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Fragmented Identity, Saffron Strategy: Navigating the Bharatiya Janata Party's Ascendance in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam

Bikash Dihingia¹, Chuchengfa Gogoi², Pankaj Kumar Sarmah³

¹ Department of Political Science, North Lakhimpur University, Lakhimpur, Assam, India, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2940-6226

² Department of Political Science, North Lakhimpur University, Lakhimpur, Assam, India, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3098-0148

³ Department of Political Science, Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit and Ancient Studies University, Nalbari, Assam, India, ORCID ID: 0009-0008-1013-5829

Correspondence: Chuchengfa Gogoi, Department of Political Science, North Lakhimpur University, Lakhimpur, Assam, India. Mobile: 70886073557. E-mail: chuchengfa@nlu.ac.in

Abstract

The unprecedented rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2020 election to the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), erstwhile Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) of Assam, marked a significant development in the region's political landscape, which is historically dominated by the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), an ethnic political party representing the Bodos. For decades, the BPF exercised near-hegemonic control over the BTC, shaping governance structures and political dialogue through an ethnic-centric approach. The fourth BTR election disrupted this established order and brought in a more competitive and pluralistic political environment. The shift from single-party dominance to an emerging multi-party system not only reconfigured electoral alignments but also contested the institutional and ideological bases of BPF's authority. This study thoroughly examines the growing dynamics of electoral politics in the BTR, positioning the 2020 election as a decisive departure from conventional patterns of political mobilisation and voter behaviour. It also explores how changing socio-political conditions, including internal differentiations within the Bodo community, generated new opportunities for political contestation. Particular attention is given to the BJP's strategic interventions, especially its capacity to leverage fragmented ethnic identities and integrate them within a wider electoral framework. Through this analysis, the study intends to advance understanding of shifting political narratives, party competition, and identity negotiations in contemporary Bodoland.

Keywords: Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bodoland People's Front (BPF), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), Fractured Identity

1. Introduction

Northeast India, in general, and Assam, in particular, have been home to multiple social mobilisations for extended autonomy and self-governance under the Constitution of India (Gogoi, 2018; Kom, 2010). Many such demands target extended autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Singh, 2022; Bhattacharyya et al., 2017). As Article 244(2) of the Indian Constitution suggests, the administration under the Sixth Schedule shall apply to tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram (Harsha & Ranglong, 2016;

Mohapatra, 2017). Hence, under Parts I, II, II(A) and III of the Sixth Schedule, various autonomous councils are being formed (Hansaria, 2016). In Part I, three autonomous councils in the state of Assam have been formed, namely, the Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, and the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) (Hansaria, 2016; Islary, 2022). Along with these, there are statutory autonomous district councils constituted under the state acts, such as the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the Mising Autonomous Council, the Tiwa Autonomous Council, the Deori Autonomous Council, the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council, and the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council (Islary, 2022). The establishment of such autonomous councils is significant not only from the perspectives of tribal development and governance but also for fostering an environment conducive to democratic decentralisation in Assam. The devolution and expansion of powers to these councils provide local populations with opportunities to participate through elections (Singh, 2022; Borah, 2022). Different autonomous acts set rules for many elected officials in these councils, most of whom come from native tribal communities. This arrangement has facilitated the creation of a political space wherein tribes can contest for positions and establish a parallel administration within the autonomous regions governed by these councils. The emergence of ethnic political parties, such as the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in Karbi Anglong (Barbora, 2008), the Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF), and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) in Bodoland, further exemplifies this political proliferation (Basumatary, 2025). These political parties are distinctive for harbouring extended sub-regionalist sentiments and fostering specific tribal identities and cultures. Historically, they have maintained dominance in elections and the formation of autonomous councils across various parts of Assam. This situation has heightened the need for a platform that supports the comprehensive development of indigenous tribal communities. Consequently, the tribes demonstrate their habitual legitimacy and trust in the newly emerged political class within their community. For an extended period, these political parties have leveraged this legitimacy to secure their political dominance in the region. However, the dominance of ethnic political parties has gradually declined as national political parties have expanded. This shift is attributed to pre-election and post-election alliances formed between ethnic and national political parties when contesting elections beyond the Autonomous Council, such as state assembly and parliamentary elections. Additionally, reliance on state and central funds for the operation of autonomous councils has facilitated the increased influence of national political parties within autonomous regions. Moreover, evolving state-level political dynamics have further contributed to changes within the autonomous councils. The political dynamics of BTC are also similar.

