The State, Ethnic-Fragmentation And The Bodos: The Post-Accord Appraisal

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Abstract: The paper intends to highlight the emerging crisis among the Bodos over the question of community representation and leadership. The post-accord phase has witnessed the rise of differences among the Bodo leaders on the question of autonomy, sovereignty and the protection of identity. The struggle for political power among different heads, the betrayal laments against the ruling party from within the community, mobilization and countermobilization have brought many complexities and intricacies into BTAD politics. The paper addresses the problem, looks into the political dynamics of the Bodos through the theoretical lens of ethnic-outbidding. The paper further entails BTC elections where one can be familiar with the effects of ethnic-outbidding, presence of ethnic-fragmentations and violence. The paper draws the sources from the existing literatures as well as from the informal discussions with a few Bodo leaders. Broadly, an attempt has been made to correlate the process of outbidding, the role of Indian State, its peace-making mechanisms with the existing complexities, political intricacies and violence in the region.

Index Terms: crisis, leadership, ethnic-outbidding, ethnic-fragmentation, BTC elections, ethnic violence, the State.

1. INTRODUCTION
Alvin Rabushka and Kelvin Shepsle proclaim that ethnic parties and democratic instability are concomitant. They assert that ethnic parties lead to ethnic outbidding and ethnic outbidding intensifies ethnic competition which breeds ethnic violence; hence ethnic parties are detrimental to democratic stability (Rabushka, 1972). On the other hand, Kanchan Chandra declares, "ethnic politics to a single dimension destabilize democracy, whereas institutions that foster multiple dimensions of ethnic identity can sustain it." (Chandra, 2005). She firmly attacks the theory of ethnic-outbidding and claims that ethnic parties can be sustained in new democracies if they are institutionally encouraged, simply by replacing the unidimensional ethnic identities with multidimensional ones. Sharing a similar kind of view, James Manor also optimizes the presence of ethnic politics within a democratic set up owing to the fluidity and flexibility of the ethnic identities. The fluid nature of ethnic identity allows ethnic groups to cut across multiple identities and thereby reduce the appearance of ethnic conflicts (Manor, 1996). One can understand the effects of ethnic outbidding, perceive the presence of intra-community competition and realize the panorama of ethnic violence in the area of BTAD with the help of these theoretical interpretations. The paper explores how ethnic-outbidding challenges the peace-building process in the region, as the outbidding leads to different ethnic head-counts, ethnic competition that has culminated into complexities, contentious politics and violence in the region. The struggle between the ‘local autocrats’ (Lacina, 2009) over political power, the betrayal laments within the community against the ruling party for moving away from the root cause of the movement and showing ‘centrist party behavior’ (Manor, 1996), polarization and fragmentations within the community have shaped the complexities, political intricacies and violence in the region. In fact, the differences and contradictions within the Bodos over the community representation have unveiled the state of uncertainty in their proposed Bodoland. Ethnic- outbidding, ethnic- fragmentations and polarization have encouraged conflict-within and conflict-without in the BTAD, turning the region into an ethnic conundrum.

2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY
The primary objective of the paper is to introspect the emerging leadership crisis among the Bodos, mostly inhabited in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley. Further, an attempt has been made to correlate the process of ethnic-outbidding, the role of the Indian State, its peace-making mechanisms with the existing complexities, political intricacies and violence in the region.

