

Transformation of Ethnic Identity into Hegemonic Authority in Bodoland

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Abstract: *This article examines the transformation of Bodo ethnic identity into a framework of hegemonic authority following the achievement of constitutional autonomy in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Northeast India. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, this study explores how Bodo identity, initially mobilised in response to marginalisation and demands for territorial recognition, has become institutionalised within governance, development, and public administration structures after the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and subsequent peace accords. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising semi-structured interviews with political leaders, government officials, civil society actors, and residents, as well as a documentary analysis of policy documents and scholarly literature. The findings demonstrate that Bodo identity has evolved from an oppositional, mobilising force to a legitimising principle of governance, reinforced by cultural narratives and the delivery of development outcomes. Hegemonic authority in the BTR is maintained through the production of consent, with legitimacy rooted in both ethnic representation and the effectiveness of development and welfare delivery. However, this authority remains contested and conditional, subject to renegotiation amid internal class, generational, and ethnic divisions, as well as the demands of non-Bodo communities. The study argues that autonomy has not diminished ethnic politics but has reconstituted it as a dynamic interplay of identity, governance, and development, resulting in a form of negotiated hegemony. This analysis contributes to broader debates on ethnic autonomy, state formation, and the complexities of political legitimacy in multiple societies.*

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Bodo Politics, Hegemony, BTR, Representation

INTRODUCTION

Historically, ethnic identity has been a key factor in political mobilisation within multicultural societies, especially when marginalised groups seek recognition, representation, and protection through institutions. Ethnicity often serves as a political tool for communities to express collective goals, assert influence, and pursue territorial autonomy (Smith, 1991; Brubaker, 2004). In Northeast India, ethnic politics has played a crucial role in reshaping governance and state boundaries, with autonomous movements impacting political reorganisation. The Bodo movement is among the longest-standing efforts for ethnic self-determination, leading to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and later reformed as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) after the 2020 Bodo Peace Accord.

Scholarly work on the Bodo movement has focused primarily on its historical evolution, identity assertion, insurgency phase, and autonomous negotiations. Early studies highlight the emergence of the Bodo ethnic consciousness and its transformation into a structured political demand for autonomy (Bhattacharjee, 1996; Choudhury, 2007). Bhattacharjee locates the movement within broader ethnic autonomy struggles in Assam (Bhattacharjee, 2016). While Choudhury provides a detailed account of the formation of Bodo identity and the organisational role of student and political groups in shaping mobilization (Choudhury, 2007). Deka further examines the politics of identity in the Bodo movement, tracing its evolution from cultural assertion to institutionalised political claims under the BTC framework (Deka, 2014).

Recent scholarship has also explored the complex dynamics of ethnic assertions, electoral politics, and post-accord governance in Bodoland. Studies such as Dutta analyse the production of collective identities in electoral arenas, highlighting how ethnic mobilisation intersects with party politics and shifting alliances in the Bodoland Territorial Area (Dutta, 2016). Behera further conceptualises the Bodoland conflict as a 'majoritarian paradox,' where demands for autonomy reflect an attempt to construct a territorially defined political majority within a democratic framework (Behera, 2018). These works collectively demonstrate that Bodo politics cannot be understood solely as a movement for statehood, but must be situated within broader processes of contentious politics, identity construction, and electoral competition.

Despite this growing body of literature, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the post-autonomy transformation of ethnic identity. Most studies treat the BTC Accord as the culmination of the Bodo movement rather than examining how autonomy restructures political authority and governance practices. The institutionalisation of autonomy has embedded Bodo identity within structures of governance, administration, and development planning, thereby altering the relationship between ethnicity and political legitimacy. In the wider context of Northeast India, Sanjib Baruah argues that autonomy arrangements must be understood as part of the broader processes of state formation and negotiated sovereignty (Baruah, 2020). His work provides a critical framework for examining how ethnic autonomy is not merely a concession but also a mode of governing diversity through institutionalised identity.

To analyse this transformation, the present study draws upon Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Gramsci conceptualises political authority as sustained not only through coercion but also through the production of consent, where dominant groups secure legitimacy by presenting their interests as the general interest (Gramsci, 1971). This framework is particularly useful for understanding how ethnic identity becomes embedded within governance structures and how legitimacy is produced through institutional and developmental practices.

The study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Fieldwork was conducted with elected representatives, political leaders, government officials, civil society organisations, student leaders, and residents within the Bodoland Territorial Region. These primary sources are complemented by an analysis of peace accords, government reports, policy documents, and secondary scholarly literature. Thematic analysis is used to examine how ethnic identity is institutionalised, how consent is produced through governance practices, and how authority is negotiated in a multi-ethnic context.

