

OPTIMAL DELIVERY OR MERE OPTICS IN BODO PEACE DEAL?

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

Optics? Or optimal delivery? The Bodo peace deal poses tricky questions for India in general and far-eastern India in particular. The deal was announced on 27 January in New Delhi in an attempt to bring closure to a conflict in the homelands of the Bodo people—or Boro, as they call themselves—in Assam. A formal surrender-and-integrate ceremony is intended for later this week.

On the face of it, fine. Four factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), along with an influential Bodo students' organization and a Bodo civilian pressure group, signed the peace agreement with the central and Assam governments. Among other concessions, the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts, the name given to Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri, the four contiguous districts bordering Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, will now be known as Bodoland Territorial Region.

The changed nuance from districts to region is significant as it acknowledges a Bodo homeland within the state of Assam, without separating from Assam. This is dialled down from earlier rebel demands for a breakaway state and later suggestions for Union territory status.

The renaming is designed to satisfy the identity and aspirations of the Bodo people, as well as solve the politically tricky matter of ceding territory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Assam. Ceding territory would set off the Assamese chauvinist and territorialist, as it were, and could trigger similar demands in other parts of Assam, such as Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and Cachar, which also have homelands of non-Ahom ethnicities.

Indeed, it could also affect the ongoing Naga peace process, leading Naga rebels to demand territorial and administrative autonomy in Naga homelands in Manipur, which will trigger a firestorm of politics, and ethnic tension between the Nagas and the Meitei, the largest ethnic group in Manipur whose language, culture and history dominate the state.

There is already an inherent vulnerability to the Bodo peace deal even without the overhang of ceding territory. This is rooted in the birth of the Bodo rebellion, which began in the 1980s not on account of slights from India, but administrative and development apathy of the state of Assam, and a feeling that Bodo, the people, the language, the identity, were subsumed by the Assamese and migrants. The initial demand for Bodoland, which grew out of a students' movement (in much the same way, ironically, as a movement led by students in Assam that later birthed armed rebellion by the United Liberation Front of Asom), came even earlier, in the early 1970s.

This vulnerability extends to other parts of Assam and far-eastern India and indeed any geography in India that either has active conflict, or has neutralized conflict with military or policing dominance and now hopes to seed positivity with governance and development. How much independence will Bodoland Territorial Council, which is now nominally responsible for administration and development, and which has purse-strings and political-strings tied to Dispur, Assam's capital, be accorded?

The Kokrajhar-based council has elections due for its next five-year term. Elections were last

held in April 2015. The Bodoland People's Front, the civilian avatar of the Bodoland Liberation Tigers that signed a peace deal in 2003, a deal which led to both the birth of the council and continuing rebellion by factions of NDFB, is in majority in the council. Will the front be comfortable with newly peaceable colleagues of NDFB?

Will the BJP, which is certain to again contest elections to the council and try to increase its tally from one seat, emerge as the pivot? Will the 1,500 crore promised to the Bodo territory as part of the peace deal, the amount to be shared equally by the central and Assam governments and disbursed over three years, lead to real development? Or will it continue to provide candy for the council and Assam's paymasters, who oversee the Bodo region that includes some of the most under-developed districts in Assam?

What of non-Bodo people, mainly Bengali-speaking Muslims and migrants, who were attacked and killed in large numbers during elections in 2014? And the Adivasi community attacked by Bodo rebels later that year, around Christmas? And the massive violence that broke out with Muslim settlers in Bodo areas in 2012?

True autonomy, true peace, and true development are always worth more than the paper on which they are promised.

This column focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights.

Log in to our website to save your bookmarks. It'll just take a moment.

Your session has expired, please login again.

You are now subscribed to our newsletters. In case you can't find any email from our side, please check the spam folder.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com