

Handbook of **TRIBAL POLITICS IN INDIA**



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 **SAGE**

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Transitional Political Environment: Bodos and Tribal Politics in Assam

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It is pertinent for any minority-linguistic community within a majority-linguistic state to find expressions in their political institutions and organizations. Assam is one such linguistic state which is home to many minor communities wherein some are tribal communities and some are just non-tribal communities. The Bodos of Assam are one of the tribal communities of Assam accounting to possess the highest number of tribal population as per the census of 2011. Of late, the Bodos are seen to take part actively in politics. The social mobility of the Bodos in terms of political institution is seen to be very recently emerging as one of the strong fields where the Bodos have started to express their dissent or favour. The emergence of the Bodos into the political realm is, however, not a recent process, though active participation and emergence of new ruling Bodo political parties is. Looking at the political aspects of the Bodos, the emergence of new ruling

parties is, in general, a normal adverse result of the absence of any rigid political system within the Bodos. The general Bodo narrative is that regional Bodo parties emerged as a fallout of the administrative grievance of Assam towards the Bodos. This is indicative of the pride the Bodos take in the administration of their own territories. The formation of regional parties as of such is also indicative of the presence of divisiveness in a state's political unity.

The chapter dwells around the political system of the Bodos. The chapter begins with a brief discussion on the Bodos and then focuses on the entry of the Bodos into the realm of Indian politics before Independence. Then it discusses the nature of Bodo politics till the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), followed by the dynamics of Bodo politics after the formation of the BTC.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE BODOS

The Bodos are considered as the first Tibeto-Burman speakers entering the north-east region (Kundu, 2010; Pulloppillil and Aluckal, 1997). The Bodos were also known as Kacharis and were the aboriginal and the first settlers of modern Assam, North-Bengal and parts of Bangladesh (Baruah, 1972; Gait, 1926; Kundu, 2010; Sarma and Devi, 1993). Pulloppillil and Aluklal (1997) argue that the Bodos ruled Assam unto the 20th century AD and moved to western part of the Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar Hills and the plains of Cachar in 16th century AD to stay away from the Ahom onslaught.

Hodgson used the term Bodo for the first time in his work on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal tribes in 1880. To him, Bodo means man. According to him, 'A Kachari or Mech will call himself *Bara f'se*¹ to distinguish himself from Sim-Sa (Bhutia) or Chin-fsa' (Gait, 1926, p. 26). In the contemporary times, Bodos those living in the west of the Kamrup districts are called the Mechs and those in the eastern side as Kacharis. Even though Kachari is considered to be the original word to describe the Bodos, at present, the Constitution of India has recognized this group of tribe as the Bodos. *Kos-ari* is derived from *Kos-arui*, meaning, the sons of the *Kos*. *Ari* or *arui* is a patronymic, commonly used by the Bodo people in naming their clans. The word Kachari is, thus, a generic term, which is used to denote a number of tribal groups speaking more or less a common dialect or language and claiming a common mythical ancestry (Pulloppillil and Aluckal, 1997, p. 1).

The 2011 Census indicates that Assam is one of the largest multi-ethnic states in Northeast India with 68 languages and local

parlance. Based on the place of inhabitation and ecological standpoint, the tribes of Assam are basically categorized into hill and plain tribes. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Assam is 31,205,576. Out of which, 3,884,371 are tribal, constituting 12.44 per cent of the total population. There are 2.90 and 97.10 per cent Scheduled Tribes (ST; hills) and ST (plains), respectively. The plain tribes include Burmans of Cachar, Bod-Kachari, Deori, Hojai, Sonowal, Lalung, Mech, Mishing and Rabha. The hill tribes are Hajong, Dimasa, Miri (Mishings), Mech, Lalung, Syntheng, Pawi, any Naga tribe, Mikir (Karbis), any Mizo (Lushai) tribe, Man (Tai speaking), Lakher, Any Kuki tribe, Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Khoi, Lyngngam, Hmar, Garo, Dimasa-Kachari and the Chakmas. The plain tribes are dispersed over different districts of Assam on the north and the south banks of the river Brahmaputra. On the other hand, the hill tribes are mostly confined to the two hill districts of Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills.

Among the ST, the Boro or Boro-Kachari has the highest proportion of population in comparison to other tribes in Assam (Table 12.1). Along with the Bodos (35.05%), Miri (Mishings, 17.51%), Mikir (Karbis, 11.08%), Rabha (7.62%), Sonowal Kacharis (6.52%) and Lalung (5.17%) are the other major ST having more than 5 per cent of the total ST population and they constitute more than 87 per cent of the total tribal population along with Dimasa Kacharis (3.15%) and Deoris (1.12%). The other tribal population constitutes a very small portion in their population demography (Table 12.1).

Table 12.2 indicates that the Bodos have chequered history in terms of their demographic composition. The Bodos are concentrated most populously in the districts of

¹ *Bara Fsa* is actually pronounced as Boro Fisa. *Fisa* here means a child and by saying *Bara Fisa* the writer meant as the child of a Boro.

Table 12.1 Population of Some Major ST Communities of Assam, 2011 Census

<i>Sl No.</i>	<i>Name of the Scheduled Tribe</i>	<i>Total Tribal Population</i>	<i>Proportion to the Total Tribal Population (in %)</i>
1	All ST	3,884,371	100
2	Bodo, Bodo-Kachari	1,361,735	35.05
3	Miri (Mishings)	680,424	17.51
4	Mikir (Karbis)	430,452	11.08
5	Rabha	296,189	7.62
6	Sonowal Kacharis	253,344	6.52
7	Lalung	200,915	5.17
8	Dimasa	122,663	3.15
9	Deori	43,750	1.12

Source: Government of India (2011).

