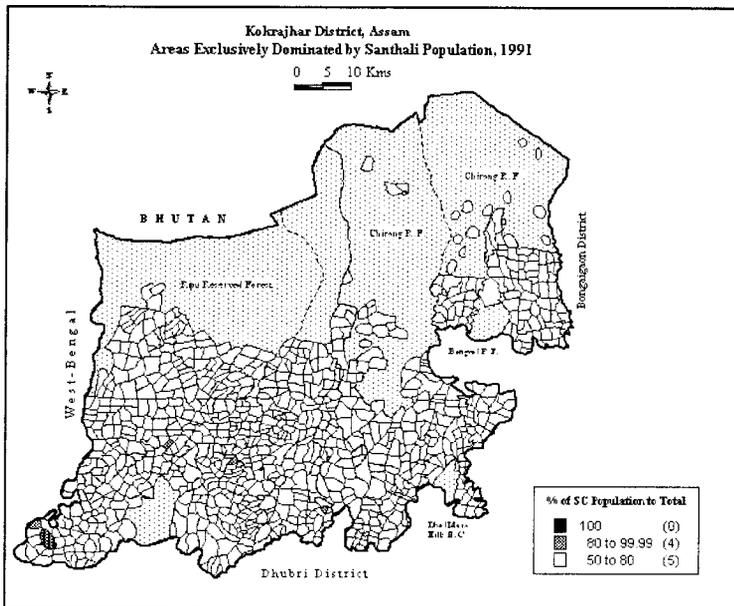


Fig. 9

that the *Bodos* have been able to consolidate their position in larger areas. The villages in which they are in a commanding position have increased in number and many more pockets have become exclusively *Bodo* dominated areas. Such a situation is not to be found as far as the Santhali population is concerned (fig.8 and 9). They seem to have dispersed over more areas on the wake of the attacks from their *Bodo* counterparts. On the other hand the area of exclusive dominance by the non-*Bodo* non-Santhali population which was much widespread in the year 1971 seems to be shrinking very fast if the pattern in 1991 is any indication (fig.10 and 11)

Table-3 clearly reveals such a pattern. The change in the share of *Bodo* population is rarely negative and is confined to only around 19 per cent villages. Such villages are also not many among the Santhalis. The worst sufferers are the non-*Bodo* and non-Santhali people. In around 52 per cent villages, the non-*Bodo* and non-Santhali population has experienced absolute decline in its population. The fact that the *Bodo* and the Santhali population has experienced large increases in a great majority of villages in Kokrajhar district is a clear indication of their migration to villages where they could constitute a majority.

## **Relief and Rehabilitation**

Strive towards ethnic supremacy is not without its price in terms of human misery and sufferings. The *Bodo*-Santhali clash has resulted in deaths of many thousands of people and has rendered many homeless to seek refuge in relief camps. It is not only the Santhalis but also *Bodos* who have to leave their villages and take shelter in the relief

camps. The Government of Assam provided us the following information regarding the people currently living in the relief camps. Though the records are certainly under enumerated the figures paint a gloomy picture.

As is evident from table-4, bulk of the displaced people are the Santhali whose number is now over 130 thousands. The displaced *Bodo* people account for over 31,000. Over 30,000 families have made the relief camps their home. The most agonising aspect is the overwhelming presence of a sizeable number of children in these camps. The displaced are mostly living in public buildings, makeshift shelters, or under plastic sheeting. In most camps, there was little medical care and no formal education. Camp residents reported deaths and malnutrition in the Assamese camps resulting from inadequate health care and food aid.

The displaced in these camps have an uncertain future. The majority cannot return home because they lived in the so-called forest areas. The local authorities have told them that they also cannot stay in the camps and receive assistance indefinitely. But these same authorities cannot help them find any alternative, leaving them in limbo.

Among the inmates are more than 57000 children, in the age group five to eight years. These inmates, who have no means of earning their livelihood, have been provided with only five to six days of dry rations by the administration. Residents complain that the government rations are very erratic. In any case, the foodstuff provided is adequate and lasts only for about 10 days a month. For the rest of the 20 days, they are forced to eat roots. Apart from the problem of food, five to six people have been forced to share one blanket in the severe cold of December-

