

## UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSFORMATION FROM ETHNICITY TO ETHNIC POLITICAL PARTIES: A STUDY OF BODOLAND PEOPLES FRONT

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### INTRODUCTION:

Ethnic parties are the result of political mobilisation as well as the growth of political consciousness among the ethnic groups. The state plays a central role in breeding political consciousness among the ethnic groups. The character of the state constitutes the dominant influence upon the character of ethnic politics, ethnic consciousness being 'an emotionally powerful ideological response to the pattern of insecurities generated by the power structure of the state'.<sup>i</sup> There is close link between ethnic consciousness and the activities of the state. David Brown in his book '*Ethnicity and the State in Southeast Asia (1994)*' has clearly pointed out that the construction of nationalist ideology for the strengthening of national integration many times results in the construction of ethnic ideology which is developed in obvious term against the state. The critical nexus between the state and the ethnic groups gives birth to the ethnic based political forums through which their identities and interest can be protected as well as be fostered. Kanchan Chandra explains the fact how the state has influenced in the emergence of ethnic based political parties in India in case of BSP, DMK and JMM. The imposition of Hindi language in place of English as official language encouraged DMK to take a pro-Tamil platform. DMK is a state party in Tamil Nadu which came into being in 1949 as an anti-congress force and brought a heavy loss to the congress bastion in the state, reducing the congress support base. The state of Tamil Nadu is one of those who replaced congress as the governing body of the state. Likewise, ignorance and non-representation of the scheduled caste by the congress party led to emergence of nationwide ethnic based political party- BSP in the year 1984 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram. The BSP leaders alleged the congress party of serving the interest of the upper caste Hindus only and mobilised their target group on the ground that

the schedule caste communities are not represented by the congress party. The leaders of BSP regarded political representation as the cure for their exploitation and underdevelopment, clearly expressed in the lines of Kanshi Ram, "political power is the master key with which you can open any lock, whether it is [a] social, educational or cultural lock."<sup>ii</sup> JMM is another ethnic based state party formed in the state of Bihar in 1972 which strived for a separate state of Jharkhand.<sup>iii</sup> It fought for the cause of development of the tribals in Bihar which were being exploited.

This article is an attempt to study the emergence of Bodoland Peoples Front in the landscape of Assam with the help of an historical analysis. The article has been divided into two sections for the convenience of the study. The first section has dealt with the background of political mobilisation among the Bodos. For analysing the current politics of BTAD, one must look into the political struggle of the Bodos. The second section basically focuses on BPF as an ethnic party, its organisation as well as its structure. However, before marching directly towards the process of political mobilisation of the Bodos, a brief introduction of the Bodos renders plausibility.

### THE BODOS:

The Bodos are the largest plains tribe of Assam with 1,352,771 persons in the state being classified as Bodo-speaking in the 2001 Census of India that puts them at 40.9 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe population of Assam.<sup>iv</sup> The Indo-mongoloid groups of Tibeto-Burmese stock are spreaded over Assam, however, mostly inhabited in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley. A segment of Bodo people is also settled in Bangladesh, Nepal and in the other Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Meghalaya and

Tripura.<sup>v</sup> The Tibeto-Burman covers many communities such as the Koch, Rabha, Garo, Mech-Kachari, Sonowal- Kachari, Dimasa-Kachari, Bodo- Kachari, Lalung and Tripuri. All these were included in Bodo-language group, however, the present definition of the Bodos has confined into only the Bodo-Kachari. Monirul Hussain considers the Bodo-Kachari as the first native of the Brahmaputra valley and they brought the first civilisation into the valley.<sup>vi</sup> The Reverend Sidney Endle in his masterpiece, the Kacharis, mentioned about two direction of their mobility into the valley- one entering North-east Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh and the other makings its way into the Eastern Assam trough the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys. However, the frequent conflict with the Ahoms and Burmese invasion can be labelled against the concentration of the Bodos in the northern bank of Brahmaputra valley<sup>vii</sup>. Religion wise, some Bodos profess animism (bathou), some section follows Christianity and the others follow Hinduism (through Brahma movement). Agriculture is their main occupation and jhum cultivation enjoys the central position among the Bodos. The Bodos form an integral part of the greater Assamese nationality. However, the process of assimilation and categorisation of Assamese people had led to the Bodo sub-nationality assertion, culminated into the demand for separate statehood.