Table 12.2 Bodo Population of Assam (1951–2011)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Population of Assam (in Lakhs)</i>	<i>Bodo Population (in Lakhs)</i>	<i>Percentage of Bodo Population</i>
1951	80.29	3.64	4.53
1961	108.37	3.46	3.19
1971	146.25	6.10	4.17
1981	180.41	7.41	4.10
1991	224.14	11.84	5.28
2001	266.38	14.72	5.52
2011	312.05	14.16	4.53

Source: Government of India (1951–2011).

Kokrajhar, Udalguri and newly formed Baksa and Chirang of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD)² region. In addition, they can also be found in the districts of Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup (both rural and metro), Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Karbi Anglong, etc. The Bodos can also be found in the adjoining states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and West Bengal, and adjoining countries of Nepal and Myanmar. In Assam, the Bodos are generally notified as the scheduled plain tribes except in

the autonomous hill districts where they are noticed as scheduled hill tribes.

ENTRY OF THE BODOS INTO THE REALM OF POLITICS (PRE-INDEPENDENCE)

The north-eastern part of India has experienced the problems of separatist in-group³ political activities within the federal state from colonial

² BTC is the territorial council and the area which falls under the jurisdiction of the BTC government is called the BTAD. BTC was formed after Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) leaders with the central and the state government. This MoS as described by the Bodoland movement actors was signed to sabotage the Bodo movement for a separate state. The Government of Assam also accepted and approved the aforesaid MoS on 31 October 2003 by vide notification number TAD/BTC/161/2003/6. The Government of Assam thus resolved to extend executive powers to 40 subjects according to the BTC agreement in the said MoS.

³ By the term 'in-group' the scholar meant to denote the social group to which a person psychologically identifies himself/herself as a member.

rulers. The in-group political activism has intimidated the very idea of federal structure and in spite of developing a unitary governance, this often leads to many separatist demands in the region. As a result, the region has witnessed the restructuring of the federal states during the last four decades. The creation of the state of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are the fallouts of such federal restructuring.

The divide and rule policy of the British administration has led to the declining of the socio-economic conditions of the tribal communities in Northeast India. The divide and rule policy was successful in bringing out a division between the hill and plain tribes. This division thereby created a space for suspicion among the two tribal counterparts (plain and hill). In this context, it would not be wrong to articulate that tribal politics in the region started with the introduction of such apprehending policies of the British administration and the Bodos are one of those tribes who were part of the same. The Bodos are the majority plain tribal group in Assam⁴ and have been playing a consequential role in the tribal politics of Assam since the colonial days. There were also other factors that added to the uprising of the Bodo politics. One such factor was the fear of the Bodos to be completely dominated by the Assamese middle-class elites in the state politics. Such fears had supplemented the need of a separate political identity for the Bodo tribes. However, initially the Bodos did not have a separate political identity.

Gradually, the Bodos became conscious about their political identity since the British rule. The birth of the Kachari Youth Association (Kachari Jubok Sanmilian) of the 1920s is an example of Bodo consciousness. The formation of this youth association took place owing to their impressive efforts to re-assert traditional culture and literature and also to secure their collective rights and for correcting perceived injustices, discriminations and alienation from the mainstream political and economic development (Chaudhuri, 1992). The youth organization placed their demand before the Indian statutory commission, that is, the Simon Commission in 1929.⁵ The demand included seeking permission for the entry of this group into public sphere by bringing forth the economic and political rights of the Bodos. Datta (1993, p. 175) states that this same group had also submitted a memorandum to the commission demanding a separate electorate for the Bodos so that the Bodo group too may have ample representation in the provincial assembly. This was the first time that the Bodos expressed their political aspirations and sentiments formally. Following the submission of the memorandum, the Simon Commission allowed the reservation of four seats in the provincial assembly for all the plain tribes, which accommodated the Bodos as well.

In view of the above submission, the British government introduced the new liberal intellectual conditions, which initiated the process

⁴As per the census reports of 1971, 1991 and 2001, there are about 23 ST (Hills and Plains) in Assam. The Bodo-Kacharis shared 33.36 per cent of the total tribal population in 1971, 44.07 per cent in 1991 and 44.08 per cent in 2001. The Miris (Mishings) shared 13.52 per cent of the total tribal population in 1971, 13.52 per cent in 1991 and 16.27 per cent in the 2001 Census report. The Mikirs (Karbis) percentage to the total ST population in Assam was 9.23 in 1971, 9.94 per cent in 1991 and 9.94 per cent in 2001 Census as well. The other ST major group Deoris' percentage to the total tribal population was 1.20 per cent in 1971 Census and 1.25 per cent and 1.34 per cent in 1991 and 2001 Census, respectively. The details of 2011 Census tribal population is given in Table 12.1.

⁵The British government appointed an Indian statutory commission on 8 November 1927 under the chairmanship of S. Simon, what was accompanied by six other members. All the members were British members of the Parliament and had no Indian members in it. Therefore, Indians had derogatorily termed this commission as 'all white commission'. This Commission arrived in Shillong (erstwhile capital of Assam) on 2 January 1929 and left on 11 January 1929. For detailed account, see Deka (2014, p. 102).

of constitutional changes.⁶ These constitutional changes brought forward by the British government provoked the Bodos to assert their community identity. This also instigated the need for a platform to express the same. Again, the identity consciousness made the Bodos feel that there is a need to review and restructure their culture, tradition, custom and language in order to assert their community identity. Owing to all these conditions, the Bodos underlined the need of a platform created by a regional political party to fulfil their aspirations. The complexities within the elite communities of Assam had also marginalized the Bodos and considered them as a backward community by excluding them from various mainstream activities of the society. The dominant Bodo narrative is that after the annexation of the Bodo kingdom by the British, the Bodos have lost their political independence in their own territory. This has left the Bodos to become victims of exploitation, subjugation and marginalization and hence they were compelled to be assimilated with the upper-caste Assamese and face the consequences of being a marginalized community.

