



Research Article

Copyright © All rights are reserved by Jintu Thakuria

When Territory Becomes Homeland: Ethnicity and The Politics of Space in The Lower Brahmaputra Valley of Assam

Jintu Thakuria*

Department of History, BKB Building, Cotton University, Assam, India

***Corresponding author:** Jintu Thakuria, Department of History, BKB Building, Cotton University, Panbazar, Guwahati, Assam, India, PIN-781001.

Received Date: August 20, 2026**Published Date:** September 21, 2026

Abstract

Homelands are not just geographic units but are rather political and cultural constructions where territory and identity, belongingness, memories and political claims are associated together. The Lower Brahmaputra Valley in Assam, India is one of the important areas that allow us to understand the politics of homeland, which has witnessed migration, border changes, land disputes, and ethnic mobilization in the past. This paper contends that the homelands demanded by Bodos and Koch-Rajbonshi communities in the region can be best understood within the framework of the territorialization of ethnic identity, meaning the translation of cultural belongingness and memories into claims of political authority over a particular territory. Despite the fact that both the movements invoke collective belongingness, they have different historical backgrounds. The Bodo movement, due to the reasons of cultural recognition, protection from marginalization and political autonomy, gradually evolved into a territorial endeavor based on Bodoland. On the other hand, the Koch-Rajbonshi movement interpreted the historical political space called Koch-Kamata as Kamatapur, making political claims grounded on territorial memories of the past.

Keywords: Homeland, ethnicity, territory, Bodos, Koch-Rajbonshis

Introduction

The demand for exclusive homelands has occupied central place in the history of ethno-politics in Assam, a state in the north-eastern region of India. The questions of language, migration, land control, political representation, socio-cultural recognition and economic marginalisation, etc. have generated conception of competing belonging since the late colonial period. The colonial era marks the beginning of the formalisation of territorial identities through diverse colonial policies, including ethnographic records, mapping and classification. Sanjib Baruah's analysis demonstrates how immigration, language, cultural politics and control over resources became central to the emergence of subnational and ethnic politics in the state. These colonial administrative practices contributed to a 'durable disorder', where modern ethnic assertions are often framed as reactions to perceived linguistic and cultural

subordination [1].

Particularly, the Lower Brahmaputra Valley in Assam has emerged as a hotspot of ethno-politics since the last quarter of the bygone century, often characterized by a complex intersection of autochthonous claims and overlapping spatial demands. The valley, situated in the western part of Assam, is an example of the complex interplay of geographical forces and historical events since time immemorial. It is carved out by the powerful Brahmaputra River and its tributaries and by the towering Himalayan foothills and Meghalaya Plateau. Originally covering the colonial districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang, the area represents a dynamic zone both by geographical and socio-political fluidity since pre-colonial times. The landscape inhabited by diverse communities for thousands of years has remained a recurrent site of contestation

due to ongoing demographic and environmental shifts. The most intrinsic case of claim and counter-claim in the region comes from the Bodos and Koch-Rajbonshi communities, whose competing aspirations for spatial recognition have intensified the discourse around internal sovereignty and autonomous administration. These movements illustrate how cartographic reorientation based on linguistic and ethnic identity is frequently mobilized as a strategic mechanism to acquire new homelands and fostered both self-validation and the pursuit of regional autonomy [2].

This article examines how the idea of a homeland emerges when space is transformed into territory, territory into an object of collective identification and territorial identification into a political claim. This examination is articulated by assessing the experiences of the Bodos and Koch-Rajbonshis.

Revisiting the Bodo and Koch-Rajbonshi Demands

The Bodos are among the earliest inhabitants of the region who are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Assam. They have a long history of mobilisation for safeguarding the Bodo identity since mid-twentieth century which turned into a homeland movement during the last quarter of the past century. The Koch-Rajbonshis are another aboriginal ethnic group who are struggling for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) along with their demands for a separate Homeland. The Bodo and Koch-Rajbonshis' spatial demands illustrate two different trajectories of the process. The Bodo movement emphasizes the territorialization of ethnic space as a redress for systemic land alienation and socio-political marginalization [3]. On the other hand, the Koch-Rajbonshi demand centers on securing constitutional protections to preserve their distinct cultural and historical heritage within an increasingly competitive demographic landscape [4]. The Bodo movement progressively territorialised ethnic identity through the demand for Bodoland, while the Koch-Rajbonshi movement drew upon historical memories of Kamatapur to articulate the claim for a distinct political space.

