

More than 'link' persons: women recruits and insurgency in Assam



*Given the lack of educational and economic prospects, joining the rebel group is not just an economic but also a moral and ideological incentive for many women in Bodo Territorial Area Districts of Assam. **Anwesh Dutta** examines the stories of women recruits, the impact of AFSPA and the results of sexual violence in the region.*

The Bodo Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) in Assam, India has been a stage for recurrent violent ethno-religious contestations for over two decades. Violent clashes over space and identity involving Bodos, local Muslims and other ethnic groups began with the [1987](#) demand for a separate state of Bodoland.

The movement became more violent during the later part of the 1990s, when the 1993 Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Accord failed to meet the expectations of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Subsequently, the Bodo Territorial Council was created as a special territorial privilege under the [sixth schedule](#) of the Indian Constitution in 2003. BTAD was formed comprising the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksha and Udalguri. The BLT gave up their demand for a separate state in exchange for autonomy and transformed into a political party called the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and has been in power since. However, the NDFB refused to participate and one faction of the movement by the name Songbijit (NDFB(S)) has remained active. But within the [27,100 sq km](#) (or 35 percent of Assam) covered by BTAD, Bodos constitute [29 per cent](#) of the population, followed by the Rajbanshis (15 percent), Bengali Muslims (12-13 percent), and Santhals (6 percent).

In July 2012, Bodo-Muslim conflict resulted in internal displacement of nearly [half a million people](#). Subsequently, in December 2014, [82 Adivasis \(including 26 women and 16 infants\)](#) were killed by suspected militants belonging to the NDFB(S). [That year](#), with over 300,000 people displaced, Assam had the highest number of conflict induced internally displaced population in the world.

BTAD has been a spectacle of suffering due to cyclic exposure to violence, with mental and physical wounds deeply etched into individual bodies and the collective imagination through a constant sense of fear and uncertainty.

I have researched in BTAD since 2009 and travelled extensively across the region and at various points in time – during elections, post episodes of ethnic violence and floods.

After every episode of conflict, the geography is strewn with makeshift relief camps devoid of basic amenities like health care, drinking water, nutritious food and sanitation. Schools are often [burnt down in clashes](#), and drop out rates are high. A typical sight at relief camps is of sick and crying infants in the arms of young, often under-aged, mothers. The sight that strikes me the most is groups of teenagers and young adults who hang around, often as silent onlookers. According to a Humanitarian [Field Assessment Report \(HFAR\)](#), there were more than 290,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in 139 relief camps in January 2015. While the government maintains that most camps have been dismantled and people have returned to their villages, a few hundred *adivasis* continue to live in relief camps in the forests areas around Lungsung. Besides ethnic violence, BTAD also witnesses displacement due to [natural disasters](#) like floods.



A relief camp in Assam. According to a Humanitarian [Field Assessment Report \(HFAR\)](#), there were more than 290,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in 139 relief camps in January 2015. Credit: Anwasha Dutta.

In most political violence and civil wars, [women and children](#) are the worst affected. However, research on [recruitment practices](#) of rebel groups, [motivations for joining insurgency](#) movements as well as rehabilitation programs for surrendered militants has focused on men. I often come across men who recount that if required they will join an armed faction for the cause of a sovereign Bodoland. The large-scale resentment and anguish against the government is an open secret. Meetings with the village elders frequently reveal instances of young boys from their village joining local insurgent groups, but others immediately hush them so as to not reveal more details. I have often wondered about the role of child soldiers as well as women recruits.

During my research stay from January to May 2015, some villagers told me that in the December [2014 conflict](#) when NDFB(S) militants targeted *adivasis* in Kokrajha and Chirang districts, they saw female militants for the first time. While local journalists, and officers in the district and state administration of Assam (including the police, forest department) acknowledge the involvement of women, they maintain that women mostly work as messengers for the rebels or act as 'link-persons'. Some women are active recruits as reported [in local newspapers](#), but not much is known about them. However, the profile picture on a [facebook page](#) by the name NDFB(S) is that of five young women holding assault rifles.

During a field visit, I was shown a photograph of a group of young women dressed in 'army' clothes and holding rifles. At first they looked like women training to join the India Army or its allied forces, but my interlocutor said that he had received this photo from NDFB(S), indicating full-fledged recruitment drive and training camp for women cadres. They are no longer messengers but training to be soldiers.

Given the lack of educational and economic prospects, joining the rebel group is not just an economic but also a moral and ideological incentive. Women cadres have been active in the [Maoist movement](#) in central India. Although there is no detailed report available regarding the percentage of women recruits in the BTAD insurgency, a [news report](#) states that the NDFB(S) has at least 10-12 women and the [overall strength](#) is close to 500.

Frequently the women are in a romantic relationship with members of the rebel group and it is also a way of fostering that companionship. However, this does not always end well as in the [case of Priya Basumatary](#), a 16-year-old who was gunned down by NDFB(S) rebels on camera in front of her whole village in Chirang on 20 August 2014. She had allegedly provided information to her boyfriend, who was a militant in the rebel faction, of the presence of NDFB(S) cadres in her village. Her boyfriend then tipped [the police](#) with this information, which led to a counter insurgency operation resulting in the death of five NDFB(S) cadres.

Research on recruitment, training and delegation of women rebels especially in the BTAD is extremely scarce. The army is part of the quotidian due to the [Armed Forces Special Powers Act](#) (AFSPA) in Assam. This act furnishes the army extensive powers to search, arrest and shoot at sight for the maintenance of public order, with a degree of immunity from prosecution. The presence of the armed forces in the BTAD, especially around the relief camps has led to [several instances](#) of [rape and sexual assault](#) on women and minor girls by army personnel.

A group of teenaged girls at the relief camp spoke about how a *jawan* (soldier) of the para-military stalked her and her friends when they went to the toilet at night and tried to touch them. She eventually ran away to her aunt's house. In another instance, a young girl committed suicide after getting pregnant (my interlocutors said that she was raped by a *jawan*). I also met a deaf and mute woman; gang raped by the paramilitary forces in front of her husband in 2011 and [justice still evades](#) her. Women hesitate to speak out due to shame and fear. There is an urgent need for a detailed assessment into recruitment of women cadres as well as sexual abuse and torture by the armed forces in the BTAD. This can aid in both prevention and rehabilitation of these girls and women.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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