The probable cause of such exploitations and subjugations virtually points that the Bodo problem was essentially linked to the processes of assimilation and absorption with the then Assamese culture. However, it was not possible for the Bodos alone at that time to form a political party of their own. Owing to such circumstances, the Bodos joined the section of plain tribal groups of Assam and advocated an independent political expression

that would enable all the tribal to protect their tribal identity. Subsequently, the All Assam Plain Tribal League (AAPTL) was formed as a tribal political party in 1933 and this was the first political party exclusively comprising the leaders of the plain tribes of Assam. The Bodo-Kacharis, Rabhas, Mishings, Deuris and the Mutaks were the main tribal-community members of this political party. Pegu (2004) indicates that the AAPTL first participated in the Assam provincial assembly in 1937, which was held under the GOI Act of 1935. The Indian National Congress (INC) emerged victorious in the election, which formed the coalition government with the support of AAPTL. Rupnath Brahma of the AAPTL was the first eminent Bodo leader to be elected to the Assam provincial assembly (Deka, 2014). Hence, the formal entry of the tribal politics in Assam can be accounted to the formation of the AAPTL.

On 16 March 1940, AAPTL signed an agreement with the Saadullah Ministry in Assam.⁷ The agreement between the state government and AAPTL proposed for the inclusion of all the tribal people, irrespective of religion, under the category of tribal in the census of 1941, which the government conceded. Subsequently, there was a substantial increase in the numerical strength of the tribal population in the state. Owing to such political intuitions, the tribal league hereafter became an elite organization of all the plain tribes of Assam. This league became a platform where all the plain tribal could articulate

⁶ The new liberal intellectual conditions set-up by the British rule consisted of activities like issuing of the white paper in March 1933, setting up of new electorates on the basis of recommendations of the Simon Commission, selection of joint selection committee to consider government schemes of constitutional reforms in India, etc. In short, such initiatives resulted in the formation of the Government of India (GOI) Act, 1935 (Deka, 2014: 103).

⁷ The INC emerged as the single largest party in the 1937 Indian provincial elections in Assam. The INC, however, refused to form the constitutional government under the British Raj and the party joined the boycott of the pan-India policy to refrain from being under the British further. They instead became the main opposition party then. At this backdrop, the Governor approached the Assam Provincial Muslim League (APML) led by Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla, with the proposal to form the Assam government in April 1937. This was the first Saadullah Ministry whose tenure lasted only till September 1938. The Saadullah Ministry was formed again on 17 November 1939 and 24 August 1942. The periods were intervened with the Governor's rule in between the gaps (Deka, 2014).

their political aspirations along with the other tribal groups of Assam.

However, like other parts of India, the colonial rule was continuing in Assam. Subsequently, after the formation of the first tribal political party in Assam, the constitution-making body was being formed in central India around 1946. This constitution-forming body received the powers passed down by the British colonial rulers directly to the INC. Baruah (1999) argues that the Bodo politics received major applause when one of the Bodo leaders of AAPTL, Mr Dharani Dhar Basumatary, was selected as a member of the constitution-making body from Assam. His selection was made to represent the interest of the Bodo society in the making of the Indian Constitution. However, the selection of a Bodo leader created further division among the other tribal communities of the AAPTL and has paved the way for further suspicion within the group. Meanwhile, other tribal groups raised eyebrows concerning the credibility of AAPTL in creating a political space for tribes and moved away from the tribal league. As a result, the AAPTL lost its political credibility and relegated itself to merely a sociocultural organization in the post-Independence period.

BODO POLITICS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The post-Independence political environment was the result of amalgamation and dissolution of tribal parties in the initial stage. This marks the other phase of political mobilization among the Bodos. While the initial phase focused on land, the next phase focused on culture. Mochahary (2014 p. 77) narrates this phase as the vicious cycle of constantly deteriorating situation of the people, which opened up scope for a section of the educated Bodo people to come together in order to form a multiple community-centric organization. At this backdrop, different platforms were created by the Bodos under different

ideologies which includes organizations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam (PTCA), ABSU, Boro Security Force (BrSF) and National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB). In the post-independence period, the earlier political party made its presence in the form of literary organization, militant outfit, some student organization, social and political organization. Mochahry argues that these organizations were formed with a view to work for the welfare of the community and negotiate with the powers concerning sociocultural, economic, linguistics and political rights. Thus, we can find the presence of fragmented tribal political party in different forms in the post-colonial India.

The formation of the BSS in 1952 was a significant step used by the Bodos to articulate their distinct identity and this enabled the Bodos in ascertaining their political aspirations as well. As mentioned earlier, on the political front, the AAPTL transformed itself into a sociocultural organization as All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS) in 1954. From this transformation of AAPTL, a new political front known as Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in 1966 under the leadership of Samar Brahma Choudhury and Charan Narzary. The political environment of the Bodos took a new direction with the formation of the PTCA. The contestants from the PTCA initially contested as independent candidates till it gained full momentum as a regional Bodo political party. Henceforth, since its inception, the PTCA participated in the Assam assembly elections and won seats till the ABSU was formed.

After its formation, the PTCA focused on the political identity of the Bodos. The PTCA submitted a memorandum to the then President of India, Zakir Hussain, on 20 May 1967, demanding full autonomy for the plain tribal areas that spread over the northern tract of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts. Such move of the PTCA indicated the motive of protecting the tribal lands and saving the tribal from

economic exploitation by the non-tribals. This was the first instance where the question of autonomy surfaced among the ethnic groups (Bodos) of Assam. The Bodos considered that autonomy would end the political domination of non-tribals over tribals. Deka (2014, p. 110) argues that such an arrangement would also give tribals the opportunity to grow according to their genius and conserve their traditional culture and language.