The BTC is an autonomous district council in Assam. It was established on 10 February 2003 in accordance with the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, arising from the prolonged and persistent struggle of the Bodo people in Bodoland (Basumatary & Pathak, 2017). The council was created to fulfil the socio-economic, political, cultural, and educational aspirations of the Bodos, as well as to safeguard, preserve, and sustain the Bodos' ethnic identity (Baro, 2017; Basumatary, 2014). Presently, the BTC comprises 46 members, of whom the Governor of Assam nominates 6 (Singh, 2004), while the voters directly elect 40 through universal adult suffrage. Among these 40 directly elected seats, 30 are reserved for Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, 5 for non-ST communities, and 5 for all communities within Bodoland (Baro, 2017; Mahanta, 2013). From this pool of directly elected members, 12 are to be selected as executive members of the BTC, including one chief executive member and one deputy chief of the council (Basumatary, 2014). As per the Second Bodoland Accord of 2003, the BPF was entrusted with the provisional responsibility for governing the BTC areas until an elected council was established (Basumatary, 2014), which was constituted in 2005. Since that time, the BPF has remained the dominant political force within BTC under the leadership of Hagrama Mohilary. However, the fourth election of the BTC marked a significant shift in Bodoland politics, resulting in the formation of a coalition-controlled council, which was the first non-BPF-led government, in 2020 (Nath, 2020). Consequently, this study aims to examine the factors driving the paradigm shift in BTC politics and the electoral strategies employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to expand its support in the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD). Ultimately, these strategies contributed to the BJP's emergence as a key political player in BTC governance. It is worth mentioning that the area covered under BTC was also called the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD) until its transformation into the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2020.

1.1. Objectives

The current paper has the following objectives:

- To understand the changing political trends in BTR.
- To explore the different factors responsible for the changing dynamics of BTR politics.
- To examine the BJP's strategic approach to leveraging political support in BTR.

2. Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature. It applies an in-depth interview method. Both primary and secondary data sources were collected for the research. The primary data were collected through an unstructured interview schedule. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling, including leaders and workers from various political parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bodoland People Front (BPF), and United People Progressive Front (UPPL), as well as academicians and a few voters from the region. A total of 44 respondents were interviewed. The interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Telephonic and physical interviews were conducted for a period of one month. Interviews were taken in the Assamese language and later transcribed in English. For the data analysis, the thematic analytical method was employed to analyse the primary data collected from the field. The secondary data were collected from a wide range of sources, including books, articles, government reports and newspapers. Moreover, statistical data on election records and the BJP's membership strength were collected from competent authorities, including the Election Commission of India, the Assam State Election Commission, the state office of the BJP in Assam, and district offices of the BJP in the Bodoland region.