3 CONFLICTS-WITHIN: PRE-ACCORD RECORDS
The movement of the Bodos for identity, land and resources started in the pre-independence period and has been traversed through different phases- peaceful, violent and engaged a host of organizations with different affiliations-political and cultural. The historical analysis of the Bodo movement reveals the presence of intense power struggle among the Bodo leaders in the pre-accord period as well. The mention of growing conflict between Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and BTC (P) renders plausibility. In the year 1979, the younger section of PTCA formed a new political party named PTCA (P) which demanded for ‘Mishing Bodoland’, a separate political autonomy instead of Bodoland. On the other hand, PTCA was demanding for Udayachal. The differences between PTCA and PTCA (P) which ultimately resulted in another political party named UTLNF under the leadership of Binay Khungur Basumatary (Narzary, 2011). The factionalism within the Bodo leadership has been standing in the way of finding a solution to the Bodo problem. The intra-ethnic competition can also be seen between the PTCA and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) over the issue of the Bodo demands. It is documented that ABSU (U) militants were patronized by the central government in order to make the PTCA weak and marginal. The ABSU (U) had indulged in numerous violent activities- bomb blasts, kidnappings, killings, destruction of public properties, extortion of money, etc. In fact, 300 innocent PTCA members, workers and followers had been killed by ABSU militants (Narzary, 2011). On the other hand, the ABSU leaders hold the view that PTCA leaders in the later phase tried to fulfil their vested interest by making an alliance with the state Janata party in 1978 and thus betrayed the larger Bodo interest as they retreated from the demand for Udayachal and claimed for an autonomous region ( ABSU, History in Glimpse All Bodo Student Union (1967-2017) : A journey of struggle). In addition, the conflict and violence between Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) after signing the first
Bodo accord in 1993 also substantiate the intra-ethnic community conflict of the Bodos. The post-BAC era had witnessed a violent phase of the Bodos against other ethnic groups and within its own community as well. The ideological difference between BLT and NDFB led to the conflict situation in which each one projected the others one's rival. The period between 1990s and 2000s witnessed frequent clashes between the two causing deaths of the Bodos. The NDFB while was fighting for secession from the Indian union, BLT claimed for a separate Bodoland within India. According to an ABSU publication, nearly 100 Bodos were killed by the militants in 2008 in their effort to control Bodoland politics and society (Mahanta, 2013). Bodoland Peoples’ Front (BPF) has also faced challenges from NDFB, one of the most dreadful militant organization in South Asia. NDFB is very critical of the role, has been played by BPF. It is to be mentioned here that during the signing of the Bodo accord in the year 2003, the central as well as the state government had sidelined the NDFB. Thus, the NDFB leaders were disappointed as they were also fighting for the cause of Bodoland. But the State emphasized the position of BLT and formed the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) by making the ex-BLT militants the ruler in the BTAD. NDFB, although has been divided into three segments, the demand for Bodoland is still strong in their minds. The president of NDFB (P), B. Sunghatra has expressed his dissatisfaction at the function of the ruling class. He said that the NDFB (P) is working hard to unite all the Bodos under one territorial jurisdiction, but the working of BTC has failed to address the issue of the Bodos outside the boundary of BTAD. The president said that despite of being one of the largest plain tribes of Assam, the Bodos have lost everything at present. Regarding the role of BPF, the party in power since its inception, he said that BPF’s priority is politics now rather than the territorial aspiration of the community. BPF should concentrate more on the rights of the Bodos who have struggled to find their position (Mochahari, 2017). Hence, has been facing stiff opposition from the community itself.