The PTCA henceforth launched the Udayachal movement for a greater tribal land by keeping in mind the object of a separate autonomy. This demand resorted the central government to propose for an autonomous council in 1968. However, this proposal was not acceptable to all the Bodos. The refusal of the council then by some prominent Bodo leaders resulted in the fragmentation of the PTCA into two parts—PTCA (inclusive of any tribal communities of Assam) and PTCA (Bodo student union faction, wherein members were only from the Bodo community). The division was created due to various ideological differences among the Bodo leaders, wherein some of them were in favour of the council and others were not. Some members of the PTCA proposed armed struggle while some others were engaged in the formation of a new group by now. As a result of this political turbulence, new student politics, the ABSU emerged among the Bodos. Henceforth, ABSU became the prominent group which shaped the direction of Bodo identity politics.

In 1987, the ABSU redefined political movement of the Bodos by demanding the division of Assam on a 50-50 formula, rejecting the earlier PTCA's demand for Udayachal or greater tribal statehood. Along with the student organization, other armed groups also reinforced the identity issue of the Bodos. The demand of the student organization changed when, in a press release on 7 October 1988, the ABSU declared the demand for union territory with full-fledged statehood and more autonomy and political power, which Deka (2014) terms as the demand for Bodoland.

As seen in Table 12.3, the breakdown of the PTCA was an end to another tribal political party that had lasted for more than a decade. However, PTCA was successful in winning at least some political power in favour of the Bodos and sustaining their presence in the Assam assembly elections. The PTCA had contested for four consecutive assembly elections and won three to four seats on average in all the contested years, except the 1972 election (Table 12.3). The realm of the Bodos in the political sphere of Assam went down after the breakdown of the PTCA. Again, there was another rumour of the PTCA reflecting aspirations of the Bodos only, and thus, sidelining the other non-Bodo tribal leaders to move out of the group before the mass breakdown of PTCA. Even after the break down, the Bodos still contested the assembly elections but as independent candidates or on other political parties' tickets. Hence, there was an absence

Table 12.3 The Bodo Political Parties of Assam at a Glance (1972–2016)

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>Assembly Election Year</i>	<i>Seats Won</i>	<i>Total Seats in Assam</i>	<i>Percentage of Seats</i>
PTCA	1972	1	114	0.91
PTCA	1978	4	126	3.17
PTCA	1983	3	109	2.31
PTCA	1985	3	126	2.75
BPF	2006	11	126	8.73
BPF	2011	12	126	9.52
BPF	2016	12	126	9.52

Source: Government of India (1972, 1978, 1983, 1985, 2006, 2011, 2016).

of Bodo political party(ies) between 1985 and 2006.

The dominant Bodo narratives capture the reasons for the absence of any Bodo political party between 1985 and 2003. One prominent factor that emerged during my fieldwork pointed towards the process of assimilation of the tribal with the upper-caste Assamese. The Bodos were also involved rampantly in the process of getting converted or assimilated to the Assamese fold generally. The other factor that mattered at that time was the introduction of the Assam Accord of 1985. The Assam Accord significantly affected the political environment of the Bodos. After the breakdown of PTCA, the educated Bodos were also involved in another project, precisely the creation of a separate homeland for the Bodos—the Bodoland, which had diverted them away from the political sphere in Assam. The newly formed ABSU leaders moved from village to village as an act of mobilizing the people for creation of a separate state. Moreover, the continuing dissent among the leaders themselves had left the Bodos ambiguous and they could not stand unitedly to form a tribal or say, another Bodo political party.

However, after lots of drifts and trials, the BTC was formed in 2003, which was the result of the agreement between the central government, the state government and some influential Bodo leaders. The formation of the BTC was a boost to the political environment among the Bodos. As a consequence of various peace process in Assam, after more than a decade, a new political party of the Bodos, Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF), was formed on 20 April 2005. The creation of the BTAD has succeeded to create a rigorous political consciousness among the larger section of the Bodo people. The BTAD has also provided a significant political autonomy to at least some sections of the Bodo leaders like the Bodoland's Progressive Front (BPF), the Ex-BLT cadres and their supporters in particular. The creation of the BTAD has also brought forward new political dimension in the

Bodoland movement. The Bodoland movement started afresh via a conference held in Mazbath in 2010 by reviewing the ideologies associated with the movement. The Bodoland movement was by now taken up to the national capital. The ABSU declared to continue the movement for a separate state even after separate territorial council was carved out of Assam for the Bodos by considering issues faced by the Bodo people such as identity crisis, cultural distinctiveness, growing erosion of community rights over resources, dispossession, marginalization and deprivation of tribal communities, sociopolitical and economic marginalization, and land alienation and massive migrants from outside.

TRIBAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN BTAD

In a democratic state, political parties play significant role in smooth functioning of the democracy. The articulation of people's interest in the election process and the clustering of interest for the same among the masses become the prime activity of the political parties. The political parties enable the people to take part in the activities of the government directly or indirectly. The political parties establish relations with their supporters and sympathizers which, in the long run, play a very vital role in the election process. By establishing such direct and intimate contacts, the aspirations regarding various developmental programmes of social reconstruction and welfare of the people are incorporated in the election manifestos to prove that their relations with people are not vague. Different political parties put up a competition among each other even in their manifestos so that they can capture more sympathy and support of the masses and win the elections.

Multiparty system exists in the Indian political system and there are number of parties competing for seats. In India, it is possible even for one person to float a party very easily and

the supporters can be attracted at a later period. Barker (1953) argues that there is a necessity of political party to be existent and also the operation of modern political system. Both of these entities provide indispensable link between people and the working representatives of the government. It is also necessary for a political party to exist because people cannot govern themselves in a free manner unless they are given the freedom to choose between different candidates whom they consider as their leaders. The choice of the people may, however, differ due to different factors like the manifestos, policies, sympathizing aspect, local influence, support or other factors. The citizens are, thus, given the alternative choices before them by different political parties where they exercise their right of freedom of choice in choosing their preferable candidates. In this regard, Barker argues that the choice of a citizen is the root of democracy. He substantiates his argument by saying,

The 'citizens', as it may be called, is the tap-root of democracy. I must be free to choose if I am to have a free government, and if I am to free to choose I must have an alternative before me—the alternative offered to me by different political parties. (Barker, 1953, p. 8)

Political party is, however, an association organized in support of some principles or policies by constitutional means. The political parties strive to make the contributing factor for government. (MacIver, 1955, p. 396). He further argues that without party organizations, there can be no unified statement of principles, no orderly evolution policy and no regular resort to the constitutional devices of parliamentary elections, nor, of course, any recognized institution by means of which a party can seek to gain or to maintain power (MacIver, 1955, p. 398). Fights for important position in the autonomy and dissent among the party and association members have led to the origin of some regional political as well as other associations in the BTAD region of Assam as well. Pertaining to the same, the history of electoral politics among the Bodos

witnessed the birth of different political parties, which are described in the following paragraph.

