

The Tripartite Bodo Talks : Circumstances, Proceedings and Observation

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The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC), spearheading a protracted agitation for the creation of a separate state for the Bodos and other plains tribals under the name and style 'Bodoland' in the northern belt of the Brahmaputra in Assam, ultimately decided to come to the negotiation table on 28 August 1989 with the Union Government and the Government of Assam. Prior to this talks, the two rounds of Bipartite talks between the State Government and the ABSU at Dispur held on 27-27 June, 1988 and 11 January, 1989, proved fruitless with far reaching consequences - stepping up of the agitation with rising tempo attended by large scale of violence perpetrated by both the agitationists and the state police. The failure of these talks, according to Shillong based ABSU Vice-President, Mr. Pradeep Kumar Daimari, could be ascribed to the non-fulfilment of commitments made by Assam Chief Minister Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta in the first round of talks, and that after having invited the ABSU leadership for the second round of talks, both the Chief Minister and the Home Minister did not turn up in the meeting and instead deputed a newly inducted minister of state for sports Mr. Durgadas Boro and hence no fruitful discussion and negotiations could take place.¹ Consequently, the ABSU took a tougher stand declaring that they would not enter into any negotiation with the Govt of Assam without the presence of a Union Minister as an observer.² Initially, the Government of Assam did not subscribe to the idea of involving the Centre even at the level of official observer on the plea that the Bodo issue is an internal matter of Assam and, therefore, should be solved without the interference from any quarter. As the movement was rising to its height, the Government of Assam agreed to hold talks with the ABSU leadership in the presence of an official observer from the Centre. But it came too late, because by this time the ABSU had taken a new position asserting that the time of holding talks with the government of Assam even in the presence of an official observer from the Centre was over and demanded direct intervention by the Government of India to find solution to the problem. They also demanded that the talks should be held outside the state on security reason.³ The Government of Assam maintained that there was no question of holding talks outside the state and that no discussion could take place on the demand for Bodoland.⁴ While ruling out

talks on Bodoland issue outside the state, the state government contended that the Bodo problem was Assam's problem and solution should be preferably found on Assam's soil. But it must be admitted that in view of the haunts for ABSU leaders and other activists, there was some justification in their demand for having talks somewhere outside the state to escape arrests. Again, when the Government of India is made a party to talks and negotiations, New Delhi, from all angles of consideration, offers the most suitable venue for such a talks. If one considers that Assam Chief Minister's rushing to New Delhi to talks with the Bodos is a humiliating submission, it will be equally humiliating, if not more, for the the Union Minister or a high ranking bureaucrats to rush to Dispur on the same mission submitting to state's ego. Moreover there is no dearth of instances of such talks on vexed problems being held and solution found in New Delhi. Negotiations on Assam's foreigners issue were held and solution found in New Delhi only. Quite for sometime, Govt of Assam maintained its rigidity in its view and stand perhaps on consideration of its prestige and ego. Meanwhile, the situation escalated and all forms of destruction and ravages including killings were rampant. In the wake of this mounting tension, there were pressures from all sides on the AGP Government to bring the ABSU to the negotiating table shedding whatever consideration it might have. Response of the government, nevertheless, was unhelpful. It was only in the backdrop of unabated group clashes between Bodos and non-Bodos in several districts of the state that the Government of Assam finally invited the ABSU for tripartite talks in the New Delhi on 28 August 1989 and this offer came as a sequel of a crucial talks in New Delhi between Assam Chief Minister and Union Home Minister Mr. Buta Singh.⁵ The ABSU leadership, on clarification whether Assam's Chief Minister Mr. Mahanta and Union Home Minister Mr. Buta Singh would participate in the talks announced its decision to participate in the talks and called off the on-going 1001 hour. bandh to create necessary condition for the talks and negotiations. This response from the ABSU's side came to the people as the best piece of news bringing a sigh of relief to the people in worst affected areas. However, with the announcement of the tripartite talks in New Delhi, some organisations like Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) attempted to hinder the the process demanding that their organisations too be made parties to the negotiation. Demand of the AASU for its participation in the talks lacked justification and it amounted to interference. In this context, ABSU-BPAC issued a strongly worded statement questioning the propriety of the AASU to intrude in the negotiation on the Bodo issue. As for the PTCA, such demand though dangerous was understandable. It was dangerous because the ABSU and PTCA looked upon each other as arch enemies and hence, the presence of the PTCA in the negotiation would have undoubtedly polluted the atmosphere and thus

