

VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN BTAD ELECTIONS

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Abstract: The behaviour of people belonging to different caste, class, religion and sex are totally different while casting votes. It also differs from place to place. Understanding voters behaviour can explain how and why decisions were made either by public decision-makers, which has been a central concern for political scientists, or by electorate. To interpret voting behaviour, expertise of both political science and psychology are necessary and thus the requirement of political psychology emerges. In the present study, an attempt has been made to analyze the voting behaviour of the people of BTAD area in the last elections from the 2004 to 2016 considering the important political developments that have taken place in the BTAD after its formation in 2003. Voting behaviour of the people of BTAD area is not found to be static; rather it changes almost in all elections.

Keywords: Voting, Election, Politics, BTAD

INTRODUCTION:

The concept of voting behaviour covers a vast area of election process such as examination of voting records, compilation of voting statistics and computation of electoral shift. So, it is treated as a sub-field or considered to be a sub area of political behaviour. In the domain of Political Science study of voting behaviour constitutes a separate field of study and formal name "psephology" is given to this branch of Political Science.

Actually voting behaviour is the most important factor in election. The voting behaviour also fathoms the degree of rationality of a voter. The voting behaviour of different people depends on the different socio-economic, political and cultural factors. Voting behaviour of all the people is not uniform. The study of political psychology helps the voters to understand the different mechanisms of election and voting. Participation in the decision-making process, exercising the right of franchise, casting votes and choosing leaders -- all these activities serve to gratify the voters. Sense of self esteem prevails upon the right-thinking voters while exercising own right to vote. Under a given socio-political environment, the behaviour of the voters in electing public representatives obviously becomes a process of making a choice from among different options. Here, different contestants are the options available to the voters for making own choice.

The importance of the study of voting behaviour is not only important for understanding the voting attitudes of the people of a particular society, but also important for understanding the whole socio-political structure of that society. Voting behaviour is not only an attitude of casting vote in favour of a particular candidate of one's choice, but it is the only way of practicing the ultimate power of a citizen in case of political decision-making procedure of one's country. For analyzing the voting behaviour of a class of people, their socio-economic background, political, educational and cultural status should be understood clearly.

Homogeneity in a population ensures peace and harmony in a place. On the other hand, heterogeneity in population tends to give rise problems in a place. As the BTAD also abodes non-Bodos comprising various ethnic groups and communities along with mainstream Bodos, the tendency is to arise problem on various counts. Conflict in ethnicities and clashes of interests has become the regular feature. It has almost become the rule with regard to demography of the territory. They take chance to ventilate their pleasure and displeasure when occasions arise. The same determines the voting behaviour of the electorate during the periodic elections held time to time --- be it election to territorial Assembly, State assembly or national Parliament.

Statement of the Problem:-

The Bodoland Territorial Areas District [BTAD] is quite new a political arrangement in the political history of India. So to say, it is not a normal feature in the Constitution of the country. It has been created through amendment of the existing Sixth Schedule provisions in the constitution.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution is generally meant for the hill areas of the north-east. But so as to help pacify the Bodos agitating for a separate State, the same has been made applicable to the Assam plains also. Thus the BTAD is an aberration in the Constitution of India as being an amended provision.

Although the BTAD has been created for the Bodos, no longer it has remained for the Bodos only. As the Bodos are exercising territorial autonomy, all residing within the Bodoland territory now possess *locus standi* in the system. Hence the non-Bodos even have become stakeholder in the BTAD. They are beginning to consider the BTAD as their own and now vie for its wellbeing.

As the BTAD happen to give abode to non-Bodos even and they happen to outnumber the Bodos, the assertions and demands on the part of the non-Bodos have increased day by day. Their expectation from the BTAD rule is increasing out of proportion which the BTC is not in a position to fulfil. Hence problems have arisen on many counts which need due attention and careful handling.

Importance of the Study:-

Territorial Autonomy as being applied in administration of the BTAD territory is a novel concept in the field of Political Science. It is being tested for the first time in the country applying in the case of BTAD. Hence the new political arrangement of novel type need due study on the part of research scholars.

The present BTAD has been created through amendment of the existing provisions in the Constitution of the country. The existing Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was meant for the hill areas of the north-east. But now through amendment effected with regard to the BTAD it has been made applicable to the Assam plains also.