BPPF

The state election commission declared the council election for BTC on 13 May 2005, after the provisional functioning of the council for a period of one year. On declaration of the election in BTC, the leaders of the ABSU and the Ex-BLT Welfare Association decided to form a political party to contest in the election. On 12 April 2005, 16 membered convenor's committee gathered at the Ganga cinema hall in Kokrajhar, Assam, before forming the government. This meeting was held with a view to form a political party. As a result, BPPF was to be formed on 20 April 2005. But BPPF could not be formed on the specified date because as per the announcement of the state election commission, nominations had to be filed by 19th April 2005. Hence, owing to such factors, the first election of the council was contested by the Bodo politicians as independent candidates.

Finally, the BPPF was considered to be informally formed on 20 April 2005. The formation of BPPF gave birth to a new political party of the Bodos. When the party was formed, the new party had two main working committees: the executive committee and the policy-making committee. The executive committee had 11 members with Rabiram Narzary as the president and Chandan Brahma and Baktar Ali Ahmed as the vice-presidents. Emmanuel Mushahary became the secretary of the committee and Hemendra Nath Brahma the general secretary of the executive committee. Other leaders such as Sobharam Brahma, Jagadish Sarkar, Lwmsrao Daimary, Niren Roy, Badan Hasda and Ripon Daimary remained as members of committee. On the other hand, the policy-making committee of BPPF had mainly four members in total with Hagrama Mohilary and Pramila Rani Brahma as the convenors. Bodo political leaders like

Sansuma Khungur Bwiswmutiary and Urkhao Gwra Brahma remained as members of the committee along with other 10 member representatives from each of the four districts.

This division of the party members brought about radical thinking in the minds of the newly elected Bodo political leaders. Different scholars studying the electoral process in BTAD debate upon this issue in different ways. According to Daimary (2015, p. 8), 'The student union, particularly the ABSU, being overground, had advantage to play much more role in the new dimension of new politics.' While some others like Karjie (2017) opine that the architect of BTC, Mr Hagrama Mohilary was sidelined by the BPPF on the pretext of being new to politics and the party hesitated to elect Mohilary as the chief of BTC. In general, the student body considered the Ex-BLT members to be relatively new to politics in comparison to them. The ABSU claims to have been in the politics since the inception of the student body in 1967. Also, the student leaders being more learned and experienced did not consider equalizing the representation of the interests of the underground group (Ex-BLT) with other intellectuals. It was this thinking that formed the main cause of split within the newly born regional party. Thus, the negligence of some Bodo leaders in the party structure of the BPPF led to the fragmentation of the party into two factions: BPPF (Hagrama faction)—BPPF(H), led by Ex-BLT chief Hagrama Mohilary and his cadres—and BPPF (Rabiram faction)—BPPF(R), led by former ABSU leader Rabiram Narzary. On account of this split in the regional party, a condition of political disorganization prevailed in the BTAD region for a significant period of time.

The first council election in BTC took place on 13 May 2005. This was a significant event in the political discourse of the BTAD. BPPF was an amalgamation of leaders from both ABSU and Ex-BLT leaders. In the first election of the BTC, although the BPPF(H) candidates contested independently, out of

40 seats, the party won 39 seats losing just 1 seat to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Interestingly, only the candidates who earlier belonged to the BLT or BPPF(H) won the election. On the other hand, BPPF(R) could not even win a single seat. This political development resulted in the shifting of support base from the BPPF(R) to the other faction under Mohilary. The new BTC government was thus formed after rigorous choice of making the architect of BTC, Mr Hagrama Mohilary as the chief of the BTC. This significant turn in the political history of the Bodos also brought the erstwhile new amalgamated regional party to an end and witnessed the new dimension of power politics in BTAD for the first time.

BPF

The signatory faction of the Ex-BLT cadres was mostly dissatisfied since the formation of the BPPF. As a result, Mr Hagrama Mohilary along with the support of other Members of Council of Legislative Assembly (MCLAs) members decided to form a new party. Thus, a new party, the BPF, was formed under the leadership of Mr Hagrama Mohilary with the mission and vision to bring uniform political sovereignty. Accordingly, a big political convention took place in Debargaon on 4–5 December 2005 to formally declare the formation of the new party. Mr Hagram Mohilary, Mr Emmanuel Moshahary and Mr Khampa Borgoyary became the president, general secretary and spokesperson of the party, respectively.

The BPF was formed with certain mission and vision associated not only with the Bodos but also with other communities living within BTAD. The main ideology of BPF includes:

1. Administering the BTAD and Assam as a whole through the principles of democracy
2. Working for the elimination of poverty and the upliftment of the subjugated people living in BTAD and Assam as well

3. Working for the strengthening of Indian nationalism by providing due respect to the identities of all the sections of people
4. Striving for the all-round development of the people of BTAD as well as Assam.

Hence, keeping at par with the ideology of the party, the BPF started off its work in full swing with certain aims and objectives. The aims and objectives of the party were—working for sovereignty and integrity of the country; political rights, economic development and social justice to all irrespective of any community; making BTC a model and self-sufficient by influencing the government both at the central and the state level to explore the abundant natural resources like water, forest, minerals and human resources; etc. The party also had the objective of working for free nationalism detaching the community from the prejudices of castes, religions and languages to stand by the principles of cooperation, trust, tolerance, fraternity and coexistence. The party also aimed to bring about reforms in the field of education, to implement the Bodo Accord of 2003 and seek cooperation of both the central and state government in the fair running of the territorial council. Hence, there was support from all communities to the BPF party (Daimary, 2015).