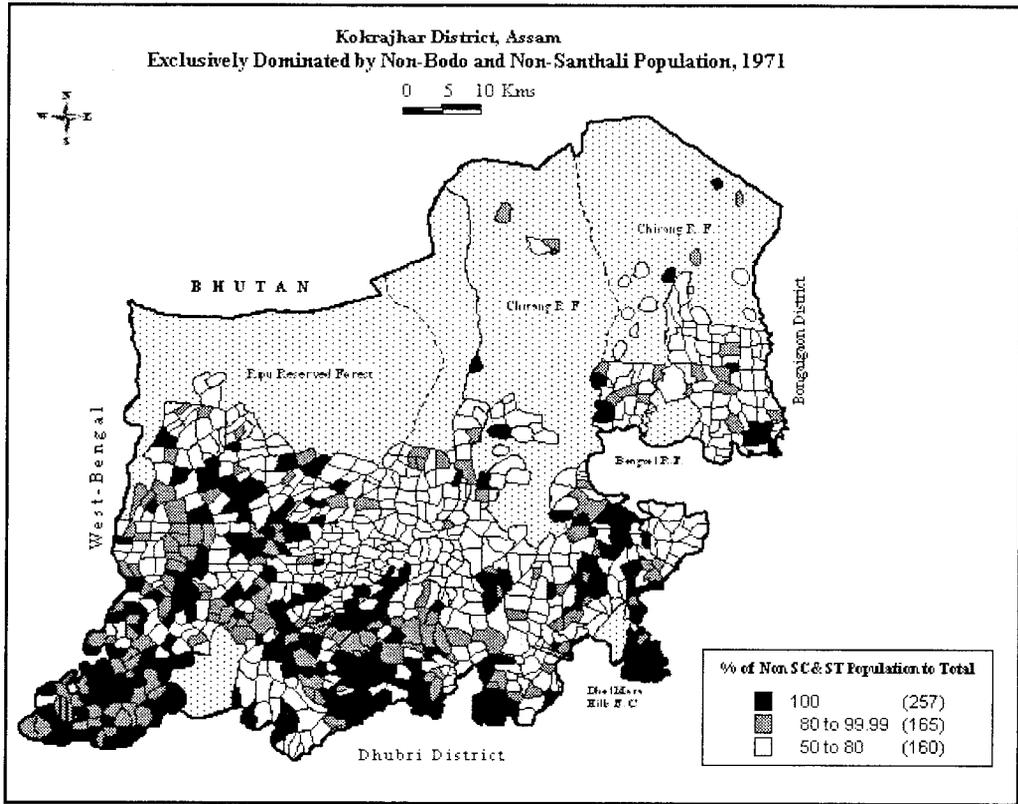


Fig. 10

Table-3 Change in the share of Population

% Differential	Non-Bodo/Santali Village		Santali Villages		Bodo Villages	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
-100 to -50	45	4.83	3	0.32	15	1.61
-50 to 0	439	47.10	125	13.41	163	17.49
0 to 25	407	43.67	787	84.44	638	68.45
25 to 50	19	2.04	12	1.29	63	6.76
50 to 80	8	0.86	3	0.32	17	1.82
80 to 99.99	8	0.86	2	0.21	21	2.25
100	6	0.64	0	0.00	15	1.61
Total Villages	932	100.00	932	100.00	932	100.00

