

Ethnic Cleansing in the Areas of Bodo Concentration in Assam, India using GIS Technique

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 suggest '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. Evidences 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 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 very few 'plains tribe', has been experiencing a great redistribution of its population both in the past as well as in the present, if the data available in censuses is of any indication.

The Problem:

The ethnic situation in India's North-East has been and continues to cause concern. The situation is particularly difficult in Assam where the Bodos are demanding a separate state 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 autonomy. 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 violent path creating a situation of gross violation of human rights. 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 as refugees in their own land. The present paper while drawing the attention of scholars from all over the world to the pathetic conditions of lakhs of people in the Bodo areas of Assam, makes a modest attempt to have a close look at the changing spatial pattern in ethnic distribution in the Bodo areas of Assam by taking village level data for analysis. Though the data for 2001 Census could have thrown a better light on the massive change in the geographical distribution of different ethnic groups in the study area, it has not been possible as village level information is not yet available till the completion of this report. Hence the study confines itself to the period between 1971-2001.

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 availability of land for the tribal people as a whole and particularly the Bodos who were squeezed rapidly towards the north. 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 invites research efforts 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 a separate statehood in the same line as many other tribal groups in the North-East have been given separate states. 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 much helped improve the situation

It is in this context that the present problem assumes significance. It is clear that the redistribution of the tribal population has been an ongoing process for quite sometime. It is not the purpose here to examine this long drawn process of redistribution of the tribal population, but to confine the study only to the recent period of political and ethnic unrest when the process of redistribution of population has acquired a qualitatively new dimension. It is no more confined to the *Bodo* segment only. The violent nature of the demand for a separate *Bodoland* 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 manifestation as well as its consequences, which form the core of the proposed 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 proposes to examine if the patterns are becoming 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 present study the areas where the *Bodo* tribes constitute a significant proportion of the population of Assam has been selected as the study area. Needless to say the quantum and quality of population redistribution has been different in this part of the state compared to others. As has been mentioned earlier, the areas of Bodo concentration are more towards the north of Brahmaputra 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 dominate this tribal zone. Ethnically it has great significance. There are occurrences of riots between *Bodos* and non-*Bodos* (especially *Santhals*) in this area. The riot is playing a major role in redistributing people from this belt.

The *Bodos* as the most numerous communities cover the widest area. They 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 *Bodoland Autonomous Council* in the year 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 may be now stated as follows:
to get an insight into the ethnic dimension of the 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 for this research 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, block and village level. Data available from the *Bodo* Autonomous Council has also been profitably utilized to identify areas of *Bodo* domination. Personal visits to the relief camps and interview with a few of the displaced people also is a necessary input to writing of this report.

The methodology adopted for the present research is outlined below:

As has been mentioned earlier, the main objective of the research 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 of the present research, the period of investigation is confined to three decades starting with 1970. The 1970s are chosen as the starting point as the decade is not much known for inter-ethnic strife resulting in forced ethnic redistribution. The decades of 1980s and 1990s have witnessed ethnic violence in many parts of the *Bodo* Areas and the redistribution tendencies

characterize this period. Thus data pertaining to the period in 1970s have been profitably used to describe the 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 district and subdivision level as well as between the rural and urban areas.

A village level analysis has been done by identifying villages, which are dominantly inhabited by (a), the *Bodos*¹ (b) non-*Bodo* tribe² and (c) non-tribal segment. The redistribution tendencies have been examined for all the four categories of population; at village level (i.e. for the three groups identified earlier).

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 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. After four years of struggle, the Assam Government granted³ the *Bodo* language the status of an associate official language of Assam. Until 1987, the *Bodos* were content to demand an autonomous council along the lines of the other hill tribes of Assam⁴. This demand was originally put up also by a *Bodo* regional party, the *Plains Tribal Council of Assam*. They were not successful in achieving even this limited degree of autonomy.

Insensitivity to the problems of the *Bodos* coupled with the "chauvinism" of successive state governments in Assam was responsible for escalating a 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*⁵. 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 contiguous geographical areas between the rivers *Sankosh* and *Mazbat*.) The Central and Assam Governments also deliberately 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.