#### **THE BTAD PROFILE:**

The Bodoland Territorial Area District came into being as the result of the Bodo Accord, 2003 that comprises of four districts Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri; curved out of eight districts of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur. It is situated on the Northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley having a mixed range of population including both tribals and non-tribals. Covering thirty five per cent of Assam's area, BTAD consists of about twenty seven percent Bodos; rest is filled up by the other communities- Asomiya Hindus, Koch-Rajbanshis, Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Adhivasis, and Nepalis etc. This complex composition has become a potent source of

conflict in the area, making the area one of the most hostile corner of South Asia.

BTAD administration is run by the BTC which is composed of forty six members. Out of these, thirty seats are reserved for the STs, five for non- tribal communities, five seats are open to all communities and the rest six members are to be nominated by the governor of Assam.<sup>viii</sup> The presence of population diversification on the one hand and the institutional arrangement based on a singular ethnic group on the other has culminated into a complex and contentious politics in the region.

#### **THE GROWTH OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE RISE OF BODO NATIONALISM: A WAY TO POLITICAL DISPENSATION**

Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) is the result of political mobilisation among the Bodos. Formally, BPF emerged after historic Bodo accord 2003, signed between the representatives of the Union government, the Assam government and the members of BLT. However, the process of political mobilisation among the Bodos had started long before. Before the arrival of BPF, other political parties were there which fought for the cause of the Bodos along with the other plains tribes of Assam. The Brahma movement under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had contributed in the growth of consciousness among the plain tribes with the help of the emerging educated middle class, attuning themselves to the colonial modernity. The growing consciousness resulted in the submission of a memorandum to the Simon Commission in the year 1929, demanding separate representation for the Bodos. Besides, the leaders like Jadav Chandra Khaklari, general secretary of the All-Assam Kachari Association, reiterated for the educational upliftment of the Bodos, through establishing schools. Subsequently, the first plains tribes' political organisation, All Assam Plains Tribal League was formed at Roha in the district of Nowgong in the year 1933. The educated elites of AAPTL developed a common platform for the plains tribes, by creating ethnic boundaries from the other communities like the Muslims, caste Hindus, hill tribes and tea garden labourers. Rupnath Brahma, Rabi Chandra Kachari, the members of the league demanded reserved seats for the

tribals with separate electorate in the legislative bodies. Consequently, the Government of India Act, 1935 made the provisions for reservation of four seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly for them which actualised the political participation of the tribals. The tribals took part in the election of 1937 and won all reserved seats. Entering into an alliance with the congress party, the AAPTL succeeded in protecting the tribal land by strengthening line system. However, the next government of Muslim league threatened the very existence of the tribals by taking the policies that fostered immigrant penetration into the tribal land. The tribal leaders vehemently opposed to the resolution for the abolition of line system by the then government. Regarding the question of land alienation, Rabi Chandra Kachari said “there should be a line system to protect the weak and backward people. Without a line demarcation it is not possible to look into the interest of the poor people who require special protection.”<sup>ix</sup> The tribal leaders were well known about the growing influx of immigrants into their land and that is why they criticised the then Saadulla ministry for their soft attitude towards those immigrants. Post-independence period saw the transformation of the league from a political party to a cultural body named tribal sangh as the leaders were optimised of the congress government relating to the upliftment of the tribals of the plains. However, it is interesting to mention that the league after independence showed utmost dissatisfaction at the functions of the congress government and regretted on its departure from the political front. The disbandment of tribal league created a political vacuum in plains tribal society. The leaders of tribal sangh expressed discontent regarding the role of the state government in articulating the interest of the plain tribes.

The tribals particularly the Bodos have now realised that without a political platform, it is not possible for the tribals to play a significant role in Assam's political landscape. In the context of the role of the state in the emergence of ethnic politics among the tribes of Assam, the mention of the 1967 Declaration of the Indian government is relevant. On 13th January, 1967, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced the proposal for