This study argues that the Bodo experience extends beyond the attainment of constitutional autonomy. Rather than marking the end of ethnic mobilisation, autonomy has transformed Bodo identity into a hegemonic framework of governance that structures political legitimacy, development priorities, and institutional authority while remaining subject to ongoing negotiation and contestation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ethnicity, Identity, and Political Mobilisation

Scholars have long discussed how ethnicity relates to political mobilisation, increasingly recognising ethnic identity as socially and politically constructed rather than innate or primordial (Benedict Anderson, 1983; Ernest Gellner, 1983). Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" explains how shared stories and symbols foster collective identity, while Gellner highlights the influence of modern institutions in shaping nationalism. Smith adds that common myths, historical memories, and cultural symbols form a deep-rooted basis for collective solidarity, which supports political mobilisation (Smith, 1991).

Unlike traditional views, Rogers Brubaker critiques the idea of ethnicity as merely a group trait, instead describing it as a practice and a process of 'group-making' driven by politics (Brubaker, 2004). From this perspective, ethnicity gains political importance when used to seek recognition, distribute resources, and reshape institutions. In Northeast India, for example, ethnic mobilisation is often rooted in histories of marginalisation, uneven development, and exclusion from state authority, leading to ongoing calls for autonomy and institutional change (Baruah, 2020). Therefore, ethnicity serves both as a self-identity marker and a tool for political change.

Gramscian Perspectives on Hegemony

The concept of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci provides a critical framework for understanding how power is maintained not only through coercion but also through consent. Gramsci argues that ruling groups sustain authority by embedding their worldview within institutions, civil society, education, and cultural life, thereby transforming their interests into "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971). Neo-Gramscian theorists such as Robert W. Cox extended this framework by analysing how hegemonic orders are reproduced through the interaction of ideas, institutions, and material capabilities (Cox, 1983). Similarly, Adam David Morton emphasises that hegemony is not static but continuously reproduced through governance practices and ideological formations (Morton, 2007). Recent interpretations of Gramsci also highlight his concept of "common sense" and the role of intellectuals in maintaining hegemony, showing how everyday beliefs and cultural practices sustain political authority (Gramsci, 1971). This framework is particularly useful for analysing autonomous regions, where legitimacy is constructed through both institutional governance and cultural consensus.

Ethnic Autonomy and Governance

Research on ethnic autonomy generally views it as an institutional mechanism for managing diversity, reducing conflict, and enabling self-governance within multiple societies. Yash Ghai argues that autonomy arrangements allow ethnic communities to pursue self-rule while preserving national unity, particularly in postcolonial and multi-ethnic states (Ghai, 2000). In India, the Sixth Schedule provides constitutional recognition of tribal autonomy through district councils with legislative and administrative powers. However, much of the literature focuses primarily on constitutional design and conflict management rather than on the everyday practices of governance. Consequently, less attention has been paid to how legitimacy is constructed within autonomous institutions and how authority is negotiated in practice. This gap indicates the need to move beyond formal institutional analysis and examine autonomy as a lived political process shaped by power relations, consent, and governance dynamics.

Bodo Politics and the Research Gap

The literature on Bodo politics provides extensive documentation of the historical trajectory of ethnic mobilisation, insurgency, peace negotiations, and the institutionalisation of autonomy in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Early and foundational scholarship situates

the Bodo movement within the broader dynamics of ethnic assertions and sub-nationalism in Assam (Singh & Mushahary, 2013; Dutta, 2016). These studies highlight how long-standing grievances relating to land alienation, linguistic marginalisation, and political exclusion shaped the emergence of organised ethnic mobilisation in the late twentieth century. A significant body of work interprets the Bodo movement as part of India's wider 'ethno-federal' experiment, where territorial autonomy is deployed as a mechanism for conflict management and ethnic accommodation (Saikia, 2016).

In this context, the Bodo demand for autonomy goes beyond identity politics, serving as a response to structural inequalities and the contested processes of state formation in Northeast India (Baruah, 2020; Behera, 2018). Studies of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) show that autonomy has not ended conflict but has transformed the nature of political contestation in the area (Saikia, Chima, & Baro, 2016). Instead of resolving ethnic tensions, autonomy has created new political struggles over representation, resources, and legitimacy among Bodo and non-Bodo groups. This supports the findings that ethnic autonomy arrangements often produce "nested hierarchies of belonging" rather than stable political solutions (Mukherjee, 2022). Recent research has highlighted the importance of electoral politics, coalition-building, and shifting alliances in shaping governance after autonomy in Bodoland. For example, Dutta shows how electoral dynamics in BTAD reflect flexible ethnic alignments, where identity-based mobilisation interacts with pragmatic political bargaining (Dutta, 2016). Governance in the BTC region is also shaped by the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and institutional power, further complicating simple narratives of ethnic dominance (Saikia, 2023). Despite this expanding scholarly work, most studies remain focused on movement politics, insurgency, and conflict transition rather than on how ethnic identity becomes institutionalised post-autonomy. The predominant analysis centres on why the Bodo movement started and how autonomy was achieved, rather than on how ethnic identity is maintained and normalised within governance structures after institutionalisation.