jeopardise the prospect of any understanding rather than creating congenial atmosphere during the session. It was understandable, because they were perhaps extremely worried over the possibility of signing an accord with the ABSU which thereafter could claim to be the only official representatives of the Bodo tribesmen of the state. It was not that the PTCA was against the creation of a separate state for the plains tribals (after all it was the PTCA which was the originator of an idea of a separate state for the plains tribals under the name and style Udayachal), but because it genuinely wanted itself to be associated with the negotiation process on some valid reasons. The precedence set by the AASU leaders who jumped into electoral fray soon after the Assam Accord was signed in 1985 and eventually captured the seat of power in the state is still vivid in the minds of the PTCA leaders. The chances of the ABSU leaders of following this suit of the AASU looked bright and in fact, some kind of whisperings in this line was already heard in the air,⁷ and so the PTCA leaders demanded that they also be made a party to the negotiation and consequent accord so that they could be reckoned with in future and have some trump-cards in their hands to play in the electoral game. These moves of the AASU and the PTCA were unwise and if accommodated, would have certainly disturbed ABSU's mood and emotion and made them part their way. This fear has reference to the invitation for talks on a number of occasions earlier being spurned by the ABSU. The state government and the Union Home Ministry, however, did well by not entertaining their demands.

II

28 AUGUST 1989 TALKS (FIRST ROUND) : Relevant portions of the proceedings

.....Shri Upendra Brahma, President, ABSU agreed that violence can not lead to any political solution of the Bodo problem. He, therefore, stressed that all forms of violence and atrocity must stop and climate created for a meaningful dialogue for a political solution. He agreed that to facilitate creation of such atmosphere and to enable the ABSU to participate in efforts in this direction indiscriminate violence against the Bodos should be put an end to and all prohibitory and special laws must be suspended.

.....Smt. Rajendra Kumari Bajpai representing the Centre stated that the state should consider suspending some of the special laws and measures. But she emphasised that the ABSU must also give a clear commitment that it will see that all forms of violence are put a firm stop to.

.....Chief Minister Mr. P. K. Mahanta and Home Minister Brigu Kumar Phukhan assured that if ABSU gives a firm commitment that it would refrain from all forms of violence, the state would suspend various special laws and measures

including Section 144 CRPC, TADA, Disturbed Areas ACT, Armed Police special powers Act after observing the situation in the affected areas.

.....Shri Brahma gave a commitment that ABSU would cooperate with the government in restoring peace and also call off agitation. He agreed that discussions between the state govt. and Absu should continue in positive manner until a satisfactory solution is found. In this context, Shri Brahma suggested that future talks should be held under the auspices of the Government of India. He also suggested that henceforth the talk should be held on the Tripartite basis at the initiative of the Union Home Ministry.

.....The state government delegation informed that if the Union Home Ministry was agreeable to this, the state govt. will have no objection, and agreed to convey their feelings to the Union Home Ministry.

.....In view of this, ABSU agreed to suspend their agitation and stop violence to create congenial atmosphere for talks. The Govt. of Assam also agreed to take steps for the suspension of preventive measures in the affected areas on suspension of agitation and stoppage of violence. As ABSU alleged about the police excesses, Govt. of Assam assured that the police were instructed to act only as per law and ensure that no excess is committed.⁸

5 OCTOBER 1989 TALKS (SECOND ROUND)

.....The ABSU and BPAC reiterated their demand for a separate Bodoland.

.....Dr. (Mrs.) Bajpai stated that the policy of the Govt. of India was against any further division of the states.