reorganisation of Assam on federal structure. This declaration raised aspirations among the plain tribes along with the hill tribes of Assam.<sup>x</sup> Resultantly, a new political party was formed under the name of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) with Mr. Biruson Doley and Mr. Samar Brahma Choudhury as President and Vice President and Charan Narzary as its General Secretary, placing its headquarter at Kokrajhar. The party leaders expressed their unhappiness with the state government in implementing the tribal community related policies. The question of land alienation and policy of assimilation were major factor behind their dissatisfaction. The party raised the issues like impact of urbanisation and industrialisation on tribal land which threatened the tribal identity. PTCA then decided to demand for full autonomy in the plains tribal areas on the northern tracts of Goalpara, kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts including all the tribal belts and blocks within the region.<sup>xi</sup> The leaders of PTCA peacefully demonstrated their demands for the protection of tribal lands, their culture, language and customs which were expressed in the memorandums, frequently sent to the central government. However, their demands were not being given due recognition. PTCA leaders even boycotted the elections of 1967 for Lok Sabha and 1968 for State legislature in order to pressurise the government to take actions on their demands. The poll- boycott failed to give any positive output and the leaders decided to take part in the subsequent elections to the House of People and Assam Assembly. PTCA member Charan Narzary became an MLA in the Assam Assembly from the Kokrajhar east (ST) constituency in 1972 election. It is to be mentioned that up to 1972, PTCA demanded for autonomous plains tribal region. But, non-action on the part of the central government resulted in the form of demand for a union territory called Udayachal. The feeling of discontent with the state developed further during the Roman Script movement staged by the cultural organisation of the Bodos, Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Roman Script movement can be regarded as the manifestation of reactive nationalism<sup>xii</sup> through which the Bodos tried to draw a line of difference between the Assamese and the Bodos. The Bodo leaders believed that the use of their mother tongue as

the medium of instruction would prevent the dominant language from overrunning of local dialects and the language of tribal minorities.<sup>xiii</sup> The state government feared at providing Roman Script to the Bodos which would help in enriching their language and would embolden their movement for Udayachal. After much controversy, in the year 2000, Devanagari was adopted at the annual session of BSS. The movement for the roman script was followed by massive police atrocities which took away the lives of many in the Bodo-dominated areas. It is documented that during the Roman Script movement, all the prominent leaders and the top leaders of the PTCA had to underground themselves in order to avoid police atrocities.<sup>xiv</sup> The Roman script movement was just followed by the proclamation of national emergency in 1975 which gave a halt to the political activities of the Bodo leaders. Nonetheless, the success of the party lies in the fact that it was recognised as a state political party in Assam after Charan Narzary won secured 4.9% valid votes polled in the whole state of Assam in the parliamentary election of 1977. Charan Narzary mentioned in his book how the Congress government tried to sideline PTCA by backing another organisation ABSU. All Bodo Student Union came into being in February 1967 that is parallel to PTCA. However, the emergence of ABSU as a political front came later to PTCA. It was alleged that emergence of ABSU as a political front was encouraged by the congress party to remove PTCA along with its demand for Udayachal.<sup>xv</sup> Hence, PTCA was moved to the back as it failed to fight the big giant, Indian state. However, there is another explanation for growing unpopularity of PTCA among the Bodo people. The ABSU leaders had expressed their agony as PTCA compromised the idea of Udayachal for sharing power the congress government and turned down their demand into an autonomous region. ABSU criticised the role of PTCA as the betrayal of the Bodos and deemed it to enter into the political field for the protection of the identity and tradition of the Bodos.

In terms of mobilising the Bodos, ABSU was the most successful organisation as it assembled the mass support. The credit must go to the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma.

The Bodo movement reached its zenith during the era of ABSU-BPAC, especially in 1980s. Rehana Saeed Hashmi and Gulshan Majeed have explained the transformation of ethnicity into ethnic politics due to certain factors such as state authority, process of assimilation.<sup>xvi</sup> These factors are also apparent in case of Bodo politics. ABSU under the leadership of U. N. Brahma became the strongest organisation of the Bodos by acquiring mass support. The ABSU was successful in mobilising a large number of the Bodos which in turn made it crucial political organisation. The perennial issue of land alienation, assimilation policies like Official language Act, making Assamese language compulsory in universities in 1972 had apprehended the minds of the Bodos along with the other plain tribes of Assam. The feeling of deprivation, exploitation and alienation reached its peak during the reign of AGP government. Sanjib Baruah asserts that the movement for Bodo homeland was an outgrowth of Assam movement.<sup>xvii</sup> During Assam movement, the ABSU leaders fought together with AASU in order to protect the tribal belts and blocks against the foreigners. However, the post- Assam movement period and the regime of AGP government marked another phase of Bodo politics. Clause 6 of Assam Accord has promised safeguards to protect the cultural identity of the Assamese people. The categorisation of Assamese people had led to the process of ethnicization of the Assamese<sup>xviii</sup> and to the creation of another ethnic category- the Bodos. The ABSU leaders were criticised of another clause 10 of Assam Accord that was intended to protect the lands from the encroachers which AGP government had failed to protect. The newly formed government in 1985 was soon accused of using the Clause 10 of the Assam Accord only to evict poor tribal farmers from the government land and reserved forests. The same clause was never utilised when it came to evicting the illegal non-tribal encroachers from the various tribal belts and blocks.<sup>xix</sup> As a consequence, ABSU started the separate statehood movement under the banner of divide Assam 50-50 and under the leadership of Upen Brahma (who was mistreated by the AGP government.) Since, 1987, the demand for Udayachal got promoted to the demand for a separate state- Bodoland. The 92 point charter of the ABSU proves the growing