It is widely believed that the situation in the area would not have deteriorated to the extent that it has if the BAC Accord had been handled more sympathetically. Consequently the *All Bodo Students Association* (ABSU), which had signed the agreement in 1993 accord, hardened⁶ its stand for a separate state by the year 1998. Political parties too further complicated the matter. In September 1997, as the tripartite talks were about 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. They 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*, point to the intensity of feeling amongst the more extremist *Bodos* who 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 felt that by undertaking such actions, they can drive out "outsiders" and claim an area from Kokrajhar in the west to Darrang in the east, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river, 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 to a problem of human rights. The militant *Bodos*⁷ as recourse to convert the areas of their proposed

Bodoland dominated started the process of “ethnic cleansing” by the Bodos 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 also 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 failure to resettle the *Santhal* refugees from earlier riots is one of the main causes of the renewed ethnic violence in Kokrajhar district, particularly the resettlement of refugees uprooted from the reserved forest areas. They have not been able to go back to these forests as in most cases; their settlements are now occupied by others, (despite court orders restraining people from settling in the reserve forests). Over 300 people had died in the May 1996 *Bodo-Santhal* clashes, which carried on for over two weeks and rendered 2, 00,000 persons homeless. About 60, 000 of these are still living in the refugee camps. The district authorities used to supply the refugees with rice, which has now been stopped. Some of the *Santhal* refugees were also given a 'rehabilitation grant' of Rs. 10, 000 on the condition that they gave a written undertaking that they would not go back to the homesteads they had carved out of the forests. Unfortunately, however, some of them recently left the refugee camps out of desperation, and attempted to go back to their old homes where they confronted the same *Bodo* militants who had forcibly evicted them and who were now occupying these lands, and the killing began anew. Meanwhile, a tragedy of immense proportion is in the making in these refugee camps, where women and children live in unhygienic conditions. The number of deaths in these camps is now larger than the mortalities associated with the attacks by the *Bodos*.

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 retaliating with acts of gruesome violence themselves. The *Bodos* say that these tribals (*Santhals*) are getting increasingly better organised.

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 changed its demographic pattern decisively. 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. A bitter internecine struggle for the leadership of the *Bodos* has further worsened matters. Fratricidal killings between the two main *Bodo* terrorist organisations, the NDFB and the BLTF, are in the nature of a power struggle for supremacy over the BAC.

Redistribution and Ethnic Cleansing in Bodo Areas

According to 1971 census the proportion of the *Bodo* to the total population of Assam was only 4.23 per cent. It marginally increased to 5.48 per cent in 1991. The share of Scheduled Tribe population to the total on the other hand was 10.98 per cent in 1971 census 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.

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

Districts	Scheduled Tribes		Bodos				% to Total Bodo Population	
			% to total		% to ST			
	1971	1991	1971	1991	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

However, this increase is not spatially uniform when the data is analyzed at the district level. 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 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 population 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. For example, the proportion 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 concentration 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 proportions 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 per cent 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. 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 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.

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

Percent to Total Population	Percentage Villages, 1971			Percentage Villages, 1991			Percent Differential		
	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other
Nil	78.33 (730)	39.06 (364)	11.70 (109)	75.21 (701)	30.36 (283)	15.77 (147)	-3.12	-8.70	4.07
Insignificant < 10 percent	15.02 (140)	7.73 (72)	7.83 (73)	16.20 (151)	9.98 (93)	7.83 (73)	1.18	2.25	0.00
Substantial 10-30 percent	4.94 (46)	10.41 (97)	8.69 (81)	5.58 (52)	9.55 (89)	10.73 (100)	0.64	-0.86	2.04
Significant 30-50 percent	1.07 (10)	9.55 (89)	9.33 (87)	2.04 (19)	8.15 (76)	10.41 (97)	0.97	-1.40	1.08
High 50-80 percent	0.43 (4)	13.30 (124)	17.17 (160)	0.54 (5)	14.38 (134)	14.91 (139)	0.11	1.08	-2.26
Dominant 80-100percent	0.21 (2)	11.05 (103)	17.70 (165)	0.43 (4)	11.59 (118)	19.53 (182)	0.22	0.54	1.83
Exclusively Dominant 100 percent	0 (0)	8.91 (83)	27.58 (257)	0.00 (0)	14.91 (139)	20.82 (194)	0.00	6.00	-6.76
All Villages	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	0	0	0