.....Chief Minister P. K. Mahanta stated that the Govt. of Assam would be prepared to examine an appropriate, legal, political and administrative arrangement acceptable to all sections of the people in the state.

.....The ABSU requested the Government of Assam to release all those arrested persons. The Government of Assam agreed to consider the request except in respect of heinous crime. They also demanded that TADA, 144 Cr. P. C. and police pickets should be withdrawn from different affected areas. The Assam Government stated that in view of the prevailing law and order situation in the state, a blanket withdrawal will not be possible.

.....It was agreed that joint visit of representatives of Govt. of Assam and ABSU will be organised to persuade the Bodos living in camps to return to their homes.

.....it was decided that the discussion will be continued with smaller delegation to evolve a political, administrative and legal solution to the problem acceptable to all sections of the people in the state.⁹

11 JANUARY 1990 TALKS (THIRD ROUND)

.....The Bodo delegation forcefully reiterated the demand for a separate state of Bodoland as well as other demands contained in the memorandum presented on 28 August 1989. They also urged that the relief for refugees should be sent to the affected areas and the Bodos in Andrup Jhongks and Bhairab Khunda should be brought back. Chief Minister clarified that relief and rehabilitation measures can be undertaken within the constitutional boundary of the state.

.....Union Minister of Labour and Welfare Mr. Ramvilas Paswan suggested that a small committee consisting of the Bodo, State government and Union Government representatives be set up.

.....ABSU president expressed that he was prepared to consider the suggestion.¹⁰

9 MARCH 1990 (FOURTH ROUND)

.....The ABSU and BPAC reiterated their demand for a separate state, creation of autonomous districts in the southern bank of the Brahmaputra and the recognition of Bodo-Kacharis living in the Karbi Anglong district as scheduled tribe and other demands in their memorandum dated 28 August 1989.

.....The Chief Minister stated that demand for a separate state could not be conceded.

.....Shri Ramvilas Paswan, Union Minister reiterated his earlier suggestion for the constitution of a committee with the representatives of ABSU, Assam Govt. and Union Govt. to discuss the Bodo problems and grievances and make recommendations for solution. Chief Minister Mr. Mahanta welcomed the suggestion while the ABSU and BPAC did not agree to it but desired to discuss these issues in the next meeting.

.....The Chief Minister reiterated the commitment of the state government of the tribals living in Assam, protection and preservation of land belonging to the tribals and securing of adequate representation to them in govt. jobs. He further stated that steps have already been initiated in these areas by the state govt.

.....It was agreed that ABSU, BPAC and the govt. would come to the next round of talks on 18 April 1990 with specific suggestion.

.....Mr. Ramvilas Paswan agreed to visit along with the Chief Minister, the Home Minister and the Law Minister of Assam the affected areas on 1 April 1990.¹¹

18 APRIL 1990 TALKS (FIFTH ROUND)

.....The representatives of the ABSU/BPAC reiterated their demands for the creation of separate state of Bodoland

under Art. 2,3 and 4 of the Constitution of India, creation of Autonomous district in the south bank and inclusion of the Bodo-Kacharis living in Karbi Anglong in the Sixth Schedule and other demands.

.....Union Minister Mr. Ramvilas Paswan stated that the creation of a separate state was not possible.

.....The Chief Minister, Assam stated that creation of autonomous district on the south bank is not acceptable. He further stated that the matter of considering the demand for declaring the Bodo-Kacharis living in Karbi Anglong as scheduled tribe is within the jurisdiction of the Govt. of India.