discontent with the state, submitted to Chief Minister Prafulla kumar Mahanta on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1987. The main political demands of the charter were-

- a. To create a separate state on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra for the plains tribals of Assam.
- b. To create two district councils on the southern bank of Brahmaputra.
- c. The inclusion of the Bodo-Kachari of Karbi-Anglong into the Scheduled Tribes list.

Apart from these three political demands, the other 89 demands were related to socio-economic, education and other problems.<sup>xx</sup> For ABSU, it was the first ever event that the claim for a separate state got projected in the national capital, as the 92-point charter was placed before the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi along with the submission to the Home Minister and the then President of India Gianni Jai Singh in the year 1987. No action from the government followed by the activities like rail rokho programme, highway blockade, hunger strike, Assam bandh, tribal area bandh...etc in order to pressurise the government under the famous quote 'Do or Die'. The year 1989 saw the violent phase of the movement covering a series of killings, kidnapping and bomb attacks. The central government then initiated talks with the Bodo leaders. After several rounds of talk, the First Bodo Accord was signed in the presence of Rajesh Pilot, the then union minister of state for home, the then Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikia and the Bodo delegates of ABSU and BPAC. As a result, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was created which led to the emergence of many problems in the subsequent years. The accord had failed to fulfil the demands of the Bodos, leaving many issues unresolved like the demarcation of villages to be included in BAC, the issue of financial autonomy...Etc, confirmed the motive of the Indian state behind the sign of the Accord, not to solve the problem of the Bodos, but to bring to a halt to the violence. This Accord was itself controversial in terms of including the notified villages within the proposed Bodoland Autonomous Council. The government asserted that the Bodos constituted in only 1,100 villages of the 2,750

notified villages and ABSU and the other Bodo organisation criticised it. They felt betrayed as they had already compromised their claim for Bodoland, and denounced the Accord. The BAC chief Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary declared that "This is all our land and non- Bodos have come and settled here from time to time. So changed demography cannot be used against our aspiration for autonomy. If therefore we do not have majority, we might consider creating one."<sup>xxi</sup> The later phase had witnessed a large scale of violence in the Bodo- dominated areas; an ethnic cleansing exercise began where the immigrant Muslim community was largely targeted.

### **ISSUES OF BODO POLITICS:**

Although, there are different political parties which fought for the cause of the Bodos at different phases, there are certain issues which are central for the political consciousness that the Bodos deemed it necessary to have a political forum in order to fulfil their demands. Thus the Bodo politics is continued around certain issues.

#### ***a. LAND ALIENATION, ENTRAPMENT AND THE ISSUE OF IMMIGRATION:***

The issue of land alienation has always been sensitive in case of the tribal people as for them land is not just a piece of commodity; rather they regard it as part of their custom and tradition. Land becomes a symbol of pride for them and always retains primordial values. In case of the Bodos and other plains tribes, both the central and state government have failed to protect their land from encroachment. In fact, the policy of immigrant settlement in remote areas of Assam, pushed by the colonial state has been consolidated by the successive government. The political parties, socio-cultural organisations of the Bodos were very critical of this. AAPTL, PTCA, ABSU all have vehemently criticised the tribal land encroachment by the non-tribals. AAPTL raised voice against the Saadulla ministry who patronised the East Bengal Muslims to be settled in the areas of tribal communities under the banner of 'grow more food.'<sup>xxii</sup> PTCA leaders were also claiming for the protection of tribal belts and blocks. ABSU alleged that the encroachment over tribal lands by non tribal was still going on and the tribal belts and

blocks became totally defunct. It asserted that due to silent and secret policy of negation from bureaucracy side or ruling machineries, over 3, 60,601 bighas of land out of total 45 tribal belts and blocks of Assam have gone to the occupation of non-tribals and the immigrants as per the record of 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1990.<sup>xxiii</sup> Internal colonialism can be a factor for ethnic politics as rightly projected by Hechter<sup>xxiv</sup> where the periphery gets exploited at the hands of the core. The resource extraction policy of the colonial state has been consolidated by the post-colonial state.

