

Bodoland Territorial Area District Elections 2015

A Discussion

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The Bodoland Territorial Area District elections this time has seen votes getting split between multiple parties. Will the Bodoland People's Front, who have been allegedly involved in violence earlier, able to bring peace in the region?

Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), which came into being in 2003, witnessed its third elections on 8 April 2015.^[i] The region is one of the most violence afflicted zones of South Asia, therefore, the elections in the province possess great significance. The BTAD has a council comprising a maximum of 46 members, of which 30 will be reserved for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and five for non-tribal communities; five seats are open to all communities, and six members are to be nominated by the governor of Assam.^[ii] These elections have displayed a multi-party contest for the first time. Another important aspect of the elections is that the Congress Party lost both tribal and non-tribal votes of the region and faced a complete whitewash.

The Mandate

The Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) has once again formed the council after the BTAD elections 2015. Six political parties contested in the elections, additionally, a large number of independent candidates too contested the elections. Total numbers of voters were 20,64,099 (10,05,210 voters were female and 10,58,889 male). The BPF managed to win the largest number of seats by winning 20 seats out of the 40 seats of the council elections. Independent candidates won 15 seats followed by four seats of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and one by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is noteworthy that AIUDF, founded in 2004, has been a major blow to the politics of the Indian National Congress (INC) Assam. INC, which is the ruling party of Assam, could not win even a single seat in the elections.

Table 1: BTAD Elections 2015 (Percentage of votes scored by each party)

AIUDF	BPF	AGP	CPI (M)	BJP	INC	IND
4 %	28.5 %	0.50 %	1 %	13 %	6 %	47 %

Source: Assam State Elections Commission.

BTAD came into being on 10 February 2003, as a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS), between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tiger. Since then till 2005 BTAD was governed in an ad hoc basis by the BPF, "... led largely by former cadres of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) a dreaded ruthless militant group that once blazed its name with massacres and acts of extreme terror" (Gohain 2008). Thereafter, the first elections of the council took place in 2005, which was allegedly full of widespread rigging and other undemocratic means, and the BPF managed to win the elections almost without resistance from any other party. [iii] In the 2010 elections, the BPF won 31 seats, the INC won three seats and independent candidates won three seats (Table 2). Since the formation of the BTAD, the Congress was an ally of the BPF, till 2014.

The major break from the past, in the elections, was a multi-party and multi-cornered contest; therefore, in the 2015 elections the BPF faced stiff competition from various other political parties. This time the BJP and AIUDF too fielded their candidates in the elections. The BJP tried hard to gain the ground by conducting a high voltage campaign, wherein, inter alia, four union ministers took part. But the party had to satisfy itself by winning only one seat out of 40 seats.

Though the BPF won 20 seats, it polled only 28.5% vote share in these elections. In most seats the party faced stiff competition from the non-Bodo candidates, and the Peoples Coordination for Democratic Rights (PCDR). PCDR, formed by the All Bodoland Student Union (ABSU), Bodoland Peoples Progressive Front (BPPF)—in collaboration with the Pro-talk National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), contested the elections as an independent party. PCDR came out of the Bodo community, as a response to the widespread corruption by the BPF party, and its dictatorship in the governing process. The margin between the winners of the BPF, and the runners-up candidates were very less, the lowest being only 13 votes. The PCDR, which contested as an independent, had snatched seven seats from the BPF.

Table 2: Seats Won by Political Parties in the BTAD Elections

Political Parties	Seats Contested in 2010	Seats Won in 2010	Seats Contested in 2015	Seats Won in 2015	Gain/loss Since 2010
BPF	40	31	40	20	-11
INC	23	03	40	0	-3
AIUDF	--	--	08	04	+4
BJP	08	--	40	01	+1
IND	40	06	40	15	+9
CPI(M)	05	0	07	0	Nil
AGP	09	0	06	0	Nil
AITC	03	0	--	--	--

Source: Assam State Elections Commission.

Division of Non-Bodo Votes

BTAD consists of only about 27% Bodos and rest of the population are non-Bodos, which includes the Asomiya Hindus, Koch-Rajbanshis, Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Adivasis, Nepalis, etc. BTAD covers "...an area of 27,100 sq km (or 35% of Assam's area). This was awarded to the Bodo tribe - which, according to the 2001 Census, had 1,296,000 members (or 5.3% of Assam's population)—in exchange for the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force surrendering their arms and dropping their demand for a separate for the Bodos" (Borooah 2003). The Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency covers the major portion of the Bodoland area and is very significant from the viewpoint of Bodo politics. In the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, "... 20 non-Bodo ethnic and linguistic groups under the banner of the Sanmilita Janagostiya Aikkyamancha (SJA) came together to support an independent non-Bodo candidate and a former leader of the ULFA Naba Sarania," and, the candidate won by a huge margin of 3,55,779 votes from the Kokrajhar constituency (Mahanta 2014). The non-Bodo candidate won those elections? because of the strong alliance between the diverse non-Bodo communities. But this time the incumbent MP—Naba Kumar Sarania has? severely failed to keep the non-Bodo people under the banner of the (SJA). As a result, *Oboro Suraksha Samiti* (OSS), a non-Bodo organisation, splintered out from the SJA which lead to the major division of votes of the non-Bodos and paved way for the BPF and PCDR. SJA won four seats, while OSS won two seats.