.....It was decided to constitute a committee called 'Committee on the Bodo issue' comprising representatives of ABSU, BPAC, Govt. of Assam and the Govt. of India : Secretary, Welfare, Govt. of India (Convenor), Joint Secy. (N. E.) Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India (Co-Convenor), Special Commissioner (Home and Political, Commissioner and Secy., WPT & BC and Secy (Home & Political), Govt. of Assam, Sansuma Kunggar Bwiswmutiary, Adviser, ABSU and Chief Convenor, BPAC, Rabiram Brahma, Gen. Secy., ABSU, Shri Satyandra Nath Brahma Chaudhuri, Legal Adviser, BPAC. The Committee will consider the various aspects of the matter and bring recommendations for solution in the next meeting.¹²

3 JULY 1990 TALKS (SIXTH ROUND)

.....The Eight member Committee on Bodo issue constituted on 18 April 1990 submitted its reports on various socio-economic and ethnic issues concerning the Bodo community. The report was discussed.

.....Among decisions taken at today's meeting was that concrete proposals for all round development of the tribal areas of Assam would be made at seventh round of talks on 3 August 1990.¹³

8 AUGUST 1990 TALKS (SEVENTH ROUND , Talks deferred to 8 August)

.....The Govt. of Assam placed in the meeting a proposal for autonomous three-tier Panchayati Raj structure for tribal areas of the state with full devolution of administrative, and financial powers. The proposal envisaged that the proposed structure will have full executive functions in the field of welfare and development of the tribal people within their areas.

.....The proposal also included a package of measures for the socio-economic development of the plains tribals. The package included continuation of three language formula in the Secondary stage of education and English as

medium of instruction in Higher Secondary, college and University in addition to Assamese, teaching of Bodo as Modern Indian Language and starting it at Master's Degree level in Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities, provincialisation of Bodo medium school, a separate Directorate for the tribal education and Bodo as associate official language.

.....The ABSU delegation expressed great dissatisfaction and disappointment over the proposal of the state govt. and outrightly rejected the proposal of Panchayati Raj system given by the Assam Government and reiterated their demands. The delegation expressed that they were not interested to sit with the Assam Government since they had no sincerity to solve the issues politically and pleaded with the Centre to deal with the matter.

.....Centre's representative Mr. Ramvilas Paswan while rejecting the demand for a separate state stated that the proposal for Panchayat Raj system was not final decision of the state government and the matter could be discussed again. He emphasised that the autonomy proposed by the Government of Assam for the plains tribals was not adequate and there was need for considering granting greater autonomy.¹⁴

11 SEPTEMBER 1990 TALKS (EIGHTH ROUND)

.....The Bodo delegation stuck to their original demands-creation of a separate state of Bodoland.

.....Centre's representative Mr. Ramvilas Paswan ruled out the creation of a separate state.

..... Chief Minister Mr. Mahanta stated that the new Panchayat Raj with significant devolution of powers and special provision for scheduled castes and tribes would meet the aspirations of all sections of the people in the state. (This round of talks failing to reach any solution was adjourned till 13 September 1990 with understanding that the Centre would place its proposal on that day in an effort to find solution to the vexed Bodo problem).¹⁵

13 SEPTEMBER 1990 (EXTENDED SESSION OF THE EIGHTH ROUND)

Centre's representative Mr. Ramvilas Paswan tabled his government's proposal. The resolution pertaining the proposal runs thus :

"The Govt. of India is deeply concerned about the problems of the Bodo and other plains tribals of Assam and is committed to their economic development and other rights. On serious consideration of the Bodo problem, the Govt. of India proposes that a three member Committee of experts may be set up to determine the areas of the Bodo and other plains tribes to the north of the Brahmaputra river and make re-

commendations as to the autonomy, legislative, administrative and financial powers that may be given to them. The committee will consult all groups concerned and submit its report within fortyfive days to the Government of India.' The Bodo delegation although stuck to its original demand for a separate state of Bodoland welcomed the Centre's proposal to set up the expert committee. The state government delegation reserved its comment on the acceptability of the proposal till it holds discussion on the issue with other members of the cabinet and agreed to convey its view to the Centre within one month.¹⁶

III

The first talks held on 28 August 1989 could not be said 'Tripartite Talks' in so far that it was initiated by the Government of Assam at the instance of the Union Home Ministry, invitation to the ABSU was extended by the Government of Assam¹⁷ and that Assam Govt. requested the Centre to send its representative to the talks. The talks, was, therefore, essentially 'Bipartite' with the representative from the Centre as an observer.