As the BTAD gives abode to the Bodos and non-Bodos both, a tug of war is sure to take place in the domain of practical politics. Continued flow of migrants has outnumbered the Bodos even. This has given rise to a situation in which the non-Bodos have turned so assertive and demanding.

The peculiar situation in the politics of BTAD demands a proper study, lest it shall help throw light on the ongoing problems in the BTAD territory. This shall remain as precedence in case such territorial autonomy is offered to other people in near future. This shall go a long way in giving clue and providing solutions to the problems those might arise in times to come.

Area of Study: - The area of the study is the voting behaviour only with regard to the electorate of the BTAD area within the State of Assam in India. Hence territorial jurisdiction of this study is limited to the Bodoland territory popular as BTAD as enshrined in the Constitution of India under the Sixth Schedule. Other geographical areas find mention only as reference as and when necessity arises. After all, this may be considered as a Case Study of voting behaviour in the BTAD territory.

Objectives of the study:

1. To find out the causes of changing pattern of voting behaviour in the BTAD area.
2. To study about the possible causes of continuous support base of BPF – the ruling party.

Methodology: The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Data for the study have been collected from published sources available with the District Election Offices and other government agencies.

Limitations in the Study: - As stated above, the BTAD is a quite new type of experiment in the domain of Political Science. As the thing itself is new, no much source material can be gathered with regard to this study. Also when comments are solicited from enlightened folk, they cannot express their feeling in a desirable way. Hence almost everything has to be started anew with own initiatives. These are some of the acute problem those have to be confronted during the study.

Political problems of BTAD:

NDFB [Progressive]: National Democratic Front of Bodoland [NDFB] earlier known as Boro Security Force [BSF] was founded in the year 1983 its objective being the creation of separate sovereign state of **Bodoland** curving out of the country of India. It believed in armed struggle and carried forward relentlessly so as to help realize its dream. But in the year 2005 it declared a unilateral ceasefire and came forward for negotiation to help bring about a solution to Boroland tangle.

Difference cropped up with Ranjan Daimary, the founder president of the organization. Dhiren Boro alias B. Sungthagra and Gobindo Basumatary alias B. Swmkhwr were selected as the president and General Secretary of the breakaway faction. Ranjan Dwimary alias D. R. Nabla agreed to participate in the talks after his arrest in Bangladesh. There had been 27 rounds of talks with the Centre so far, 12 rounds being in political level. Other rounds were held at the official's level. The last round of talks was held on 16th April, 2017. Rajnath Singh – the Union Home Minister, Sarbananda Sonowal – the Chief Minister of Assam and Chandramohan Patowary – a Minister of Assam cabinet were present in the last round of talks.

Designated camps have been erected in Kokrajhar, Baksa and Udalguri so as to help give abode to the NDFB militants in ceasefire. Around 1200 leaders and cadres, 836 are getting stipends. The Central Government has been assuring that talks would continue. But nothing positive is coming out so far. Solution to the Bodoland tangle has been kept postponing time and again.

BPF: The ex-BLT and ex-ABSU leaders and the Bodo intellectuals felt the necessity of a political party to run the administration of the BTAD. They along with social activists and public gave birth to the Bodoland People Progressive Front [BPPF] on 13th April, 2005. Mr. Rabiram Naezary, ex-ABSU president became the president and Mr. Hemendra Nath Brahma was selected as General Secretary.

But as the first elections to the Bodoland Territorial Council, took place the BPPF got landslide majority. When the BPPF was about to form the territorial Government, the political office-bearers did not intend to elect Hagrama Mahilary – the chief architect of BTC as its chief. On the pretext of being fresh in politics they tried to sideline him and take the driver's post for itself.

Smelling foul, chairman of BLT Hagrama Mahilary broke away from the mainstream BPPF and formed the Bodoland People's Front as the separate political party. Majority of Member Councillors of the BTC happened to be former BLT cadres and they rallied round Hagrama Mahilary. Thus he was able to free himself from the clutch of political power mongers and could run the B.T.C. according to his own vision and mission.

ABSU: The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was founded in 1967. First it used to work side by side of the Plain Tribals Council of Assam political party and kept in constant touch with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Virtually it used to provide manpower to the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the PTCA in times of need with regard to implementation of scheduled programmes.

