

SEVENTEENTH LOK SABHA ELECTIONS IN BTAD AREA: A BATTLE FOR THE SEPARATE STATE OF BODOLAND

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Abstract: The Lok Sabha elections elect the members of parliament from different part of India who takes part in the highest policy-making process in the nation. Likewise, the Kokrajhar constituency, lone lok sabha constituency in BTAD, could able to send different representatives from different party since 1957. Elections in this seat is contested with a quest to preserve Bodo's cultural identity and fight for other's rights against increasing Bodo hegemony. This led polarization of votes along ethnic lines. Another aspect of elections in this constituency is that in recent years electorates have chosen Independent candidates as their representative in Lok Sabha. In the present study, an attempt has been made to study the political issues of major political parties and Independent candidates in Kokrajhar constituency in the 2019 Parliamentary elections. Moreover, this paper also tries to highlight the background of Parliamentary elections in Bodo dominated Kokrajhar HPC.

Keywords: BTAD, Elections, Bodoland, Separate State.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is a territorial council of Assam. It was constituted under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India in 2003 after the signing of Memorandum of Settlement on 10th February, 2003 between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers. The objectives for the creation of BTC are to fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspiration and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and to speed up the infrastructure in BTC area. The BTC jurisdiction covers four districts of Lower Assam which is officially called as Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD).

Kokrajhar constituency is one of the 14 Lok Sabha constituencies in the Northeastern state of Assam. The constituency is situated in BTAD area of Assam. The seat is reserved for candidates belonging to the Schedule Tribe (ST). It consists of 10 Assembly segments namely Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar East, Kokrajhar west, Sidly, Bijni, Sorbhog, Bhabanipur, Tamulpur, Barama and Chapaguri. The constituency has a mixed acomposition with 1765423 votes. There are nearly four lakh Bodo votes, besides approximately 2.03 lakh Bengali, 1.84 lakh Adivasis, 1.2 lakh Koch-Rajbongshi, 1.30 lakh Assamese and an estimated 1.20 lakh voters who belong to other tribal groups.

Kokrajhar is one of the rare constituencies that have in recent years have chosen Independent candidates as their representative in Lok Sabha. This includes the sitting MP Naba Kr. Sarania who defeated another Independent candidate Urkhao Gwra Brahma. Except for Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary who could win in 2009 from Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) ticket, the past six elections have been seen Independent winning. In fact Bwiswmuthiary himself represented the seat as an Independent in 1998, 1999, 2004 before switching sides ahead of the 2009 polls.

2. Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To study the issues of political parties
2. To study the support base of political parties

3. Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical based on primary and secondary sources. While the primary sources are included Reports of the Election Commission of India, press statements, election manifestos, party documents etc., the Secondary data is collected from books, journals, internet, articles in newspapers, magazines and other printed materials.

4. Background of Parliamentary Elections in Kokrajhar HPC:

The Bodos are the most numerous and widely spread plains tribe of Assam. They mostly concentrated in four districts of present BTAD, namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. It may be noted that, from 1937 to 1952, the Bodos contested elections under the banner of Tribal League, as they had no separate political party. Moreover, the constituency had been represented by Bodo candidates till 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

The prestigious Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat had been represented by Congress candidate Dharanidhar Basumatary from 1957 to 1971 for four consecutive terms. However, in 1977 elections to the Lok Sabha, Dharanidhar Basumatary, the veteran sitting MP of Congress party, defeated in the hands of Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) candidate Charan Narzary by a huge margin. This was a clear indication of alienation of the Bodos from the Congress party, as the PTCA contested the elections on the issue of separate state for Bodos. Another PTCA candidate Samar Brahma Choudhury in 1984 elections retained the seat. After coming to power, the PTCA leadership compromised the Bodo peoples' demand for Udayachal

for their narrow personal gains. Dissatisfied with this development, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) took up new phase of separate state movement, i.e., Bodoland. In the General elections to the Lok Sabha held in 1991, the ABSU that participated in the elections by fielding independent candidate Satyatendranath Brahma Choudhury on the issue of a separate state of Bodoland could win by huge margin. However, in 1996, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDF) candidate Luis Islary defeated ABSU candidate Rabiram Brahma. Interestingly, both the candidates contested the elections on the issue of Bodoland. After the 1996 elections, Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary could win the seat in 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 elections. It is noteworthy to mention that he won the first three elections by the support of ABSU and switch sides to BPF in 2009 elections. In the 2014 elections, for the first time in the history of Kokrajhar constituency, a non-Bodo independent candidate won the elections by defeating Bodo candidates. Naba Sarania, former ULFA militant, who fought the election battle against the creation of Bodoland, could secure the non-Bodo votes, which are collectively higher than the Bodo votes.

5. Election Issues of Major Parties in 2019 Polls:

As Kokrajhar seat gets ready to vote in the Third phase of the ongoing parliamentary polls, for some it has become a quest to preserve one's cultural identity and fight for one's rights against increasing Bodo hegemony. For instance, in Kokrajhar and Mangaldoi constituencies, the general elections to the 2019 Parliamentary elections are largely to fight between those seeking a separate state Bodoland and those opposed to its creation.