3. Results

3.1. Electoral Politics of BTR, Since 2005

After years of sustained agitation by various Bodo militant groups in Bodoland, the second Bodo accord was signed in 2003. As a result of this Accord, one of the most vital Bodo militant groups, the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), surrendered with their arms and ammunition and started to participate in the politics of Bodoland by forming a regional political party in the name of the Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF). The former BLTF leaders and some All-Bodo Student Union (ABSU) leaders formed the BPPF on 13th April, 2005. Since its formation, BTC has become one of the most influential political parties in Bodoland, significantly impacting the politics of BTAD regions at the national (Lok Sabha), state assembly (Assam), and local levels. In the first BTC election in 2005, the BPPF had a strong presence, and Hagrama Mohilary became BTC chief for the first time. Since then, he has continued to lead the BTC in its second and third elections, held in 2010 and 2015, respectively (Talukdar, 2020). The BPF's rising dominance has extended to the subsequent Lok Sabha and Assam legislative assembly elections. There are 14 Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam; among them, only one constituency belongs to the BTC in the name of Kokrajhar, which is specially reserved for ST candidates. Earlier, an independent candidate dominated this Lok Sabha constituency. However, after its formation, the BPF won this constituency for the first time in 2009 under the leadership of Sansuma Khunggur Bwiwumuthiary (Election Commission of India, 2009). Later, an independent candidate, Naba Kumar Sarania, dominated this Lok Sabha constituency for almost a decade, i.e., from 2014 to 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2014 & 2019). However, in the last parliamentary election, the UPPL candidate, Jayanta Basumatary, won the Kokrajhar constituency, an alliance partner of the BJP in Assam.

Concerning the Assam Legislative Assembly election, there are twelve (12) assembly constituencies in the BTAD region. In the first Assembly election following the formation of the BTC in 2006, independent candidates won all twelve seats. No political party secured any seats in this election (Election Commission of India, 2006). However, in the next Assembly election in 2011, the BPF swept 11 of the 12 seats and became part of the Congress-led government in Assam (Election Commission of India, 2011). In the 2016 Assam assembly election, the BPF retained its previous dominance in the BTAD region by sweeping all twelve seats and becoming part of the BJP-led NDA government in Assam (Election Commission of India, 2016). However, the BPF was unable to replicate

its previous political performance in the 2021 assembly election. In this election, the BPF got only three assembly seats. At the same time, another ethnic regional party in Bodoland, the UPPL, emerged in Bodoland's politics and secured seven assembly seats out of 12 in the BTR. Along with the UPPL, the BJP also rose in the politics of BTAD by winning two assembly seats in Bodoland (Election Commission of India, 2021). Notably, this was the first time in the history of Bodoland politics that a right-wing nationalist political party had strategically achieved victory over ethnic regional politics in Bodoland.

As in state politics, the politics of BTAD also exhibit two trends: a shift from one-party dominance (BPF) to a multi-party coalition and the entry of a national political party into BTR. Consequently, the entry of national political parties has impacted the stronghold of regional political parties in BTR. In the council's first election in 2005, the BPF captured a majority of seats and formed the government in BTC, a position it retained in the next two elections as well. It was an era of complete domination of BPF in BTC. The table below shows the electoral results for various political parties in the BTC election from 2005 to 2015.

Table 1. Electoral Performance of different political parties in BTC elections from 2005 to 2015

Name of the Political Parties	Seats Won in 2005	Seats Won in 2010	Seats Won in 2015
AGP	01	00	00
AIUDF	00	00	04
BJP	00	00	01
BPF	22	31	20
CPI(M)	00	00	00
INC	00	03	00
IND	17	06	15
Total:	40	40	40

Note: AGP (Asom Gana Parishad), AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), BPF (Bodoland People's Front), INC (Indian National Congress), IND (Independent candidates)

Source: Assam State Election Commission

The table above indicates the dominance of ethno-regionalism in Bodoland. In the first BTC election in 2005, the BPF won 22 out of the 40 seats and formed the council under the chairmanship of Hagrama Mahilary. In contrast, independent candidates won 17 seats, while the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) secured only one seat. Surprisingly, the Indian National Congress, which was Assam's most dominant political party at the time, could not secure a single seat in this election. Along with the Congress, other political parties, such as the CPI(M) and AIUDF, failed to secure any seats in the BTC. In the second BTC election on 9th April, 2010, BPF retained its dominance with a clear mandate. In this election, the BPF won 31 of 40 seats, the INC won 3, and independent candidates won 6, while the other contested parties—BJP, AGP, AIUDF, and CPI(M)—were once again unable to win any seats.