The proceedings of the first round of talks state that the meeting proceeded well in cordial atmosphere and in a spirit of mutual understanding, but the hand-note issued by Shillong based ABSU Vice-President Mr. Pradip Kumar Daimari states that the state government delegation faced rough weather blowing from the ABSU-BPAC benches throughout three-hour long session. Some observers noted that the talks began with a bang, but ended in a whimper as was evident from the fact that the ABSU-BPAC representatives refused to accept the modest reception and hospitality and spurned even a cup of tea, let alone lunch, travel and accommodation facilities offered by the Assam Govt. They even demanded the shifting of venue of future talks from the Assam Bhavan to elsewhere on security reason.¹⁸

The so-called agreement on suspension of agitation, stoppage of violence, withdrawal of punitive measures and avoidance of police excesses initially raised hope for much cherished peace and normalcy in the state but such a hope still remains illusory. This is evident from the incidents taking place close to the heels of the first round of talks and thereafter. The reason is not far to seek. The so-called agreement suffered from element of disability. The greatest shortcoming of the agreement lies in the fact that the points agreed upon were left to the casual understanding and was not put down in the form of an accord which becomes binding on the signatories. The contracting parties, therefore, remained as free as before to indulge in violence due to mutual distrust. The 28 August 1989 Talks, therefore, was not a big success.

Although a magic solution to the vexed tangle in the first round itself was nobody's expectation, yet much more than what was achieved could have been achieved if the state and the Cen-

tre's representatives had meant it their business. So far as the governments were concerned, this round of talks was intended to be exploratory nature to create congenial atmosphere for future talks and negotiations, and they were not prepared to go beyond that. Nevertheless, they would have done well and the talks become more meaningful if broad framework of viable alternatives would have been tabled in the first round itself and make it the basis for future talks and negotiations.

Next, the role of Centre's representative Mrs. Bajpai in the meeting had been unexpectedly insignificant. Her role did not come up to the level of that of Mr. R. D. Pradhan, Secretary, Union Home Ministry in the talks and negotiations with the All Assam Students Union and Asom Gana Sangram Parishad on foreigners issue some six years ago. Being commissioned by the Union Home Ministry to negotiate with the AASU-AGSP and evolve a solution to the problem, Mr. Pradhan came to the negotiation table right at the earnest with tentative proposals which became the basis for the subsequent protracted negotiations. Unlike Mr. Pradhan, Dr. Bajpai attended the meeting with the ABSU-BPAC with empty hands and empty mind, perhaps without even any brief by the Union Home Ministry to place in the meeting any concrete proposal on behalf of the Centre. What annoyed the Bodo representatives most was her shifting of responsibility to the government of Assam when she stated that the Bodo problem is to be solved primarily by the government of Assam and they must take responsibility in this behalf.¹⁹ This was contrary to the confidence of the Bodo leaders reposed on the Centre. Her inability to assert was perhaps due to the fact that she was not senior enough in the hierarchy to be competent to make even tentative commitment and proposal. As for the Government of Assam, it had been observed that its 'drift and dither' policy at the beginning which allowed things to come to a sorry pass still continued and it had preferred letting the first round of talks go simply as a passing show. In the light of the past experiences of events with grave consequences as much as the extreme difficulties involved in bringing the ABSU leadership round the negotiating table and persuading them to suspend the agitation atleast temporarily, it was imperative for the Assam Government to come forward with the proposal of whatever viable alternatives it had in its mind. Consequently, one omnibus load of Bodo representatives (42 members) returned home with empty hands, but loaded with doubts about the sincerity of both the governments in finding solution to the problem. To say precisely, the representatives from both the Centre and state attended the talks without minimum home work.