The election for the coveted seat is expected to be fought tooth and nail and a tough four-way contest between incumbent Naba Kr. Sarania, BPF's Pramila Rani Brahma, UPPL's Urkhao Gwra Brahma and Congress's Sabda Ram Rabha. Besides CPM's Biraj Deka and Independent candidates Charan Iswary, Rajen Nrazary, Ranjay Kumar Brahma and Prasenjit Kumar Das are also in the fray.

For Kokrajhar seat, the 2019 elections witness two major pre-poll alliances, one BPF with the BJP and AGP and the UPPL with the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). While campaigning for BPF candidate Pramila Rani Brahma, chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal appealed to the masses to support the BPF candidate for progress and development. Referring to the BTAD he claimed that progress is picking up pace and the BJP is working for harmony among the communities living in the BTAD area.

The BPF, which has been ruling the BTC since 2005 and part of the coalition governments at the state in 2006, 2011 and 2016, contested the 2019 elections on the issue of infrastructure development of the BTAD. As per the poll understanding the BJP and AGP would help the BPF in Kokrajhar seat and the BPF in return would help them in other constituencies where Bodo votes are deciding factor. BPF chief Hagrama

Mohilary made it clear that it extended support to the BJP outside BTAD area in the greater interest of the people of Bodoland as the BJP has formed government both in at the centre and in the state. As the demand for separate state Bodoland faces a strong opposition from various non-Bodo groups, it is missing mention in the manifesto of the BPF. Moreover, to woo the non-Bodo voters it has instead pledged to support the Kamatapur statehood demand of Koch-Rajbongshi and ST status of six communities of Assam. The BPF chief Hagrama Mohilary rather blamed the ABSU and NDFB-P for cheating Bodo communities in the name of movement for separate Bodoland.

This parliamentary election is not going to be a smooth sailing for the BJP's ally Bodoland People's Front (BPF), the ruling party in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), because of upsurge of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and presence of another strong new Bodo political group, United People's Party- Liberal (UPPL) in the BTAD area. The AIUDF, which is considered a political party of religious minorities (Muslims), has extended support to the UPPL in Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat and took part in the election campaigns for Urkhao Gwra Brahma. Former Rajya Sabha member and Sahitya Academy Winner Brahma has supported the cause for the separate state of Bodoland and is supported by pro-Bodoland groups like ABSU, PJACBM and NDFB-P. During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the Bodo candidates were defeated in the only Lok Sabha constituency in BTAD for the first time after AIUDF backed the non-Bodo candidate Naba Kr. Sarania who won by a huge margin of over 3.5 lakh votes against his nearest rival Urkhao Gwra Brahma. This time the alliance between the UPPL and AIUDF emerged a big challenge for Naba Kr. Sarania and other parties in Bodo areas.

There is possibility of Bodo votes being getting divided between BPF candidate and state social welfare minister, Pramilla Rani Brahma and UPPL's candidate Urkhao Gwra Brahma. The UPPL is backed by influential All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and National Democratic Front of Boroland- Progressive (NDFB-P), a pro-talks faction insurgent group. The ABSU, NDFB-P and Peoples' Joint Action Committee for Bodoland movement (PJACBM) leaders, who have been fighting for a separate state Bodoland, extended their support to the UPPL candidates in Kokrajhar and Mangaldoi seats on the issue of good governance, all round development in both the constituencies and peaceful co-existence. They also made it clear that the objective of supporting UPPL candidates is for the solution of the long pending Bodo issue and expedite peace process with ceasefire underground groups like NDFB-P, as the parliament is the highest policy-making body of the nation. ABSU president Promod Boro said that the student body would directly support candidates from UPPL for the political solution of the problems of the Bodos.

Incumbent MP Sarania who has confidence of his victory in the polls, rejected stiff competition from the opponents, as he is backed by All Koch-Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) and other non-Bodo groups. The main poll plank of Sarania is to stop formation of Bodoland and security of non-Bodos. He

claimed that non-Bodo voters would not vote for UPPL candidate, as the party is contesting polls on the issue of separate state. He also criticised the BPF's Pramila Rani Brahma as a failed minister and just a scapegoat of Hagrama Mohilary. While the Congress candidate Sabda Ram Rabha, backed by Oboro Suraksha Samiti, lambasted his rivals in the race for the Lok Sabha throne. He accused Sarania for dividing people based on Bodo and non-Bodo for political gains. Further, he accused the BJP-led ruling government of adopting communal politics.

6. Conclusion:

Sarania who cashed in on the sentiment on non-Bodo voters living in Kokrajhar constituency, has been facing serious anti-incumbency factor this time, as the situation has changed over the last five years. While BPF's Pramila Rani Brahma has a strong support base among the Bodos in Kokrajhar, her party had lost its popularity after BPF compromised separate state Bodoland to secure non-Bodo votes. UPPL's Urkhao Gwra Brahma supported by the ABSU, PJACBM and NDFB-P, is pursuing the issue of separate state for the Bodos also has strong chances. Besides the Bodo voters, Brahma is also supported by the religious minority peoples living in BTAD area. Apart from the above, there are also some Independent candidates from Bodo community. Although none of them can win for sure but they are likely to split the Bodo votes to a large extent, affecting the prospect of other Bodo candidates.

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