United People's Party (UPP)

In 2015, the UPP was formed. This party was formed to contest against the BPF in the MCLA election. The former Rajya Sabha MP and ex-President of ABSU, Mr Urkhao Gwra Brahma became the president and Mr Pradip Daimary, an ex-member of BPF, the general secretary. In other words, it can be said that this party is the political wing of the ABSU and it comprises of many former ABSU leaders and activists. Karjie (2017, p. 774) terms the UPP as the offset of the earlier BPPF. The party emerged with a promise to provide good governance. The announcement of the

formation of the UPP was made on 6 August 2015 at a special convention held by the People's Coordination for Democratic Rights (PCDR) in Dotoma. However, during the formative stage, the party could not be fully active as it was not able to gather support. The UPP stood as a feeble opponent in comparison to the political negotiation of the ruling party of BPF with the people of BTC.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election of Assam saw the emergence of UPP with some broader and new manifestos. The party modified its name to United People's Party-Liberal (UPP-L) before the Lok Sabha election of 2019. The UPP-L emerged with some new agendas like revamping existing scheduled caste cell of the party and forming of other backward classes (OBC) cell and many others as such (NE Now, May 2019). Here again, Urkhao Gwra Brahma had contested as the candidate for UPP from the ST constituency of Kokrajhar.

PCDR

The PCDR is a conglomeration of various political and non-political parties present in BTAD. The formation of the PCDR was announced ahead of the 2016 Assam assembly election. The party had far reaching impact on the politics in the Bodo belt which was till then dominated by the BPF. It was found out from the narratives of some of the senior party members that the PCDR party was formed by uniting the regional political parties such as the BPPF and United Democratic People's Front. According to one of the ABSU activists, the PCDR is not a political body, rather it is a non-political body formed by the Bodos to bridge various committees present in BTAD. However, the UPP stands as a newly formed regional political party and was structured to act and work as the voice of the Bodo people. As per the report of a journalist, UPP President U. G. Brahma mentions that the UPP party is a product of the people's voice and it has clear ideology which would work for the welfare

of the people irrespective of caste, creed and religion (Daimary, 2015, p. 7). The PCDR was backed by ABSU and it contested in the BTC election of 2015. The PCDR gave a tough contest to the ruling BPF. It won seven seats in the election and the PCDR was a close competitor in other seats.

ELECTORAL POLITICS IN BTAD

The formation of the BTC became a new breeding ground for many aspiring politicians. There was also the emergence of some new and local political parties such as BPF, PCDR and UPP erupting among the Bodos in the BTAD region. The area which comes under the jurisdiction of the BTC government is called the BTAD region. The BTAD comprises four districts of Assam namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. However, in the recent elections, the national parties were also seen participating remarkably in the council and assembly elections. The national parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and INC contested the council and assembly elections fully or partially within the territorial extent. This nature signifies the nation's urge to set a foothold in the electoral domain of the BTAD, thus, inviting perpetual haul to the course of electoral politics in BTAD.

The BTC is entitled with 40 constituencies under its purview. Out of 40 seats, 30 seats are reserved for contesting among the ST (P) candidates, 5 seats are reserved for non-tribal candidates and 5 are reserved for General category candidates. In the recent decades, the BTC has undergone three subsequent elections. Initially when BTC was formed in 2003, there was no election immediately, rather it was administered in ad hoc basis by BPPF party formed by former BLT cadets and the ABSU leaders. An interim government had, thus, administered the council for around one and half year till the elections were finally conducted in 2005.

The first council election was a significant one in the political history of the Bodos. The newly emerged political governance faced various turfs and trials owing to the selection of the council chief of the BTAD. This tussle amongst the members of erstwhile BPPF resulted in splitting the newly formed political party into two factions even before election could take place. Hence, 2005 council election was contested without formal registration of any regional political party and the former BPPF was split into BPPF(H) and BPPF(R). BPPF(H) was led by Ex-BLT chief Hagrama Mohilary and BPPF(R) was led by former ABSU leader Rabiram Narzary. The main reason for the split was resultant of the attempt to sideline the chief architect of BTAD, Mr Hagrama Mohilary himself.

The BTC's first election was conducted on 3 May 2005 abiding by the law and order of the election commission of India. The election result paved the way for the victory of the BPPF(H), which won 39 out of 40 contested seats. All these 39 MCLA were contested successfully by the Ex-BLT cadets. The BPPF(R), however, failed to win any seats in the first election with its leader also losing himself. Surprisingly, however, the AGP could win one seat from Mudwibari constituency and thereby representing one MCLA to the new assembly. Even though AGP did not perform well in the later years, yet it had marked its presence in the very first council election unlike the BPPF(R). On 5 December 2005, a new political party, the BPF, was formed under the guidance and leadership of the council chief Hagrama Mohilary. With the formation of BPF, the BPPF(H) was formally dissolved.

The second council election took place on 19 May 2010. Unlike the first council election, the 2010 election witnessed a neck to neck competition under the aegis of independent candidates and several political parties registering for the same. The election also witnessed several national and regional political parties taking part in the electoral battle of

2010 in BTAD (Table 12.4). There was moderate violence erupting in some places due to the rivalry between regional parties. The BPF party contested in all the 40 constituencies and won 31 seats and formed the government. However, BPF could not bring much prominence unlike the first election. National parties such as the INC and BJP, and other state political parties such as the AGP, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Sanmilita Janagosthiya Aikya Mancha (SJAM) and many others also contested the election. The INC contested in 23 constituencies of the 40 and won only three seats. Four seats were successfully contested by the independent and one seat by an AIUDF candidate.