On 8th April 2015, the third BTC election took place, and the BPF once again formed the autonomous council in Bodoland under the leadership of Mohilary, who had consistently managed the party's support base there. The table demonstrates that six political parties and numerous independent candidates provided their candidatures in this election. However, as in the first and second BTC elections, BPF again emerged as the dominant force by winning 20 out of 40 seats. In this election, independent candidates took fifteen seats, including the first-ever victories of the AIUDF with four seats and the BJP with one. An article argued that the AIUDF's participation in the BTAD election contributed to ethnic polarisation and helped the BJP secure its first electoral victory in the area by winning one seat. If we look at the vote share, the percentages are as follows: BPF 28%, BJP 13%, AIUDF 4%, INC 6%, and independent candidates 47%. The most intriguing fact, however, is that the INC, the then-ruling party in Assam, could not win even one seat in this BTC election (Tripathi et al., 2018). With this one-seat win, the BJP was poised to enter BTR politics. The BJP capitalised on this in the fourth BTC election in 2020.

3.2. The Fourth BTR Election: Millstone for Saffron Tide

The fourth BTC election in the newly created BTR region was held in two phases. The polling date for the first phase of the election was 7th December 2020 in the constituencies under the Udalguri and Baksa districts, and the polling date for the second phase was 10th December 2020 in the constituencies under the Kokrajhar and Chirang districts (Islary, 2022). Despite their alliance with the state government, the BJP and BPF contested this election as bitter rivals. For the first time, the BJP has invested significant resources and efforts in the BTC election, employing various electoral strategies to mobilise voters in favour of the party. It has fielded 26 candidates for 40 council seats and backed the independent candidate for the remaining seats (Pandey, 2020).

The results of the fourth BTC election were surprising for everyone. Without breaking its continuity, the BPF again emerged as the single largest party, with 17 out of 37 seats contested by the BPF candidates. Along with BPF, another newly formed ethnic, regional party of Bodoland, i.e., UPPL, emerged as the second-largest party in this election by contesting all 40 constituencies of BTC. At the same time, this fourth BTC election became a historic event in the entire history of BTC politics, where a nationalist political party, i.e., the BJP, was able to manage nine seats in the BTC election, which was limited to only one in the previous election of 2015 (Basumatary, 2022).

The table below presents the electoral results for various political parties in the 2020 BTC election.

Table 2: Electoral Performance of BJP and Other Political Parties in the BTR Election in 2020

Name of the Political Parties	Seats Contested	Seats Won
AGP	01	00
AIUDF	07	00
BJP	26	09
BPF	37	17
Gana Suraksha Party (GSP)	35	01
INC	13	01
IND	00	00
UPPL	40	12

Source: Assam State Election Commission

Table 2 shows that seven political parties contested the 4th BTC election. The results of this election have altered the direction of Bodoland's politics. It became the first historic election in BTC, where, for the first time, the BPF did not form the council in Bodoland, despite being the single largest party. According to the table, BPF contested 37 of 40 seats and won 17, while UPPL won 12 of 40 seats, and BJP secured 9 of 26 seats contested in this election. Meanwhile, the Gana Sangram Parishad (GSP) and the INC won only one seat out of 35, with 13 seats contested. The AIUDF, which had won 4 seats in the 2015 BTC election, could not secure even a single seat this time.

4. Discussions

The illustration above shows that the fourth election resulted in a hung house. Therefore, as the single largest party and an alliance partner with the BJP in both state and central governments, BTC chief Hagrama Mohilary had earlier appealed to the BJP to extend its support to them in forming the council. However, after a serious deliberation among party leaders, the BJP decided to join hands with UPPL and GSP to form a post-poll alliance in the next BTC, which will be headed by the UPPL chief Promod Bodo (The Economic Times, 2020). This decision by the BJP took a new shape in BTC politics, where, for the first time in history, BTC formed an opportunistic post-poll alliance. The electoral verdict of the fourth BTC election was surprising for the BJP, as it assumed a kingmaker role in ethnic politics while being a nationalist political party. Here, several factors contributed to the changing dynamics of BTC politics.