Consequently, there is limited theoretical engagement with how autonomy reshapes everyday governance, administrative legitimacy, and hegemonic authority within the Bodoland Territorial Region. The processes through which ethnic identity becomes embedded in development discourse, policy implementation, and institutional legitimacy remain insufficiently theorised.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative design to examine how Bodo ethnic identity has been transformed into hegemonic political authority within the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, lived experiences, and perceptions of identity, governance, legitimacy, and political authority, rather than measuring them with numerical indicators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research is interpretive and theoretically grounded in Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which serves as the primary analytical framework. Primary

data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the BTR, including elected representatives of the Bodoland Territorial Council, political party leaders, government officials, civil society actors, student leaders, academics, and local residents. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure their direct knowledge of the region's political and administrative processes. This diversity of respondents enabled the study to capture multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives on ethnic identity, governance practices, development discourses, and political legitimacy.

To complement the interview data, the study also relied on documentary sources, including the Bodo Peace Accords, government reports, policy documents, official records, electoral materials, and relevant scholarly literature on Bodo politics and ethnic autonomy. These materials provide historical and institutional contexts and allow for the triangulation of empirical findings, thereby strengthening the reliability and depth of analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and documentary materials were systematically coded to identify recurring themes, such as ethnic identity formation, institutionalisation of autonomy, governance practices, developmental narratives, consent, and political contestation. These themes were subsequently interpreted through a Gramscian lens to explain how hegemonic authority was constructed, maintained, and negotiated within the institutional framework of the BTR. To enhance research credibility, findings from interviews were cross-verified with documentary evidence and existing academic scholarships. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality of the respondents, and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used where necessary to protect the participants' identity and ensure ethical integrity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Ethnic Mobilization to Institutionalized Identity

Empirical evidence demonstrates that Bodo political authority in the BTR emerges from an extended process of ethnic mobilisation, which subsequently evolved into an institutionalised identity. Early movements, including the Bodo campaign for statehood and subsequent autonomy arrangements, positioned ethnic identity as a counterhegemonic discourse in response to perceived marginalisation within Assam's state structure. Interview data from community leaders and student activists consistently indicate that initial mobilisation centred on cultural recognition, language rights, and territorial claims, collectively framing Bodo identity as politically distinct and historically disadvantaged. Over time, this mobilised identity became embedded within formal institutions, such as the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the expanded BTR governance framework. This institutionalisation marks a significant transition, consistent with Gramsci's distinction between a 'war of manoeuvre' and a 'war of position,' where the contest for power shifts from direct confrontation to the gradual occupation of institutional and ideological domains.

In this context, ethnic identity transitions from oppositional to integral to governance. Field interviews

suggested that this transformation fostered a stabilised political common sense, equating Bodo identity with legitimate territorial governance. As one respondent stated, “Bodo leadership is natural here because this is our land and our council.” Such perspectives illustrate the internalisation of the ethnic-territorial connection as an unquestioned assumption.

Drawing on Gramsci, this process can be interpreted as the generation of “spontaneous consent”, where ideological leadership is achieved through the normalisation of specific worldviews rather than coercion. However, institutionalisation also produces internal contradictions. While ethnic identity underpins political authority, it simultaneously narrows the scope of political imagination by prioritising ethnic belonging over class-based or cross-community solidarities. Neo-Gramscian scholarship (Cox, 1983; Morton, 2007) contends that such institutionalised identities often stabilise hegemonic blocs by aligning cultural leadership with political and administrative controls.

In the BTR, this alignment is evident in the convergence of cultural institutions, student organisations, and political leadership, which collectively reinforce a unified ethnic narrative despite the underlying internal diversity. As a result, ethnic mobilisation is not eliminated but is reconstituted as an institutionalised identity that supports governance. The outcome is not the disappearance of ethnicity, but its transformation into a governing principle that structures legitimacy.

Institutionalising Hegemonic Authority through Governance and Development

The second finding shows that hegemonic authority in the BTR is sustained not only through ethnic identity but also through governance and development practices. Interviews with elected representatives, bureaucrats, and residents indicated that development outcomes—roads, welfare schemes, jobs, and infrastructure—have become the primary measure of political legitimacy. This reflects a shift in political expectations, where authority is no longer assessed mainly through ethnic representation or autonomy claims, but increasingly through the delivery of tangible public goods. Local discourse prioritises visible governance outcomes, such as connectivity, welfare access, and employment. As one respondent noted, “If the government can bring us roads and jobs, then we support them.” Development is also central to elite political strategy. Leaders use infrastructure projects, welfare expansion, and resource allocation to demonstrate effectiveness and consolidate support, often framing these as achievements of bodo-led governance.