The major issue of the break-up of SJA was the selection of the candidates. As 30 seats out of 40 seats of the council, are reserved for the STs, therefore, selections of the candidates became very difficult, as the candidates had to be selected from the Bodo community itself to contest on behalf of the non-Bodos.^[iv] It is noteworthy to mention that the crack between Bodos and non-Bodos, by and large, is very deep in nature in the BTAD region. Sarania, the present MP and senior leader of SJA, could not deal with this complex issue of selections of the candidates in a prolific manner, which resulted in a severe dent on the non-Bodo politics in the BTAD.

The non-Bodo votes further got divided, as the BJP received 13%, AIUDF received 4% and the Congress received 6% of the total votes, by and large these votes were drawn from non-Bodos. The BJP, which had candidates in all the constituencies, hauled votes largely from Bengali Hindus. The eight constituencies, where the AIUDF fielded candidates drew large number of Muslim votes into their fold. However, the party won four seats, and, it is noteworthy to mention that, out of the four winning candidates two candidates are Bodos.

The Adivasis have significant votes in the BTAD—this time they have voted in a multifarious demeanour. In places they voted for the BPF and in some other hamlets they voted for the SJA. The Adivasis were assailed by the BLT (now BPF) on several occasions earlier. The 1996 clash between the Bodos and the Adivasis, which resulted in death and internal displacement of the latter, was one of the worst. After massive internal displacement, Adivasis have settled in reserved forests, and some are still residing in relief camps. The

BPF, promised to issue land *pattas*, on return to power, to these forest encroached Adivasi dwellers. Therefore, a significant number of Adivasis have voted for the BPF this time.^[v] As a result the non-Bodo organisations have failed to get a clear mandate in the BTAD.

Through the Voters Prism

The BTC elections of 2005 and 2010 were marked by extensive violence. However, unlike the earlier elections of the BTAD, this time the region has not bore the brunt of severe violence, barring a few low intensity clashes. The council elections have maintained comparatively higher voter turnout—in 2010 BTAD elections, voter turnout was 77 % and in these elections the turnout was about 75 %.^[vi] Out of the 2,778 polling booths, 480 booths were identified as very sensitive and over 730 as sensitive. The population of BTAD can be, by and large divided in to two segments—Bodos and non-Bodos. The major issue of the non-Bodos so far, is security while the Bodos voted largely for governance, development, infrastructure and delivery-related issues. A section of non-Bodo voters voted for the BPF too. Perhaps one should recall the massacre of 57 Muslims, shot dead by Bodo militants in Baksa District of Assam, for allegedly not voting for the BPF candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections (Siddique 2014a, 2014b).

Conclusion

The seats of the council have been won by diverse political parties, for the first time in the elections. BPF could emerge as the single largest seat? winning party, because of the division of non-Bodo votes. Nonetheless, for the first time BPF faced a stiff competition from its opponents in the form of PCDR and SJA. Bodo masses have understood, though lately, the issues of development and governance, and the same was reflected in their voting pattern. As a result, the PCDR that fought the elections on the issues of development and corruption in its very first elections has come up with an impressive result. The non-Bodo citizens are still struggling with the issues of security of their life and property, continue to remain insecure under the undemocratic structure of the BTAD. INC, the ruling party of Assam, has severely failed to contain the violence in the BTAD, therefore, the voters of the autonomous council have lost faith in the party, resulting in the complete whitewash of the party.

The elections also suggested that the region is beyond the reach of the political issues of national political parties. As Hussain (2012) observes “Learning to live harmoniously respecting each others right to life and dignity in a historically evolved shared homeland is perhaps the fundamental condition for, deepening democracy...” in the region. Will the BPF, which is allegedly involved in many violence earlier, able to bring peace in the BTAD, remains the important question, for the people.

Notes

[i] I have borrowed the phrase from Vani Kant Borooah’s paper “The Killing Fields of Assam:

Myth and Reality of Its Muslim Immigration”, published in the EPW on 26 January 2013.

[ii] See the BTAD accord 2003.

[iii] The author has interviewed substantial number of villagers across the four districts of the BTAD. And in interviews they stated that, earlier the council elections were severely affected by rigging.

[iv] Major non-Bodo communities, including the Adivasis, Nepalis, Muslims, Koch-Rajbanshis, in the BTAD do not enjoy ST status.

[v] For example, Adivasis residing in the Deosri area of Chirang District, which is near to the Indo-Bhutan Border, are internally displaced following the violence of 1996, between the Bodos and the Adivasis. Thereafter they have settled in areas which fall under the Chirang forest reserve. The area falls under the Chirang Duars (ST) constituency, and the Adivasis voted for the BPF candidate, in a hope to gain land *Pattas*. However, Adivasis are not the only community to encroach reserve forests. A huge number of Bodo Population too, have encroached reserve forests in many places of the BTAD.

[vi] See The Assam Tribune, 9 April, 2015.

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