In 1987 ABSU snatched away the reign of mass-movement for a separate State and demanded for the creation of separate state of BODOLAND within the Indian Union. The six-year long vigorous mass-movement led to the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council area within the State of Assam itself as a result of the BODO ACCORD signed in 1993. But as the arrangement of B.A.C. could not satisfy the political urge of the Bodo people, ABSU denounced the BAC and started its movement afresh in 1996. In the same year the BLT was founded. The new BODO ACCORD was signed in 2003 and the present Bodoland Territorial Council got its birth. The ABSU could not be satisfied with the territorial autonomy just and has resolved to start Bodoland Movement afresh in its Mazbat Conference in 2010. The mass-movement for separate BODOLAND is still going on.

The ongoing ABSU Movement for separate state Bodoland fails to catch the imagination of the people of BTAD. Out of the total population of the BTAD less than half are the Bodos and non-tribal people are majority whereas the 30 seats are reserved for the Bodo or plain tribal's. So, there is dissatisfaction in the minds of the non-Bodo / non-tribal population and they are demanding for the exclusion of their areas from the BTAD. Moreover, NDFB (P) and its wing PJACBM fail to attract the people for Bodoland demand for its tract record of terrorist and disruptive activities. The winning of election by Mr. Naba Kumar Sarania in the last Lok Sabha election with unprecedented and huge margin is the glaring example of this feeling of surcharge.

BSU: This is the Bodoland Students' Union. It is a student wing of the BPF political party. This was formed to curb the influence of the powerful ABSU in the BTAD area. To become ABSU member a person must be a Bodo student, but to become a BSU member any person belonging to any community living within the BTAD area can become a member of this students' organization.

But this students' organization could not rise to the expected level. As it is working as wing of a political party, it is being looked with suspicion. Its capability of delivering good to the student community is being doubted. Its existence itself is found very much dependent upon the ruling BPF party.

For this is credential itself is being question. Not quite a few circles, have not hesitated to condemn its lackadaisical attitude to the problems of the common people. As it is functioning taking up programmes keeping in tune of the ruling party, its programmes could not draw participation from the common people.

UPP: This is the United People's Party, a political party working like a political wing of ABSU mainly comprising of the former ABSU leaders and activists. This may be called an offshoot of earlier BPPF and the conglomerate PCDR formed so as to check political advance of Hagrama Mahilary led ruling party BPF.

But this new party could not be effective as it could not gather support of the mass people to the tune of the ruling BPF. As its leaders lack the charisma as of Hagrama Mahilary who rose to the present position from a humble extremist cadre. Its leadership is a *hotchpotch* type, drawn from all shades of people with differing background. Of course, it must be admitted frankly that the opposition leaders lack the capacity of political manoeuvring as that of the ruling BPF.

At present it is being led by Urkhao Gwra Brahma – former president of All Bodo Students' Union and former M.P. of Rajya Sabha. While as PCDR they could win 7 seats in the last BTC election, it could not win a single seat in the last Assam Assembly election.

Problem of ruling BPF:-

The excessive appeasement policy of BPF towards Muslim community is costing the popularity of the ruling Bodoland People's Front political party. For this acceptability of the political party also is fast eroding. As a wave anti-Bangladeshi and anti-Hindu immigrants is on in the State, its internal policy is being looked down upon by the right-thinking people and individuals.

Land alienation from the hands of indigenous tribal people to the non-tribal people in BTAD is being resented by all individuals and organizations. It has brought about the change of demography beyond recognition. Illegal migrants are creating internal disturbances and posing a threat to the sovereignty of India. But now the BPF also appears to have been giving upper hand to Muslim population with an ulterior motive of maintaining them as 'vote bank'.

The other problems are common to all. Rampant corruption is being alleged with regard to utilization of the development funds flowing from the Centre. Moreover, funds from State Budgetary allocations also are not being utilized properly. Developmental schemes and projects have remained half-done or improperly done. The development funds are being misused or misappropriated by political demagogues. The ruling party could not exercise control over its workers and supporters.

Problems in the BTAD Area:-

Communal clashes erupted in the BTAD areas in the year 2008 in Udalguri district, in the year 2012 in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts, in the year 2014 in the districts of kokrajhar, Chirang, Bongaigaon and Sonitpur districts.

The root cause of these communal clashes is the continued flow of outsiders into the BTAD area. As BTAD happens to be a vast fertile land and open spaces are still left comparatively more in places, this attract the outsiders who flock into this open area for agriculture and settlement as well. Majority of the immigrants happen to be the Muslims from Bangladesh and the Adivasis from Jharkhand.