Through the policies of reserved forests, reserved lands, the post-colonial state also extracted the Bodos for resources. Thus, there is a clear linkage between the issue of migration of the East Bengal Muslims, entrapment of the tribals and the land alienation which determines the ethnic politics of the Bodos. The political parties from time to time claimed for the eviction of the encroachers from the tribal land, but the government in centre and state level, have failed to fulfil their interest. Instead, the state government evicted a section of indigenous people from the Bodo areas in the process of eviction of the immigrants. The state government even involved in coercive means in the process of eviction, violating the basic human rights of people. The Phulung Sapor incident of 1979 substantiate the point where a Bodo peasant, Bihuram Boro was shot dead by the state police in the course of eviction of immigrants.<sup>xxv</sup> The problem lied in the fact that many forest dwellers did not have land pattas and it was very easy to identify them as outsiders. Hence, AGP led government failed to evict the outsiders from the Bodo dominated areas as promised, instead it had evicted a significant amount of indigenous people which further dissatisfied the Bodos against the state.

#### **b. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND THE PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION:**

The issue of language has been central to the emergence of Bodo nationalism. Karlsson (2001) justifies that 'the issue of language was the central to the formation and struggle of the Bodo community.' The process of assimilation through the state policies like Assam Official Language Act, 1960, making Assamese language compulsory for Universities and

government jobs really established the chauvinist character of Assamese elites. The imposition of Assamese language worked as factor for identity crisis among the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley. The cultural consciousness made the Bodos to fight against the Assamese hegemony through different organisations, be it literary (Bodo Sahitya Sabha), or political parties (PTCA, ABSU). Thus the process of assimilation resulted in identity crisis, mainly language crisis. The language factor many times determined the creation of ethnic differentiations among the Bodos and the Assamese. The Bodos started to make their boundaries by differentiating their tradition, culture from that of Assamese, as they felt deprived and betrayed. Speaking Bodo language in the cultural programs, wearing *dokhona* instead of *mekhela – chador* were some of the early symptoms of their departure from the Assamese composite culture.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Roman Script movement of 1974 can also be considered as the manifestation of Bodo nationalism which demanded for Roman scripts instead of Assamese scripts. Therefore, the process of assimilation through the introduction of Assamese language as the Official language was only a means for establishing Assamese hegemony over the indigenous tribes.

In both the categories, the role of the state is very critical. The post colonial state also failed to fulfil the demands of the Bodos, rather increased their level of apprehension through different policies and actions. The issues such as land alienation, immigration, language have constituted significant part of Bodo politics in the subsequent years.

#### **BODO ACCORD: A MEANS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL ARRANGEMENT:**

The approach of the Indian state in conflict management is again critical. It is seen that the Indian policymakers try to solve the ethnic conflicts in a piecemeal way which no doubt endures the peace for a while but it leaves the chance for recurrence of the conflict as the root causes are not being sorted out. In this context, the argument of Nani Gopal Mahanta can be placed that the accord politics which is a kind of settlement between the state and the rebel group has failed to endure peace,

breeding more conflict.<sup>xxvii</sup> Such kind of settlement may help in reducing the militancy and violence and also enable the leaders to capture the political power in the respective areas, but this may lead to the arrival of another conflict. The local autocracies, born out of the state's approach to conflict management are responsible for evolving new security situation in their respective regions.<sup>xxviii</sup> Indian state's localised autocracy policy for conflict management can be visualised in the states of Northeast India. Quoting Bethany Lacina, "ceasefires and peace settlements also attempts to placate local rivals by temporarily stopping the violence and proffering massive economic transfers from the centre. The centre's financial and coercive support allows local leaders – ex militants or civilians at the state level or below- to consolidate an area of control."<sup>xxix</sup> The policy of localised autocracy have reduced the amount of violence in the states like West Bengal, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam, but have unfolded "another pocket of autocracy"<sup>xxx</sup> which add to more conflict in those regions. In west Bengal, the violent protest for the separate state Gorkhaland by subhash ghishing ultimately led the central government to come with a settlement and consolidated political power on the hands of the political party Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), helped in reducing the magnitude of violence in 1980s. It made GNLF and its prime leader Subhash Ghishing the local autocrats, who used violence in eliminating its rivals. Likewise, the emergence of localised autocracy has also been seen in case of Mizoram, Nagaland and Maipur. The case of Assam is not an exception. The Bodo Accord of 2003 helped to reduce the violence in the region as the Accord brought the militant outfit within the framework of the government. However, this Accord has created localised autocracy of the Bodo elites, leaving many scope opened for the emergence of another section for power capturing.

