

## STILL NO FINALITY, THE THIRD TIME ROUND

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

The experiment of power sharing and governance under the [Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution](#) was expected to be the panacea of the ethno-nationalist identity questions in Northeastern States. Euphoria as well as anger over the third [Bodo Accord](#) have, however, held the mirror reflecting the complexities of exclusion of communities in such ethno-centric power sharing and governance model.

The [new Accord](#) signed by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), United Bodo People's Organisation and all the four factions of the insurgent outfit- National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) with Delhi and Dispur on January 27 promises more legislative, executive and administrative autonomy under the Sixth Schedule to Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and expansion of the BTC territory in lieu of statehood. The Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), the autonomous region governed by BTC, will be known as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) after demarcation of the augmented territory.

The [previous Bodo Accord](#) signed by the erstwhile insurgent outfit, Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) with Delhi and Dispur on February 10, 2003 led to creation of the BTC as a new experiment of territorial autonomy under the Sixth Schedule. However, the constitutionally mandated legislative power of the BTC has been reduced to a farce as the Assam Governor has not given assent to any of the legislations passed by the BTC Legislative Assembly.

Bodo groups have suspended their statehood movement, but the new Bodo Accord has triggered the intensification of the movement for Kamatapur State by organisations of the Koch-Rajbongshi community. The territory of the demanded Kamatapur State overlaps with the present BTAD, proposed BTR and demanded Bodoland. Clamour for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Koch-Rajbongshis, Adivasis and several other non-ST communities has also grown.

Deeper [ethnic faultlines](#) in an ethno-centric power sharing model will become exposed when the Koch-Rajbongshis and the Adivasis are granted ST status, as promised by the Modi government. For, the reservation of seats of BTC is for the STs and not exclusively for the Bodos. The new accord has no clear answer to such critical questions.

Accord drives divide in Assam's Bodo domain

In BTAD, the ST communities account for 33.50% of the total population; 2011 Census figures show that of the total 31,51,047 population in the BTAD, the ST population is 10,55,732. The Bodos account for over 90% of the ST population in the BTAD. The ST populations are an overwhelming majority in territories overseen by nine other autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura.

Such a demographic composition in the BTAD has allowed the space for political mobilisation of other non-Bodo communities and articulation of the campaign that the BTC is a faulty model as it allows the minorities to govern the majorities. The organisations of these communities have been demanding exclusion of villages with less than 50% Bodo population from the BTAD. Bodo organisations have a counter argument that non-Bodo is a political identity construction articulated to capture power in the BTAD by certain political forces. The new accord promises to increase the current strength of BTC to 60 from 40 but "without adversely affecting the existing

percentage of reservation for tribal[s]”.

The new accord promises to appoint a commission by the Assam government to look into the demands for inclusion of villages with ST majority and contiguous to the BTAD, and exclusion of villages which are contiguous to non-Sixth Schedule areas and have majority non-ST population. However, the core area of the BTAD will continue to have many villages with majority non-ST population which were included for contiguity.

Karbis against ST status for hill Bodos in Assam

Framers of the Constitution perceived such complexities and prescribed constitutional provisions after elaborate debate in the Constituent Assembly on the Sixth Schedule. One such provision is the setting up of autonomous regions. Sub-paragraph 2 of the first paragraph of the Sixth Schedule provides that, “If there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district, the Governor may, by public notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them into autonomous regions.” However, constitutional amendments were made following the previous Bodo Accord to ensure that this provision shall not apply in respect of the BTAD.

The erstwhile Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was the only regional autonomous council in the country. Following upgradation of the then Lushai Hills district of Assam into a Union Territory in 1972, the Mizo District Council was abolished. In 1972, the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was trifurcated first into three regional autonomous councils. These three councils were later upgraded to full-fledged Autonomous District Council under Sixth Schedule in the State of Mizoram.

The provision of setting up regional autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule can be explored to create the space for communities aggrieved by exclusion from the power-sharing model of BTC.

Narendra Modi lauds Bodos for peace pact, allays fears over Citizenship Amendment Act

Euphoria among the Bodos over the accord is also fast evaporating with efforts to unite all the four factions of NDFB having turned futile; the factions are divided in two camps: one group with the present ruling party of BTC-Bodoland People’s Front (BPF), an ally of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in Assam and one group siding with the opposition party, the United Peoples Party Liberal backed by the ABSU. The new accord will be the pivot of political mobilisation in the BTAD during the forthcoming BTC elections due in April.

A shift in the political equilibrium in the BTC resulting from a likely expansion of the ST list in Assam has the potential to keep the Bodos out of power in the BTC and push Bodo organisations to reviving their homeland demand. Peace will continue to be fragile in Assam’s Bodo heartland until an all-inclusive power sharing and governance model is evolved under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule.

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