Table-2a Kokrajhar District: Changing Ethnic Composition: Village-Level Pattern (1991-2001)

Percent to Total Population	Percentage Villages, 1991			Percentage Villages, 2001			Percent Differential		
	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other	S.C.	S.T.	Other
Nil	75.21 (701)	30.36 (283)	15.77 (147)	76.72 (715)	35.09 (327)	27.25 (254)	1.51	4.73	11.48
Insignificant < 10 percent	16.20 (151)	9.98 (93)	7.83 (73)	15.24 (142)	7.62 (71)	7.94 (74)	-0.96	-2.36	0.11
Substantial 10-30 percent	5.58 (52)	9.55 (89)	10.73 (100)	5.47 (51)	7.3 (68)	7.3 (68)	-0.11	-2.25	-3.43
Significant 30-50 percent	2.04 (19)	8.15 (76)	10.41 (97)	1.5 (14)	6.65 (62)	6.65 (62)	-0.54	-1.50	-3.76
High 50-80 percent	0.54 (5)	14.38 (134)	14.91 (139)	0.86 (8)	8.8 (82)	12.12 (113)	0.32	-5.58	-2.79
Dominant 80-100percent	0.43 (5)	12.66 (118)	19.53 (182)	0.11 (1)	11.16 (104)	16.74 (156)	-0.32	-1.50	-2.79
Exclusively Dominant 100 percent	0 (0)	14.91 (139)	20.82 (194)	1.11 (1)	23.39 (218)	22.22 (205)	0.11	8.48	1.18
All Villages	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	100 (932)	0.00	0.00	0.00

Available data shows that there have been tremendous transfers of population among the three different ethnic groups namely the Bodos⁸, the Santhals⁹, and others¹⁰. 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 908 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 90 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 one in 1971. This is a clear indication that in 138 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 257 villages which was only 7 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 a 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.

Table-3 Change in the share of Population

% Change	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

Table-3 clearly reveals such a pattern. The change in the share of Bodo population is rarely negative and is confined to only 9 per cent villages. Such villages are also not many among the Santhals though certainly more than that of the Bodos. The worst sufferers are the non-Bodo and non-Santhali people.

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 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.

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	34	19681	25222	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	57518	116088	166009	Total

As is evident from table-4, bulk of the displaced people is the Santhalis 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.

In early May 1998, residents of Kachugaon camp, who had gone without food aid for 17 days, took food by force from a local merchant. The next day, the police came to the camp and met with the residents. Tension erupted, and the police allegedly fired into the crowd, killing three of the displaced and injuring seven others.

The displaced in these camps has 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 camps and receive assistance indefinitely. But those same authorities cannot help them find any alternative, leaving them in limbo.

Among the inmates are more than 50000 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 in the past two months.

Residents complain that the government rations are very erratic. In any case, the foodstuff provided to them is adequate to last only 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-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, including those from Gongia, 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. The Gongias used their grants to buy cows, farming implements, and rebuild their homes. The Gongias return was to be short-lived, however. Several months after they returned home, Bodos again threatened them. The Gongias asked the local authorities for help, but were told that it would be difficult to protect them because their village is so remote and isolated. The authorities said that if they feared for their safety, they should return to the displaced persons' camps.

The Gongia villagers did just that, leaving with only those possessions they could carry. Once they reached the camp, the men returned to the village to collect their animals and other belongings. But they found that all of their belongings had been looted by members of yet another ethnic group, who lived in a nearby village. Most of Gongia's residents are now once again in the camp. For now, they are receiving government food

aid, but they do not know what to do in the future. They fear that if they return to Gongia, they will be killed. They don't want to live in a camp, but have nowhere else to go. Without land, they cannot survive. Unless the government finds new land for them, they will remain displaced.

Since there are more than 40,000 other displaced Santhals in 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 as prominent a person, S. K. Bwismitary, 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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