The Bodoland movement can be understood as the territorialisation of ethnic space. Recent scholarship focuses on the questions of land alienation and identity which were translated into imagined territorial boundaries for the Bodos even though their proposed homeland has been inhabited by several other communities [3]. This observation in particular, is important because it reveals a fundamental tension within homeland politics. A community may imagine a particular territory as their homeland, while that same territory may simultaneously constitute the home of other communities. Thus, homeland is both an expression of belonging and a claim to political space. The emergence of the demand for Bodoland, an exclusive homeland for the Bodos, marked a decisive transformation in the character of the Bodo mobilisation. The central question was no longer merely whether Bodo language and culture should receive recognition. Rather, whether their political protection required a distinct territorial and institutional framework. In this shift, cultural recognition became inseparable from territorial control. The preservation of identity was increasingly imagined as dependent on access to land,

authority over local resources and institutional power within a defined political space.

The Bodo territorial politics should be situated within longer histories of land and resource alienation, migration and political mobilisation. The contemporary demands for territorial autonomy are embedded in enduring histories of land dispossession, resource competition, migration and conflict, rather than constituting isolated political developments [5]. The institutional evolution of Bodoland further illustrates how ethnic space is converted into political territory. In 2003, a settlement had been established to constitute the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The 2020 Bodo Accord expanded this institutional framework and sought to address issues relating to Bodo identity, land rights and political autonomy. These settlements therefore did more than create administrative institutions: they translated an ethnic claim into a territorial arrangement backed by formal political authority.

Nevertheless, the territorialisation of Bodo identity generates a fundamental dilemma. The proposed and institutionalised Bodo territory has never been demographically exclusive to the Bodos. The territorial imagination of Bodoland exists alongside the presence and claims of other communities. The political problem, consequently, is not simply whether Bodos possess legitimate grievances, but how those grievances are institutionalised in a shared and demographically plural landscape. Homeland politics thus operates simultaneously through processes of inclusion and exclusion: it seeks to secure collective protection for one community while potentially producing differentiated access to land, representation and political belonging for others.

Though contemporary, the Koch-Rajbonshi case reflects a different trajectory of territorial politics. The idea of homeland in the Koch-Rajbonshi's demand is closely associated with historical memory and the symbolic reconstruction of a political past. The demand for Kamatapur cannot be understood simply as a contemporary territorial claim. The Kamatapur movement demonstrates Koch-Rajbonshi's mobilisation that has involved the reinterpretation and reconstruction of history. Here, historical imagination functions as a resource through which contemporary identity is produced and political claims are legitimised [6]. This is significant in particular because the proposed territorial identity is not named directly after the community. Rather, the term Kamatapur evokes a remembered historical and political space which was ruled for centuries by the Koch rulers. The territorial claim consequently relies on a symbolic vocabulary distinct from that of the Bodo demand for Bodoland. Whereas the Bodo movement primarily territorialises an ethnic identity through claims to land and autonomy, the Kamatapur movement territorialises historical memory by transforming a historical political geography into a contemporary programme of recognition and self-government. This movement is primarily characterised by a demand for a separate state or homeland encompassing parts of West Bengal and Assam. Recent academic discourse interprets the demand by emphasising the importance of both historical memory and contemporary identity politics in shaping the movement [7].

¹ Department of History, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

The case of the Koch-Rajbonshis reveals how homeland is equally constructed by historical imagination as well as present day territorial possession. Past is politically productive precisely for the reason that it provides the opportunity to create a story of continuity between the past political landscapes and current day demands. It does not mean that historical memories are homogenous, empirically confirmable in a single way or undisputed. To the contrary, the political importance of historical memories is that it connects the past to the present and thus makes any territorial claim historically justified. Such process may be referred to as the creation of "a new past" when colonial ethnographic categorizations, stories of the community and current political demands come together [6]. Historical memory, in this sense, is not merely a recollection of territory, rather it is an active means of producing political territory in the present.

The comparison between the two cases clearly reveals that there are different paths in the formation of the homeland. For the Bodos, territory was politicized through translating the insecurities of culture and politics into claims for an autonomous territorial arrangement. For the Koch-Rajbonshis, on the other hand, territorial imagination is still strongly tied to the reconstruction of the past through the memory of Kamatapur. There are differences in the political history and the territorial discourses of the two cases. Nonetheless, it can be seen that there is a common process behind them. That is, the process of turning ethnic identity into political claim over territories starts when communities start to see space as essential to maintaining their own existence and exercising political power.