As the immigrants have been clearing the vast forests of the BTAD for purpose of settlement, the extremist outfit NDFB rose into action. It committed massacre so as to deter the immigrants from clearing the forest areas. It is committed to secure the demanded BOROLAND area from outsiders where it is destined to rule in near future with sovereignty.

Present Political Situation within the BTAD:-

After the 2001 ALA elections, a major development had taken place in the Bodo society. After a long run movement, finally the demand for a separate homeland issue of the Bodos came to an end with "signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the BLT on 10th of February 2003 for the creation of an autonomous self-governing body to be called Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Once the BTC was formed, the ABSU in support of MoS formally withdrew its demand for a separate state. All other Bodo organisations supported the settlement and with this the movement was officially closed.

Thus, it is apparent that in the post-Bodo Movement era, the ALA election came to a normal track. The sense of tension, instability, pressure of militant groups dominated the whole political atmosphere of Assam during the Assam Movement and after that during the Bodo Movement. So after the formation of the BTC, after a long period of time a free, fair and fearless ALA election, free from any movement-oriented effect, could be witnessed.

The entry of migrants into the Bodo dominated areas took over the land and their population grew day by day which affected the development the Bodo people from different angles. The flow of illegal migrant had created a severe problem in the tribal lands of Assam only because of Sadullah's pro-Muslim policy under the pretext of "Grow More Food". In addition to this, the Line System was failed, which was introduced for separating the lands of the tribal from the lands of the non-tribal people of Assam. As a result thousands of Bodo people have been rendered landless. It eventually hampered the socio-economic growth of the agro-based Bodo community of Assam. Not only this, because of their unstable socio-economic condition, the traditional activities of the community like weaving, dairy farming, fisheries, poultry, piggery, duckery, horticulture etc. had also remained under-developed.

VCDC: This is a grass root level committee operating within the BTAD area. It stands for Village Council Development Committee. It is not a formal structure of the BTAD administration. Its functionaries are neither elected by the people nor duly appointed government officials.

As Panchayati Raj institutions are not allowed in the Sixth Schedule areas, in its place the arrangement of VCDC has been made. Like Geon Panchayats it takes up developmental functions at the grass-root level. Although the BTC Legislative Assembly has passed a Bill to make it a formal structure of the BTC, it is yet to receive the assent of the Governor.

Rampant corrupt practices are going on in BTAD at the VCDC level. As the functionaries are not elected, they have neither responsibility nor accountability. In the Sixth Schedule areas of other States, tribal's only can become chairman of these grass-root bodies, but in the BTAD non-tribal even are allowed to hold chair for cheap popularity.

Support Base of BPF:-

It is seen that in the last BTAD elections, the performance of the BPF took a downward trend. It could win only 1 seat in the entire Chirang district out of total 7 seats. In Baksa district also it could win only 7 seats out of total eleven seats. It indicates that the support base of the BPF was eroding in these two districts.

Appeasement policies of Hagrama Mohilary, president of BPF towards the Muslim community who mostly are the suspected illegal migrants coming illegally from across the border is creating confusion in the minds of the indigenous population of the BTAD. Land alienation and unprecedented increase of population in entire state of Assam is a direct result of the illegal migrants entering into the state. It is posing a threat to the very existence of the indigenous people as Assam as well as BTAD.

The BPF's open support to the demand for inclusion of six communities in the Scheduled Tribe list of the Constitution of India is also disseminating apprehension in the minds of the Bodo and tribal people of the BTAD area. Bodo organizations and plains tribal conglomerates are opposing this tooth and nail. Hence, the losing ground of the BPF among the Bodo and other tribal populations of the BTAD territory.

Dastardly killing of the innocent people in the broad day light in the weekly market of Balajan Tiniali of Kokrajhar district on 5th August, 2016 and killing of a popular ABMSU leader Mr. Lafiqul Islam in the broad day light in the Titaguri market nearby Kokrajhar town are creating doubts and confusion in the minds of common persons in the BTAD. Hence, the apprehension of the losing of support base on the part of BPF. "*Jhanjanani of abaidh asthra*" (soundings of illegal arms) is alleged to be continuing in the BTAD area by the media, political opponents and critics of the policy and programme of the ruling party.