The exit polls had, however, predicted a 100 per cent win to the BPF party but the result

showed only 77.50 per cent. But the BPF was still in majority and they managed to form the government for the second time consecutively. Of late, the environment of electoral politics in BTAD has witnessed an undeniable and marked changes. This has been the fallout of ABSU's rigorous mobilizations and influential sympathy towards the demand for a separate state of Bodoland. Owing to such mobilization and growing influence of the ABSU, the PCDR emerged as a strong political opponent to the BPF in the BTC election of 2015.

The council election of 2015 created havoc among the ruling BPF leaders. As Table 12.4 indicates that when we compare the contested and victorious seats, the BPF could cater only 20 seats in this election. It suffered a major setback as their number reduced from 39 in 2005

Table 12.4 Members of the BTC and Their Portfolios between 2005–2010, Assam

<i>Sl No.</i>	<i>Designation</i>	<i>Name of Member</i>	<i>Department and Portfolio Allocated</i>
1	Chief of BTC	Mr Hagrama Mohilary	Public work department, panchayat and rural raj development, welfare of plain tribal and backward class and departments not allowed to other executive members
2	Deputy chief of BTC	Mr Kampha Borgoyari	Planning and development, forest, tourism, sericulture, land and land revenue
3	Executive member	Mr Derhasat Basumatary	Flood control, public health engineering
4	Executive member	Mr Hitesh Basumatary	Irrigation, handloom and textile, sports and youth welfare
5	Executive member	Mr Sobharam Basumatary	Social welfare, animal husbandry and veterinary
6	Executive member	Mr Emanuel Muchahary	Education, health and family welfare
7	Executive member	Mr Mitharam Basumatary	Agriculture, weights and measures
8	Executive member	Mr Lwmsrao Daimary	Printing and stationary, food and civil supplies, publicity and public relations
9	Executive member	Mr Shyam Sundi	Relief and rehabilitation, labour and employment, soil conservation
10	Executive member	Mr Lakhiram Tudu	Fishery, market and fairs
11	Executive member	Mr Maheshwar Basumatary	Urban development, town and country planning, municipal corporation, improvement of trust, district boards and local authorities, cultural affairs
12	Executive member	Mr Mono Kr. Brahma	Welfare of plain tribal and backward class (state plan), transport, excise
13	Executive member	Mr Singha Ram Boro	Cooperation, library services, museum and archaeology
14	Executive member	Mr Buddha Narzary	Industry, lottery, cinema and dramatic performance

Source: Executive Council of BTC, 2010.

election to 31 in 2011 election and then to 20 seats in the 2015 council election. Regardless of the lesser council assembly seats, the BPF again managed to form the government for the third year consecutively in 2015 with the support of the independent candidates. The main competitors for the ruling BPF were PCDR, SJAM and AIUDF. The 2015 election marked the opening success for the ABSU-backed political party, PCDR, which won seven seats. The SJAM, AIUDF, Anaboro Suraksha Samiti and BJP won three, four, two and one seats, respectively. Thus, 2015 election witnessed the dispersion, in other words, the rattling down of the otherwise strong Bodo regional party and stiff competition among the political parties.

ASSAM ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN BTAD AREA

Out of 126 assembly constituencies in Assam, largely, a total of 28 constituencies fall within the territorial boundary of BTC. All these assembly constituencies, however, do not solely comprise BTAD region, rather some constituencies also have some villages, which do not fall under the territorial ambit of BTC. Out of 28 assembly constituencies, 8 constituencies are solely spread over the villages that exclusively come under the BTAD region. On the other hand, the rest 20 constituencies cover the villages from both BTAD and non-BTAD region. The eight constituencies which strictly fall under the purview of the BTC government are Chapagurii, East Kokrajhar, Mazbat, Sidli, Panery, Tamulpur, Udalguri and West Kokrajhar. Out of these eight constituencies, four constituencies—Chapagurii, East Kokrajhar, Sidli, and West Kokrajhar—are reserved for the tribal communities. The other 20 constituencies that partly encompasses BTAD region are Barama, Barchalaa, Bhabinipur, Bijni, Bongaigaon, Dolgaon, East Bilasipara, Gauripur, Golokganj, Gossaigaon,

Kalaigaon, Kamalpur, Mongoldoi, Nalbari, North Abhayapuri, Patacharkuchi, Rangia, Sipajhar, Sorbhog and West Bilasipara.

The regional party, BPF, debuted during the 2006 assembly election right after its major victory in the council election of 2005. The campaigning of BPF's first entry into the Assam election had been carried out without any conflicts. This was the first time a purely Bodo political party participated in the assembly election of Assam. Even though PTCA had taken part earlier, it was, however, considered to be a party of all the plain tribes of Assam. BPF, in its inception, was a purely Bodo political party. However, later on, the BPF had members from other communities as well who were from tribal as well as non-tribal communities. The BPF won 11 seats in its debut to the Assam assembly election in 2006. As the INC was 53 short of majority to form the government in 2006, the BPF extended its support to the INC. As a result, the BPF managed to bargain for cabinet ministerial seat in the Tarun Gogoi-led INC government in the state. The 2006 election also witnessed the victory of the BJP in 10 assembly constituencies. The offshoot party of Assam movement, the AGP, emerged victorious in 24 seats in 2006 election.

The AIUDF also won 10 seats in its debut election of 2006. It has been alleged that the AIUDF gathered communal sentiments and played the game of minority politics. This was the main factor that helped the AIUDF to win such a huge number of votes in its debut election. The formation of a minority party led to the fragmentation of the otherwise compounded society of Assam. The alarming win of the AIUDF led many intellectuals and political analysts to rethink the various political tides that could play cards in winning or changing the game of election. However, the growing of new parties in Assam led to the declining of old parties, such as the Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India—Marxist, Nationalist Congress Party, etc., in the state politics of Assam.