This transformation may be represented schematically:

Lived space > Collective memory > Ethnic identity > Perceived insecurity > Territorialisation > Homeland demand

The process is neither linear nor inevitable. Each of these can be used to bolster, redirect or reduce the significance of any of the stages above. In addition, the above sequence must be considered as part of a cycle and recursion rather than a simple linear process: while territorial aspirations might produce new memories, identities and insecurities, these themselves can easily lead to new territorial demands. Indeed, the politics of autonomous territory in Assam clearly illustrates that ethnic politics is influenced not only by the dialectic of state and society but also by internal society politics [5]. Homeland making is thus a continuing political process and not a completed one where the administrative borders have been set up. Maybe, it all comes down to the fact that claims of belonging to a homeland are never made in relation to an unoccupied territory. The Lower Brahmaputra Valley is a common social landscape on which Bodos, the Koch-Rajbonshis and many others have formed unique connections with the area. What then poses a fundamental question - can the same territory simultaneously constitute multiple homelands? It is possible from a historical and anthropological point of view because one piece of land is always enough to create multiple layers of belonging to it. However, it becomes difficult when the cultural affiliation of the land is expressed through exclusive claims. This is best exemplified by the case of Bodoland. As academic research shows, a paradox is

inherent to it, namely, the fact that the group that strives for its own protection from the majority may, through the territorial order, end up being the dominating community [8]. This contradiction exists within the politics of the homeland itself because it is the same territorial structure that provides security to a historically marginalized community that causes insecurity to communities outside this privileged idea of inclusion.

This does not take away from the grievances of marginalization that drive homeland movements. It poses a different problem with regard to territorial autonomy: within the homeland, whose rights are safeguarded and via what process? A politically viable homeland is not measured by its success in solving the problems of marginalization of the claimant community alone; it needs to be gauged according to the way it handles land rights, political representation, cultural recognition and state institutions of all communities who live in the territory. This means that the politics of homeland can no longer focus on a dualistic problem of "indigenous community" versus "outsider." It needs to focus on the web of relations between multiple communities of one territory.

Conclusion

The history of the Lower Brahmaputra Valley is a demonstration that homeland should not be seen as a simple geographical reality, but rather as a historical and political construction and a result of an interaction of memory, identity, insecurity and institutional power. When geographic space gets saturated with collective memory, cultural meaning, feelings of insecurity and the need for political control, the territory turns into homeland. The processes of becoming of the Bodos and of the Koch-Rajbonshis represent two different ways through which such transformation occurs. The experience of the Bodos is an example of the way in which ethnic identity becomes territorialized through the demand for autonomy, representation, and the defence of land and culture. On the other hand, the experience of the Koch-Rajbonshis is an example of how historical memory produces the transformation of a remembered political landscape into a current territorial imagination of Kamatapur. It is also clear from such a comparison that the politics of homeland is relational by its nature.

Thus, the fundamental problem is not only who constitutes the members of a particular territory, but how certain communities constitute and narrativize a particular territory as their homeland, and how, in turn, these constitutions reshape the status of others. It is therefore critical to understand this mechanism in order to understand the dynamic ethnic politics of the region. The demand for a homeland is not just the demand of drawing new borders around a particular territory; rather, it is a challenge to the very notion of people's relationship with territory, memory and space. In the case of the Lower Brahmaputra Valley, territory turns into homeland through geography becoming history, history becoming memory, memory becoming identity and then identity becoming politics over territory. However, precisely because the entire process of transformation is taking place on a common ground, every assertion of a homeland implies a question about coexistence: whether the recognition of territoriality can ensure collective safety without replicating what it wants to overcome.

Acknowledgements

None

Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of Interest.

References

1. Baruah S (2005) Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India. Oxford University Press.
2. Sarma P M (2011) Ethnicity, identity and cartography: Possession/dispossession, homecoming/homelessness in contemporary Assam. *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 3(3): 24–35.
3. Ramchiary H (2019) Territorialisation of ethnic space: Politics of identity among the Bodo tribes of Assam. *International Review of Social Research* 9(2): 122–135.
4. Sarmah B (2023) Identity and aporia of autonomy: The Bodo movement in retrospect. In K. Kikhi & D. R. Gautam (Eds.), *Marginality in India: Perspectives of marginalisation from the Northeast* (pp. 142–157). Routledge India.
5. Barbora S (2022) *Homeland insecurities: Autonomy, conflict, and migration in Assam*. Oxford University Press.
6. Nandi R (2014) Spectacles of ethnographic and historical imaginations: Kamatapur movement and the Rajbanshi quest to rediscover their past and selves. *History and Anthropology* 25(5): 571–591.
7. Ray S (2023) Koch Rajbanshis and the Kamatapur movement: Azadi in Eastern India? In A. Ranjan & D. Chattoraj (Eds.), *Migration, regional autonomy, and conflicts in Eastern South Asia: Searching for a home(land)* (pp. 253–271). Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Behera A (2017). The majoritarian way to democracy: The Bodoland conflict in Assam. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 42(3): 135–145.