The failure of Bodo Accord of 1993 led to the emergence of the second phase of militancy and violence in Bodo dominated areas of Assam. Opposing the Bodo Accord of 1993, Bodo Security Force (BrSF) of 1986 started violence in the region, transforming itself into National Democratic Front of Bodoland.

Another parallel outfit Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) came into being in the year 1996 and both created havoc among the inhabitants of Bodo dominated areas. However, it was alleged that the BLT had been propped by the Central Government to destabilise a regional party-led government in Assam and to foment ethnic conflicts in the state.<sup>xxxi</sup> Although both NDFB and BLT were militant outfits, aimed at liberation of Bodoland, they were different in ideology. NDFB was demanding secession from the Indian Union, while BLT wanted separate statehood within Indian Territory. As a result, both were seen involved in frequent violence against each other along with their fight for Bodoland. The mayhem in the BAC region compelled the government to negotiate with the militant outfits. Since March 2000 to February, 2003, 30 rounds of tripartite talks were held between the central government, state government of Assam and the BLT. Consequently, a self governing body for the Bodo areas was created to protect their cultural identity, language, education and economic development and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) came into being having the jurisdiction over Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). The constitution of BTC witnessed the biggest ever surrender ceremony in the country. Altogether 2,641 BLT militants along with more than 500 varieties of weapons including rocket- propelled grenades, A K series rifles, LMG and SLR rifles bade farewell to arms on December 6, 2003. Thereafter, an interim council consisting of 12 members under the headship of now disbanded BLT, Hagrama Mahilary came into being on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2003. The election commission of Assam decided to hold the first BTC election and accordingly was scheduled to be held on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2005. Amidst election preparations, conflict emerged among the Bodo elites over getting tickets. In fact, many decided to contest in election as independent candidates as they felt deprived [field interview]. Following the declaration of the election schedule, ABSU and ex- BLT members formed a political party named Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF) on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2005. The first BTC election witnessed massive violence over the issue of controlling the Bodo issue, resulted in the faction of BPPF in the post BTC election between Hagrama Mahilary and Rabiram

Narzary. The faction led by Hagrama Mahilary renamed as Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) which is in power in BTAD region since its commencement.

### **EXISTING COMPLEXITIES, POLITICAL IMPASS AND PARTY-CHALLENGES:**

The struggle between the local autocrats<sup>xxxii</sup> over political power, polarisation and fragmentations within the community, counter-mobilisation among the 'ethnic-others' have substantiated the current impass in the region, resulted in periodic ethnic conflicts and violence. The crisis in Bodoland is a reflection of the abdication of responsibility by the Indian state.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The mere subsistence of the peace accords which provides political establishment to the rebel groups has failed to put an end to the violence in these areas. The signing of Bodo Accord in the year 2003 and the consolidation of Sixth schedule provisions should put an end to the long Bodo agitation for the autonomy or separate statehood. However, the conflicts within the group and between the groups are in increasing mode in the post- accord era in Bodoland Territorial Area Districts. The political establishment of the Bodos has failed to fulfil the interests of many Bodos. Since the formation of Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF), the area has been witnessing a number of violent incidents which proves the failure of new incumbents in building peace and reconciliation. The region witnessed ethnic violence in the years of 2008, 2012 and 2014 after the consolidation of the political power to the ethnic elites which has taken away many lives and displaced many inhabitants. The year 2008 (in August) witnessed ethnic clash between Bodos and non- Bodos near Routa in the Udalguri district of Assam which had spread over the other the districts of BTAD, leading to the escalation of violence in the subsequent years as well.<sup>xxxiv</sup> After four years, in the month of July, 2012; another series of ethnic violence occurred causing 2, 35, 412 people displaced in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Dhubri and Bongaigaon (as on 29 August, 2012).<sup>xxxv</sup>