The assembly election of 2011 continued the victory trend of 2006. The INC had an overwhelming landslide victory with a total of 78 seats. The BPF, former ally of the INC, managed to add one more seat, which took it to the final tally of 12 seats. The BPF with its 12 MLAs joined hands with the INC again for the second time to form the government. The INC could have formed the government on its own as the party secured the magic number this time on its own. However, the party continued its ally with the BPF and, in this term, the INC offered only one cabinet ministerial berth to the BPF.

The tenure of 2011 election, however, witnessed many rifts between political parties. The INC in the state experienced internal fraction between the two significant leaders of INC—the chief minister, Tarun Gogoi and Himanta Biswas Sharma. The INC ally BPF also had some differences with the ruling party and eventually by the end of the tenure, the BPF began to withdraw its support to the ruling party. During this time, the BTAD region also witnessed growing scams, corruption and conflicts. The ruling party seemed to have mishandled this issue, which indicated

the early sign of potential electoral outcome of the 2016 state assembly election.

By 2014, India was already filled with the magic forecasted by Narendra Modi in the history of Indian politics. This magic also had its implications in the northeastern states and Assam was the first state to witness the same. The BJP had an alarming rise in the number of seats it won. There was a significant rise in the final tally of the BJP from merely 5 seats in 2011 to 60 in 2016 assembly election. By now, the BPF had changed its ally from the INC to the BJP and it secured equal term of 12 seats in 2016 assembly election as well. The AGP too had entered into the pre-poll alliance with the BJP and secured 14 assembly seats. Notably, the BPF maintained its consistency in terms of winning the seats since its debut to the state election. No doubt they had shifted their ally from the INC to the BJP; this could be one of the calculated moves to sustain and retain the party's significance in the state.

Table 12.6 depicts the seat sharing of various political parties that contested the 2011 and 2016 assembly elections. The result of the 2016 assembly election indicates the gradual declining of the INC from 78 seats in 2011

Table 12.5 Political Parties in BTAD Elections, Assam

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>2010 Election</i>		<i>2015 Election</i>	
	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>
BPF	40	31	40	20
BPPF	26	1	–	–
PCDR	–	–	40	7
IND	40	4	40	3
INC	23	3	40	–
AIUDF	–	–	8	4
UDPF	24	1	–	–
AGP	9	0	6	0
CPI (M)	6	0	7	0
AITC	3	0	–	–
SJAM	–	–	9	3
Anaboro Suraksha Samiti	–	–	9	3

Source: Government of Assam (2010, 2015).

Table 12.6 Assam State Assembly Election Result, 2016

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>2011</i>		<i>2016</i>		<i>Votes share (in %)</i>	
	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Won</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2016</i>
INC	126	78	122	26	78.81	20.63
BJP	120	5	89	60	23.56	71.42
AGP	104	10	14	8	36.01	58.33
BPF	29	12	13	12	31.29	75
AIUDF	78	18	74	13	32.44	17.56
CPI	17	0	19	0	0	0
CPM	17	0	19	0	0	0
RJD	–	–	12	0	–	0
JD	–	–	12	1	–	0
UPP	–	–	4	0	–	0
RJAM	–	–	1	0	–	0
IND	263	2	126	1	21.69	1

Source: Government of India (2011, 2016).

to 26 in 2016, with a vote share of 20.63 per cent in 2016 (Table 12.6). The decline of INC has also been witnessed at the centre during the 2014 Lok Sabha election. In BTAD, the INC had formed a new ally with the UPP, the major rival of BPF in the region. As already discussed in the earlier part of the chapter, the UPP emerged as the masterpiece of Mr Urkhao Gwra Brahma, former MP of the Rajya Sabha. The pre-poll alliance between the INC and the UPP in BTAD was, however, not welcomed warmly by the people of the region. Despite that, this ally was looked upon as some evil foreplay of politics by some political analysts and intellectuals (Basumatary, 2018, p. 221). This ally rather faced criticism at many grounds by the public and was overlooked as another cheap game of politics. On the other hand, people were already motivated to bring down the governance of INC in Assam, like the centre, owing to the rising Modi wave. Owing to such circumstances, the UPP could not win even one seat in the state assembly election of 2016. The INC, however, managed to retain 26 seats, but this was not a sufficient number to form the government. The Modi magic had by then already engulfed the people of Assam and it helped the BJP to have a record victory

with 60 seats for the first time in the political history of Assam. In addition, the pre-poll alliance of the BJP with the AGP and other tribal parties such as the BPF, Rabha Jatiya Aikya Manch (RJAM) and Tiwa Jatiya Aikya Manch (TJAM) helped the BJP to secure assembly seats. The BJP formed the coalition government with its pre-poll alliance partners, the AGP and the BPF, for the first time in the political history of Assam. Needless to mention that other pre-poll alliance partners of the BJP, RJAM and TJAM that had contested one seat each, did not record any victory in 2016 assembly election.

CONCLUSION

Over the period, Bodo politics has been revolving around various issues related to their backwardness, political instability or insecurity, unchecked illegal influx, land rights, identity crisis, etc. These political issues were essentially addressed in terms of the movement for a separate state of Bodoland and this movement was noteworthy in the regions for the last five decades.

The political environment in the BTAD region has become more visible after the creation of the BTC. The creation of the council, however, has brought about a change in the political history of Assam by creating new political opportunities for the Bodo tribal leaders. With the entry of BPF in the Assam politics, the entry of a tribal Bodo party can at least be recognized by the people of Assam now. However, the regional parties are still in its dormant form and so they have to think and rethink and develop well designed strategies to sustain themselves first and make the people feel the importance of the party in the state. This potpourri act of the party has caught the eyes of the people from other states as well. The BTC, since its inception, has been ruled by the BPF, no doubt owing to the captivating efforts of its leader Hagrama Basumatary. The BPF has been able to sustain its domain in BTAD due to the absence of any practicable substitute political party. However, the party has also met at least some of the expectations of the people, and thereby it has been able to sustain its stronghold in the territorial council, which also has greater implications over state politics in Assam.

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