The Second Round of Talks took place later than scheduled due to the fact that neither the state nor the Centre was willing to take the responsibility for initiating the move. Centre's silence for sometime over the matter was due to its unwillingness to initiate the move consistent with Dr. Bajpai's statement in the first round of talks that the Bodo problem is basically Assam's and they must

take responsibility in this behalf. The Centre, however ultimately initiated the move from the second round of talks onward in consultation with the state.

Like the first round the second one too was essentially of exploratory nature to create congenial atmosphere for further talks. The main issue still did not get place in the agenda of the meeting. The only issue taken up in this round of talks was the release of the Bodo detenus which could have very well been taken up in the first round itself along with the question of withdrawal of the punitive measures in order to expedite the process of negotiation and finding solution without undue delay. Chief Minister Mr. P. K. Mahanta's casual reference in his introductory remarks to some kind of 'participatory political arrangement' to solve the tangle in the first round of talks without spelling it out straightway was simply 'beating about the bush' and hence it had no impact whatsoever on his counterpart. From this round of talks the Bodo representatives, however, joined the rest in the lunch hosted by the government of Assam which they spurned on earlier occasion. The optimists had viewed it as positive sign of improvement in the attitude of the Bodo representatives which raised hope for eventual compromise to find solution.

The Third Round of Talks was held after even longer delay. This delay, however, was understandable on account of a change of government at the centre, and time was necessary for the new batch of Ministers and officials, who are to act as mediators between the two parties, were to have everything explained from the scratch and make exhaustive study about the matter. The replacement of the Congress(I) Government at the centre by the National Front of which the Assam AGP Government was a partner gave rise to undue hope and enthusiasm in the Anti-Bodoland circle that the N. F. Government would work out an unbalanced formula to the advantage of the AGP Government to find solution. The exit of the Congress (I) Government at the centre which was alleged to have been aiding the Bodos unabettted also brought a lot of psychological relief to the state government. The hope and enthusiasm based on wrong reading of the would be approach of the N. F. Government to the problem, however, soon dispelled when the Centre's representative Mr. Ramvilas Paswan, Union Minister for Labour and Welfare displayed his balanced and pragmatic role in his first meeting. Although he ruled out the possibility of further division of the state, his pragmatic approach was noted and appreciated by the ABSU-BPAC leadership which saw a genuine interest and sincerity in the N. F. Government to find solution. With the entry of the new government at the centre in the process of dialogue, the third round of talks too became more or less of preliminary nature to create congenial atmosphere for further talks and hence, no decision worth the name was taken.

It was intriguing to note that, up to its sixth round, the tripartite talks dragged on in preliminary nature and every round of talks adjourned simply registering the usual phenomena - demand for Bodoland by the Bodo delegation and its rejection by the

governments culminating in the fixation of tentative date for the next round of talks. All these rounds of talks spreading over a period of about one year was, therefore, simply a ritual circumbulation round the mulbary bush with no sign of break-through of the problem. Let us note that all these rounds of talks are at the expense of the public exchequer. The talks of this nature would perhaps have continued further and further unless there was threat from the ABSU-BPAC leadership to break off the negotiations if no concrete proposals were tabled by the governments in the next round of talks. It was perhaps in the light of this threat that the government of Assam offered in the seventh round of talks a proposal for solution to the impasse by the way of decentralisation and devolution of powers through the new Panchayati Raj system in the plains districts of Assam with special provision for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and package of measures for socio-economic development of the plains tribals. The Bodo delegation rejected the offer outright describing it as 'provocative and humiliating' and the package measures being mere verbal assurance²⁰ with no full-proof guarantee for fulfilment, because there are instances that the government of Assam had made many such promises without actually carrying it out. Among such instances, it can be recalled here that the government of Assam had made a number of commitments of accepting the Bodo language as an associate official language through out the state which is yet to be fulfilled. Centre's representative Mr. Ramvilas Paswan too has considered the offer of the Assam Government 'inadequate' and contended that there was need for considering granting more autonomy to the Bodos and other tribal people in Assam.²¹ This remark of Mr. Paswan, though was welcomed by the Bodo representatives at the negotiating table, incurred displeasure of others who contended that his remarks would only egg on the Bodo leadership to stake claim higher. But to the contrary to such assumption and expectation, the ABSU leadership who had all along been showing no sign of lowering their demands and compromise responded to good gesture shown by Mr. Paswan and for the first time in three years of agitation offered to examine any viable alternative proposal provided that it would match the political, administrative and financial powers vested on a fullfledged state and that it encompasses the entire areas of the proposed Bodoland. This tune of the Absu leadership raises a faint hope for possible acceptance of an arrangement which may not necessarily call for the division of the state. It is, therefore, Mr. Paswan's accommodating approach to the problem which is likely to persuade the agitating leaders to make adjustment in their demands and fulfilment whereas the non-serious attitude of the Government of Assam has pushed them to lay their claims higher. In this context it might be helpful to recall that at the early stage of the agitation, the former ABSU president Late Upendra Nath Brahma had made known to the people and the government of Assam to the effect that he was very much willing to negotiate without insisting on the crea-