However, delays and unequal distribution of resources generate tension, showing that development simultaneously produces consent and potential grievances. From a Gramscian perspective, this reflects the extension of hegemony into material life, where consent is secured through socioeconomic delivery rather than ideology. Thus, autonomy is justified through developmental performance. As another respondent observed, “We do not think much about politics; if roads are built and schemes come, it is fine,” indicating a depoliticized form of consent. However, this developmental hegemony is uneven, with benefits being selectively distributed across groups and regions. Such

differentiated inclusion is structurally embedded and reinforces consent while also producing disparities. Governance institutions further strengthen this process by linking bureaucratic efficiency with ethnic leadership, creating a hybrid hegemonic bloc in which state structures and ethnic elites reinforce each other. Consequently, development functions as a political technology of consent that stabilises authority while embedding hegemony into everyday governance.

Negotiated Consent and the Limits of Bodo Hegemony

Despite the consolidation of hegemonic authority, significant tensions and limitations persist in the Bodo hegemonic formation. Consent is negotiated, conditional, and often contingent on material outcomes rather than ideology. Residents support the political structure mainly when development and welfare expectations are met and unmet promises or perceived inequality quickly produce dissent. Internal social divisions, such as class and generational differences, further fragment support, making legitimacy unstable and requiring constant negotiation by elites. Thus, hegemony in the BTR remains contested and subject to ongoing renegotiations. Additionally, the conditional nature of consent is exacerbated by a region’s internal social divisions. Class inequalities, generational rifts, and varying developmental experiences contribute to a fragmented social landscape in which support for hegemonic projects is unevenly distributed.

Consequently, political legitimacy is perpetually in flux, requiring ongoing efforts by the elites to negotiate and re-secure consent from diverse constituencies. This underscores the inherently unstable and contested character of hegemony in the BTR, in which authority is continually reconstituted through both concessions and coercion. Respondents often expressed support for the governing structure as long as it delivered development; however, this support is reversible if expectations are not met. This observation aligns with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as an “unstable equilibrium”, which requires ongoing renewal through both material concessions and ideological engagement. Additionally, evidence of internal differentiation within “Bodo society” complicates the notion of a unified ethnic bloc. Class divisions, generational differences, and spatial inequalities challenge this bloc’s coherence. While elite actors in political and administrative roles promote a unified hegemonic narrative, grassroots perspectives frequently reveal ambivalence and selective identification. This indicates that ethnic hegemony functions through partial incorporation rather than the complete absorption of social forces. The limitations of hegemony are further demonstrated by persistent political fragmentation and competing claims over representation. Disputes over leadership, resource allocation, and identity representation persist, even within institutional frameworks intended to consolidate autonomy. Neo-Gramscian theory interprets this as a defining feature of hegemonic projects that must continually manage contradictions within the historical bloc they construct.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that the link between ethnic identity and political authority is becoming increasingly instrumental rather than affective. Several

interviewees noted that political mobilisation based on ethnicity is losing its earlier emotional resonance and is being supplanted by pragmatic concerns such as employment, infrastructure, and welfare access. This transition indicates a gradual shift in hegemonic legitimacy from identity-to performance-based consent. In Gramscian terms, the hegemonic project of the BTR remains incomplete and subject to ongoing negotiations. Although ethnic identity and development underpin authority, they do not eliminate dissent or alternative interpretations of governance. Instead, hegemony functions as a dynamic and contested process that must continually adapt to evolving social expectations. Collectively, these three analytical dimensions demonstrate that Bodo hegemony in the BTR is not a static or fully stabilised structure, but a historically produced and continuously negotiated formation. It is shaped by the transformation of ethnic mobilisation into institutional identity, reinforced by governance and developmental practices, and constrained by the partial and conditional nature of consent.

CONCLUSION

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is a case study of how ethnic identity, which was a political mobilisation tool, has been reconfigured as a long-term governance and hegemonic tool. A Bodo identity has been institutionalised, making it a part of public administration, development practices, and regional legitimacy. Drawing on the framework of Gramscian theory, this study demonstrates that the legitimacy of hegemony in the BTR is also maintained by effective governance and development delivery, as well as ongoing consent-building processes among various social actors. However, this hegemonic formation is yet to be consolidated. However, it is not a stable union unless there is material gain, and divisions of the Bodo people (which vary with class, generation, and geography) and grievances from non-Bodo communities continuously challenge its stability. Consequently, hegemony in the BTR is neither unchanging nor unnegotiable and is constantly negotiated and reproduced. However, in the BTR experience, ethnic autonomy does not eliminate ethnic politics; it is a palpable and constantly shifting process that involves identity, authority, and development. This highlights the need to reframe autonomies and political legitimacy in plural societies, where inclusiveness and distributive governance are key to maintaining stability. (Data sheets are available with the Author)

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