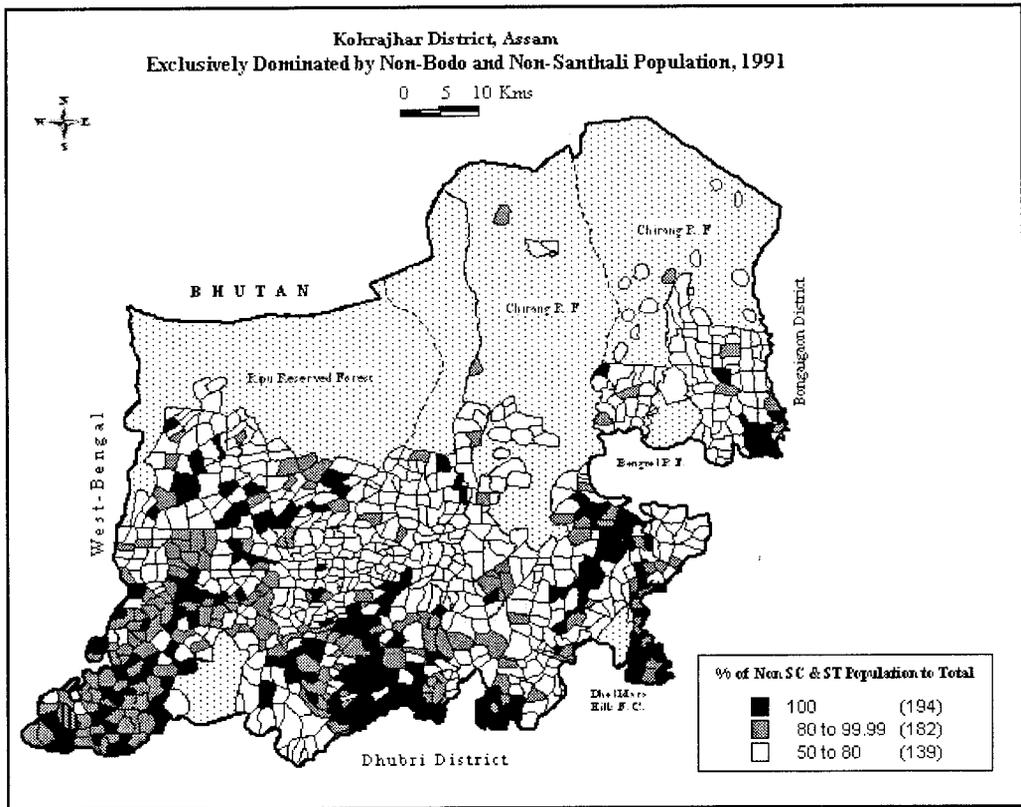


Fig. 11

Table-4 People living in Relief Camps

No. of Camps		No. of Families		Adult		Minor		Total	Community	
1996	1998	1996	1998	1996	1998	1996	1998	1996	1998	
22	35	1968	125222	64540	83909	35219	46158	99759	130067	Santhali
6	14	2868	5566	10918	24316	5196	11269	16114	35585	Bodo
1	2	40	64	150	260	65	97	215	357	Rabha
29	51	22589	30852	75608	108485	40480	57524	116088	166009	Total

January. The living conditions in the camps are unhygienic, leading to several hundred disease-related deaths since May 1996.

After remaining in the displaced persons' camps for a year, in mid-1997, many displaced Santhals, returned home. The Indian government gave the returnees grants intended to help them rebuild their homes and begin economic activities anew. Most of the displaced had been farmers. Their return was to be short-lived, however. Several months after they returned home, *Bodos* again threatened them. The Santhals then returned to the camps again to face the same predicament. The likelihood of the government finding them new land appears very slim indeed, particularly as no local group wants what they regard as "outsiders" in their area.

Amidst all this confusion, the unfortunate victim has been the poor villager in a completely underdeveloped district of the state. Kokrajhar, which borders West Bengal, serves as the gateway to the northeast, and any disturbance in the area has often led to choked lines of communications to and from the region. A prolonged state of uncertainty therefore does not augur well for the entire region.

## Notes

- 1) The *Bodos* by and large are enumerated as scheduled tribe population in Kokrajhar district.
- 2) The Santhals, though an ethnic tribe, are enumerated as scheduled castes in Kokrajhar district.
- 3) It is significant that the Assam State Government had some years earlier allowed the use of the Roman script for the Mishing language, which caused much resentment among the *Bodos*, who saw the rejection of their own demand for the Roman script as discriminatory.

- 4) Both the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills people have autonomous councils in which they enjoy a modicum of self-rule.
- 5) In an interview with *The Statesman* (Nov. 8, 1997), B. K. Rao, a key government negotiator in the talks leading up to the *Bodo* accord, notes that: In the mid' 80s, when the whole of Assam stood behind the All Assam Students' Union and the United Liberation Front of Assam, the Centre decided to directly foment an agitation to weaken this force. With the *Bodo* stir taking shape, the ULFA and the AASU lost half of their support since the new movement was fully backed by (the tribal people of) lower Assam, considerably sapping the strength of ULFA which would have otherwise influenced the tea gardens (and their tribal labour) in that area.
- 6) The ABSU president U. G. Brahma in 1998 said that, "my organisation had signed the agreement in 1993, keeping in view the ground conditions that time. But now, the accord, even if implemented in totality, cannot satisfy the *Bodos*. Last year (1997), even before participating in the tripartite talks in New Delhi, the ABSU president had said, "there can be no solution to the problem by discussing the *Bodo* Accord and its implementation. Rather the talks should now mainly focus on the modalities of granting a separate state to the *Bodos*."
- 7) Even a prominent person like S. K. Bwismutiary, member of Parliament from Kokrajhar, noted in a newspaper interview that: the *Bodos* are now pretty sure that they are to get *Bodoland*. Maybe it will take another two or three years. But in the proposed *Bodoland*, there may be many areas where *Bodos* constitute less than fifty per cent of the population. Naturally, they are keen on seeing that by the time *Bodoland* materializes, their numerical majority also becomes an accomplished fact, hence the urge to evict the non-*Bodos* and grab their land.
- 8) The *Bodos* along with Rabhas and Tiwas are covered under the Scheduled Tribes in the Census data.
- 9) The Santhals are covered under the Scheduled Castes in the Census data.
- 10) 'Others' include Bengali, Nepali and ethnic Assamese.

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