tion of a separate state.²² But the attitude of the ruling AGP Government frustrated him much and thereby transformed this shy, smiling faced and soft spoken man into a firebrand leader to lead a violent agitation laying higher claims. The government must take note of the shift in stand of the new ABSU leadership over the issue and exploit this opportunity to the fullest possible extent to strike out a meeting ground for solution.

The solution of the Bodo issue through the Panchayati Raj is ruled out so far as the Bodos are concerned. Then, what is the next formula? Chief Minister Mr. Mahanta is on record as having claimed that there are many other solutions without separating the state.²³ He would, therefore, do well to put forward other alternatives and while doing so he should keep in view that his 'too little too late' approach to the problem would not help bringing any solution.

In the extended session of the eighth round of talks, Centre's representative Mr. Paswan tabled Centre's proposal to set up a three-member Committee of experts to determine the areas of the Bodo and other plains tribals to the north of the Brahmaputra and make recommendations as to the autonomy, legislative, administrative and financial powers that might be given to them.²⁴ This move of the Centre evoked a mixed reaction. The Bodo delegation, although did not foresee and could not forecast the nature of ultimate outcome of this committee, welcomed the proposal whereas the state delegation's response was lukewarm. It reserved its comment on the acceptability of the proposal for a month. The Chief Minister later on resented the move being initiated without consulting as much state as AGP member of Parliament and Union Minister for Law and Justice Mr. Dinesh Goswami.²⁵ But the Centre which is playing the role of a mediator between the parties without throwing its weight on either side is not bound to consult one party only and equal weightage has to be given on other party too. Since the Bodo representatives were not consulted on the proposal the Government of Assam could not lay such undue claim and hence the complaint untenable. Moreover the session of 11 September 1990 was adjourned with a clear understanding with both the parties that in the light of the failure on the part of the Assam Government and the ABSU-BPAC to reach any solution, the Centre offered to bring forward its proposal for consideration in the meeting scheduled to be resumed one day later (13 September '90) with an exception that the Centre had preferred to reserved to itself the details of the proposal till it was finally tabled in the meeting and this is within its right. In this connection, it may be mentioned that the AGP Government itself did not have any prior consultation with the ABSU and the Centre to the effect that it would bring forward in the seventh round of talks a proposal for solution through the Panchayati Raj system. The various tribal organisations of Assam are understood to have endorsed favourably the Centre's proposal.²⁶ While the AGP Parliamentary party has considered the attitude of Mr. Paswan as being 'under haste and over-enthusiasm'. The AGP