Due to lack of viable alternative political parties in the BTAD area, the BPF is thriving and taking advantage of the situation. The AGP has never been having well-knit grass root organization since its inception in the year 1985. The Indian National Congress, though, it has an well-knit grass root organization, the morale of the leaders and cadres is coming down drastically because of giving free hand to the BPF at its own cost by not contesting the elections of the BTAD area neither in the BTAD elections nor in the ALA Elections nor in the HPC Elections. The party hegemony of the BPF in the BTAD area is prevailing in the BTAD area.

The flow of illegal migrants into Assam is one of the major obstacles in the way of all-round development of the state. Participation of any person in the electoral politics without having any valid photo identity proof creates problems in identifying the illegal residents of the state. Political right is ultimate right of a citizen, but using this illegally by the outside hampers the liberties of the citizen.

The electoral politics of the BTAD is somewhat different from the mainstream state politics. After the formation of the BPF, the politics of the BTAD has totally changed. The national parties, the state parties as well as the independent Bodo candidates completely lost their strength in the BTAD. It can be said that political consciousness of the people of the BTAD area is growing day by day since the formation of the BTAD. Now-a-days, the general people of the BTAD area are very much conscious about the selection of the eligible candidates who can take active steps for the furthering of their causes.

About half of the total population of the BTAD forward negative responses about the performance of the candidates elected last time from their respective area. They also opined that they are not satisfied with the working of the ruling government of the BTC as far as in case of providing clean and corruption free society is concerned.

In this, it can be said that in the ALA Election of 2006, the independent candidates of the BPF elected from the BTAD area, but due to lack of experience, they failed to satisfy the demands of the general people of the BTAD at that time. But, even after recognition as state party in the 2011 ALA Election along with full-fledged support co-operation from the general people, the candidates of the BPF again failed to win the minds of the people of the BTAD area, as the study reveals. It might have happened owing to some backdated policies and their implementations by the government and the lack of co-operation among the party members plus the other officials of the government.

Here, it can be said that the BTAD people are expecting a quick and prompt function from their elected political party as well from their government, so a sense of dissatisfaction has developed among the people of the BTAD in the event of delay in performing as per their expectations.

Findings of the Study:-

The Bodo people in general have become politically conscious and these have turned them assertive. This assertiveness has found a glaring expression in demanding a separate BODOLAND. This assertiveness yielded a lot to the Bodo people in particular and whole population of the BTAD in general. Although the mass-movement could not give them a separate State as demanded, it could fetch ethnic autonomy in the first and territorial autonomy in the next. An autonomous territory with the name Bodoland Territorial Areas District could be demarcated within the boundary of Assam itself. As creation of the BTAD legalised all those who had been residing within the given territory before the date of its creation, the territory has not remain for the Bodos

alone. As continued flow of non-Tribal peoples to the vast fertile land of the present autonomous territory led to outnumbering the original tribal population, it created newer problems within the territory. In the tug of war that followed the majority non-Bodos began to outweigh the original Bodo population in the balance of vote.

This situation has influenced the voting behaviour of the population in the BTAD. The non-Bodos tend to cast anti-establishment vote at the cost of the ruling political party. The voters get polarized on the line of community and religion both. Even the Bodo voters get divided among the ruling and the opposition political parties.

The hitherto ruling non-Bodos find very difficult to accept rule on them by the Bodos whom decades before they used to rule. Hence there seem to be general resentment against the Bodo rule among the non-Bodos in particular and opponents of the ruling political party in general.

Conclusion:-

After analysis it can be said that the voting behaviour of the voters, in the BTAD is not stable one. In the first elections to the BTC, they voted en masse as to give a chance to the outfit to prove its bona fide. But in the subsequent elections they began to vote against the incumbent political party. Although there is clear Bodo and non-Bodo divide, during the elections they do not get polarised on this line. Continued win of the ruling party with Bodo dominance proves this very amply. Although the opposition parties are dominated by the non-Bodos, they have failed to secure the non-Bodo votes as believed by the laymen.

Various considerations influence the voting behaviour in the BTAD. Influential section of the non-Bodos has accepted position and functions in the ruling political party, A substantial non-Bodo population have become members of the ruling party. Many of them have been influenced by the considerations for money, position and power in the ruling political party.

The support base of the ruling BPF political party is found to have remained almost intact. The ruling party could effectively utilise the above factors to its favour. Moreover, it could draw support from opponents in general and non-Bodo political activists in general by alluring them through offer of money, position and power within the party structure as resorted to by most of the ruling political parties in the country as a whole.

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