The betrayal laments within the community against the ruling party for moving away from the root cause of the movement and showing centrist party behaviour<sup>xxxvi</sup> has been a potent

source for the leadership fractions within the community. The Bodoland Territorial Council elections witnessed proliferation of political parties among the Bodos and the other communities. Bodoland Peoples' Front has been facing stiff opposition from the community itself. The factionalism in Bodo leadership has worked as a hurdle in the way of finding a permanent solution to the Bodo problem. The growing rift between BPF and other Bodo organisations has culminated into the emergence of other ethnic parties such as People's Co-Ordination for Democratic Rights (PCDR), United People's Party (UPP) which leads to the polarisation of the Bodo votes in the elections, challenging the dominance of BPF over the region. PCDR came out of the Bodo community as a response to the widespread corruption and dictatorship in the governing process. The PCDR is formed by ABSU, Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF) and United Democratic People's Front (UDPF) which want to dethrone BPF as it has failed to bring peace and equality in the region. UPP is formed in the year 2015 by uniting two political parties BPPF and UPDF, apart from PCDR members to put an end to the misrule of BPF and to serve the interest of the people resided within the BTAD. The difference between the BPF and ABSU can be seen in the 2014 General election over the issue that BPF has failed to fulfil the demand for separate Bodoland.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Although the election of 2014 was historic for the victory of a non- Bodo candidate in the Bodo region, the intra- community polarisation can also be found. In the BTC election of 2015 as well, BPF faced stiff challenges from PCDR which was formed by ABSU and BPPF in collaboration with NDFB (P).

The theory of ethnic outbidding believes that the politicization of ethnic divisions inevitably gives rise to one or more ethnic parties.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The emergence of one ethnic party contaminates the rest of the party system, leading to a spiral of extreme ethnic bids and destroy the competitive politics altogether. The process of ethnic outbidding is inevitable in the contemporary ethnically divided societies. Assam's Bodoland is not an exception. The mobilisation of the Bodos resulted in the formation of the BTC in 2003 and the politics of the Bodos has led to the development of



counter- mobilisation among the other communities in the BTAD. The counter-mobilisation has resulted in the formation of non- Bodo organisations mainly Sanmilita Janagosthiya SangramSamiti(SJSS: United Ethnic People's Struggle Committee), AboroSurakhyaSamiti(Assam), BTAD Citizen Rights Forum and so on. the main argument behind the formation of non- Bodo organisations is to counter the growing Bodo hegemony in a locale of ethnic mix without constituting a majority. The gradual and determined mobilisation among the non-Bodos culminated into the major political shift in the BTAD in the general elections of 2014 where a non- Bodo candidate won the Parliament seat from the Kokrajhar constituency. The BTC elections of 2015 has again proved the growing polarisation among the Bodos and non-Bodos and also revealed a drop in BPF bastion. BTAD witnessed its third election after having elections of 2005 and 2010. However, unlike in 2005 and 2010 elections, where BPF won landslide victory and without any strong opponents, in 2015 BTC election, it was challenged by different counters. No doubt, amidst stiff oppositions and challenges, BPF could manage to win the election and to form the government for the third time; it shook the dominance of the Bodos in the region.

As concluding remarks, it can be considered that the role of the Indian state in the development of ethnic politics is proactive. Both the colonial policies and post-colonial governance have contributed in the escalation of ethnic politics as well as ethnic conflicts in Assam. The role of the Indian state has been critical in terms of conflict resolution in Assam as well. The institutional arrangement that consolidated political autonomy to the Bodos does not have provisions for crossing ethnic identities in order to mitigate ethnic tensions, as the cross cutting is essential in a poly ethnic plot. The sixth schedule provision in BTAD, based on singular fault line does not provide for such cross cutting cleavages since the structure itself is set for a particular ethnic group.<sup>xxxix</sup>The accord making process in Bodoland Territorial Area Districts has been a major failure, it creates competition among the local autocrats over power-capturing and it breeds more conflicts due to structural faults in the political autonomy mechanisms. Thus, the

State should seriously engage itself in the peace building process, including all the concerned parties and entities. The efficacy of the State does not lie in mere reconciliation, rather in conflict transformation which will help in strengthening the democracy in turn.

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