4 The Process Of Ethnic-Outbidding And The Post-Accord Politics: The Discussion

The process of outbidding refers to the system where an ethnic party claims to be the true defender of that group against another group (Chandra, 2005). Hence, this may lead to both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic competition, breeding ethnic conflict. However, the institutional arrangement that encourages multiple identities can lead to ethnic-outbidding cutback fall short in case of the BTAD administration. The institutional arrangement that consolidated political autonomy to the Bodos does not have such provisions for crossing ethnic identities which can mitigate the ethnic tension. 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 (Saikia, 2015). It is clearly visible that out of 46 seats in the BTC, 30 are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes and the reserved constituencies are have been drawn up in such a manner that areas having minimum Bodo presence are reserved so that non-Bodos cannot even contest in those constituencies and the open constituencies have a substantial amount of Bodo people (Mahanta, 2013). The accord making experience in the Northeast India in general and in Assam in particular has been a major failure in terms of peace-building as well as peace-sustaining. The very approach of the Indian State in terms of conflict management is critical. In this context, the argument by Prof. Nani Gopal Mahanta can be cited that the accord politics which is a kind of settlement between the state and the rebel groups has failed to endure peace, breeding more conflict. The failure of both the accords of 1993 and 2003 substantiates the point. The failure of the BAC, 1993 led to the emergence of the second phase of militancy in the Bodo dominated areas. Opposing the Bodo accord of 1993, NDFB former BrSF along with BLT created havoc among the inhabitants of the Bodo dominated areas. Lacina (2011) while talking about the relative stability in the NE India, has criticized Centre’s strategies for maintaining peace in the region- a strategy that extends support for localized autocracy. By consolidating political power to the local autocrats, the Indian state has succeeded in reducing the growing rate of violence; however, unfolding many local pockets for substantial financial assistance and coercive resources. The manifestation of these differences can be realized in the regional and local elections. The Bodoland Territorial Council elections witnessed the proliferation of political parties among the Bodos and the other communities. The Bodoland Peoples’ Front (BPF), the single most majority party who has been in power since inception has been facing stiff opposition from the community itself. The growing rift BPF and other Bodo organizations has culminated into the emergence of other ethnic-based political parties such as Peoples’ Coordination for Democratic Rights (PCDR), United Peoples’ Party (UPP) which leads to the polarization 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 widespread corruption and dictatorship in the governing process. The PCDR is formed by ABSU, Bodoland Peoples’ Progressive Front (BPPF) and United Democratic Peoples’ Front (UDPFF) 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 UDPF, apart from PCDR members to put an end to the misuse of BPF and to serve the interest of the people resided within the BTAD. Moving ahead, the difference between BPF and ABSU can be seen in the 2014 General election over the issue that BPF has failed to fulfill the demand for separate Bodoland (Dutta, 2016). Although the election of 2014 was historic for the victory of a non-Bodo candidate in the Bodo region, the intra-community polarization 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). 2014 General election witnessed a major political shift in the BTAD as for the first time, a non- Bodo candidate won the Parliament seat from the Kokrajhar constituency, giving a blow to the dominance of BPF in the region. The victory of a non-Bodo candidate indicates the growing counter-mobilization among the other communities against the Bodos. The election was fought around two basic local issues- separate state for the Bodos on the one hand and the rights of the non-Bodos on the other. The election shook the Bodo hegemony that had been established by the ruling Bodo elites. The election witnessed the victory of Naba Sarania, an ex-militant of ULFA who campaigned against the separate state for the Bodos. The effect of outbidding culminated into the conglomeration of 23 non- Bodo groups under the banner of Janagosthiya Oika Moncha to support ex-ULFA militant so that the rights of the non-Bodos could be protected which otherwise have been engraven by the Bodo ethnic elites (Saikia, 2015). Hence, the
election of 2014 has shown the polarization among the Bodos and counter-mobilization among the non-Bodos. The counter-mobilization of the non-Bodos and the formation of the political parties can be considered as the result of the effect of ethnic-outbidding. The BTC election of 2015 has proved the growing polarization 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 without any strong opponents, in 2015 election, it was challenged by different counters. No doubt, amidst stiff oppositions and challenges, BPF could manage to win and to form the government for the third time. It highlighted the drop of votes for BPF as it won 20 seats out of 40 seats in the council election (in the last BTC election, BPF won 31 seats out of 40). In addition, BPF won 20 seats, it polled only 28.5 per cent vote share, faced stiff competition from the non-Bodo candidates and the PCDR. In the election, along with non-Bodo candidates, the Bodo candidates were also contesting through PCDR- formed by ABSU, BPPF and in collaboration with the NDFB (P) (Siddique, 2015). They contested as independently, taking the next position after BPF by winning 15 seats. The division of non-Bodo votes between SJA and OSS made a way for BPF and PCDR. Although BPF made its way and again formed the government, this election has disclosed the growing challenges of BPF in the region. The failure of BPF in articulating the demands of both the Bodos and non-Bodos have gradually made its support base narrower. The growing violence against the non-Bodos has resulted in the counter-mobilization of the non-Bodos which breeds ethnic tension in the BTAD.

5 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Thus, the above discussion disseminates a few concluding remarks. The ethnic fragmentation, polarization among the Bodo leaders substantiate the effects of ethnic-outbidding. The process of outbidding has led to the fratricidal politics that breeds both inter and intra ethnic conflicts. However, the assumptions of both Kanchan Chandra and James Manor seem to be less effective in case of BTAD politics; hence, threatening the peaceful co-existence. The institutional arrangement does not encourage to cut across multiple identities, rather the sixth schedule provisions for the region is based on a singular fault line, giving preference to the one ethnic group only. Both Kanchan Chandra and James Manor have argued that Indian ethnic politics need not necessarily lead to the destruction and destabilization of democracy as the ethnic identities cut across each other and the ethnic parties tend to show the centrist party behavior over a period of time, ultimately help in reducing the quantity of ethnic conflicts. In case of the BTAD politics, the kind of centrism can be realized. The strongest cultural-cum-political organization of the Bodos; ABSU, has expressed dissatisfaction on the role of the ruling party. No doubt, BPF has been in power since its formation and has set its agenda for all round development of the region. BPF has not paid attention to the matter of full implementation of all the provisions mentioned in the Bodo accord of 2003. The villages, being demanded by ABSU to be included has not got yet. ABSU is still struggling for the cause of the separate Bodoland and expressed its discontent with the Indian State as it created Telangana, but has not solved the Bodo demand yet. In this context, the role of BPF is also criticized as it has failed to make the Bodoland happen (the researcher was informed during an informal discussion with the members of ABSU). Thus, on the one hand, ABSU is demanding for the separate Bodoland and claiming for the protection of the tribal belts and blocks, BPF seems to be involved more in the developmental activities in the area which helps in making their seats secured, thereby tilting towards the mainstream politics. However, the absence of institutional arrangements providing cross-cutting cleavages in the region has made the flexibility, the fluidity of ethnic identities and the centrist party behavior insufficient for reducing, resolving and transforming ethnic conflicts within the BTAD.

REFERENCES