parliamentary party is perhaps still to realise that the eight rounds of talks had already eaten up one year which is a long period and the solution to the problems considering the sufferings of innocent people in the agitation affected areas is long over due. The action of the Centre, therefore, could not be hasty. Again, in course of three years of agitation, Assam witnessed unprecedented violence both from the agitationists and the state and there is nothing to be overenthusiastic about it on the part of the Centre. It is not 'enthusiasm' but concern for the plight of the violence-hit innocent people and genuine willingness on the part of the N. F. Government to put such a situation to an end that had prompted the Centre to bring forward its proposal. The AGP Govt. and the party rather has good reason to be happy with the Centre because the latter has unequivocally rejected the idea of a separate state out of the existing state of Assam as demanded by the Bodos and the September thirteen 1990 proposal by the Centre does not suggest it either. Some organisation like Assam Council for Defence of Integration has termed the Centre's proposal as a 'conspiracy' to divide Assam, but such organisation would do well if it reminds itself of the fact that it was the Centre which came forward to save the Assam Government from the morass of its own creation. The Central Executive Committee of the ruling AGP has suggested the government to present the proposal of the Panchayati Raj with modifications²⁷ whereas the AGP parliamentary feels the need for 'substantial modification' of the Centre's proposal.²⁸ The AGP party, therefore, seems to strive for a meeting ground somewhere between the modified Panchayati Raj and modified Centre's proposal. The AGP Government might go to any extent of modification of the Panchayati Raj and the ABSU-BPAC might not bother about it, but the modification of the Centre's proposal to that extent is likely to risk the unacceptability of the proposal by the ABSU-BPAC.

At the time of writing of this paper, Assam Government's decision was still awaited and the dead-line fixed by itself had already expired. In case its decision goes against, one year long lingering Tripartite talks falls through and consequently, another spell of horror can well be predicted to cast its shadow on Assam as is evident from the writings on the wall²⁹ and in case its decision goes in favour of the proposal, the prospect for solution brightens. Which is the better choice?

Much water has flowed down the Brahmaputra since the Bodo agitation came to limelight and no solution is in sight as yet. The Government of Assam harps on the acceptability of any solution by all sections of the people in the state and Bodo-non-Bodo population ratio in the areas demanded. These perceptions, however, do not seem to be tenable any longer. The decreasing ratio of the Bodo and other tribal population to that of the non-tribals in the tribal belts and blocks due to continuous encroachments by the non-tribals has been the main consideration in the very concept of a separate state for the plains tribals. Again, the fact that any solution to the Bodo problem

should be acceptable by all sections of the people in the state is simply a wishful proposition. This is absurd. Nowhere issues could find their solutions without any reservation by certain sections of the people in the state. The Assam Accord on the foreigners issue was not accepted by all sections of the people in Assam, creation of the states of Nagaland and Mizoram was effected without the referendum to the people. The creation of yet another autonomous state of Meghalaya was not accepted by all sections of the people in Assam and was carried out by the Centre in the face of threat of resignation by Union Minister from Assam Late Fakuruddin Ali Ahmed from the Union Council of Ministers, and upgradation of autonomous state of Meghalaya to full statehood a year later was carried out by the Centre without even consulting the Government of Assam led by Late Mohendra Mahan Chaudhuri, the Darjeeling Accord on Gorkha Hills Council was not accepted by all Gorkhas themselves let alone other people of West Bengal and the legislations in the state and Union Legislatures are very often carried out with the thinnest of margins. Thus oppositions are there everywhere to any measure, but such oppositions can not preclude solution to burning issues of the day.

Solution to the Bodo issue must come and peace must return, and this is the congenial time for it. But the statement made by Chief Minister Mr. P. K. Mahanta and ABSU Chief Mr. S. K. Bwiswmutiary frustrate one's hope. Mr. Mahanta says that Darjeeling Autonomous Hills Council type of solution will not be accepted by the Government of Assam. ABSU Chief Mr. Bwiswmutiary states that the Darjeeling Autonomous Hill Council type of solution will not be accepted by his leadership. Both the leaders speak of the same thing, but their implications are so contrasting to each other that solution is still a far cry. When there is no meeting ground between the two parties, solution lies only with the Centre which, therefore, must play a decisive role without giving its undue weightage on either side in finding solution through arbitration, and both the parties, ABSU- BPAC and the Government of Assam, must be prepared to submit to Centre's arbitration with all humility and grace.

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