4.1. Strategic Utilisation of Fractured Identity of the Bodos

Like other parts of Assam, Bodoland is ethnically and religiously diverse. Despite a Bodo majority, several non-Bodo communities also inhabit this region, each with their own identities and aspirations that differ from those of the Bodos. At the same time, intra-group differences also exist among the Bodo tribes themselves. These differences, including religious identity, ideology, and aspirations, have become evident over the long years of the Bodo movement and have continued to evolve from the 1st Bodo Accord to the 3rd Bodo Accord. For example, there was a religious and ideological difference between the two major armed militant groups of Bodos, i.e., the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), which led to intra-ethnic violence and fratricide killings in Bodoland (Sahni, 2002). Similarly, diverse identities among Bodos also lead to the formation of different regional political parties within the community. For instance, BPF was initially the only regional political party to emerge from the Bodoland movement. As a result, the people of Bodoland have sympathy for the party, which led to the continuous dominance of BPF in BTC politics from 2005 to 2020. Nevertheless, owing to intra-group, religious, and ideological differences among the Bodo people, another regional party, namely the UPPL, was established in Bodoland. Earlier, BPF had a monopoly over the politics of Bodoland at both the state and local levels. However, after the formation of UPPL, it became an alternative for the people (Hassan, 2020), leading to a decline in the BPF's influence in Bodoland's politics at both the state and local levels. Such a fractured identity within a group allows the national party to enter the regional space. The BJP strategically replaced BPF as the alliance partner of the BJP-led NDA government in 2020, and it then allied with UPPL in local, state, and federal politics. There were sufficient indications that the UPPL and the BJP had entered into an unofficial electoral understanding before the fourth BTC election poll (Deka, 2020), which later evolved into state politics in Assam and national (Lok Sabha) politics.

One of the noted academicians of the Bodoland region argued that fractured identity within the Bodo community shapes the BJP's proliferation in the region, which was also accepted by the leaders and workers of the BJP and UPPL during the interview. During the In interviews, several voters from the Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts also stated that during the fourth BTR election, the BJP successfully utilised the diverse nature of the people in the Bodoland region. In this regard, Bhuyan et al. (2022) argued that intra-ethnic confrontation within the Bodo community has been evident since the Bodoland movement. Later, these intra-ethnic confrontations were extended into the politics of the BTR, leading to the creation of fractured identities arising from ideological, objective, and aspirational differences. Moreover, it was observed that the BJP's successful strategy to capitalise on the fractured identity within Bodo communities is mainly responsible for the party's rise in the politics of Bodoland (Bhuyan et al. 2022).

Like other parts of Assam, Bodoland is ethnically and religiously diverse. Despite a Bodo majority, several non-Bodo communities also inhabit this region, each with its own identities and aspirations that differ from those of the Bodos. Moreover, the Bodos themselves are not a homogeneous community. Intra-group differences based on religion, language, and other factors also exist within the Bodo community (Bhattacharyya, 2018). These differences, including religious and linguistic identity, ideology, and aspirations, have become evident over the long years of the Bodo movement and have continued to evolve from the 1st Bodo Accord to the 3rd Bodo Accord. For example, there was a religious and ideological difference between NDFB and BLTF, which led to intra-ethnic violence and fratricide killings in Bodoland (Sahni, 2002). Such a diverse identity also leads to the formation of different regional political parties within the community. For instance, initially, BPF was the only regional political party representing the Bodo, a result of the Bodoland movement. Therefore, the people of Bodoland have sympathy for the party, which resulted in the continuous dominance of BPF in BTC politics from 2005 to 2020. However, due to intra-group and religious, linguistic, and ideological differences among the Bodo people, another regional party emerged in Bodoland, namely the UPPL. Earlier, BPF had a monopoly over the politics of Bodoland at both the state and local levels. However, after the formation of UPPL, it became an alternative for the people (Hassan, 2020), leading to a decline in the BPF's influence in Bodoland's politics at both the state and local levels. Such a fractured identity within a group allows the national party to enter the regional space. The BJP strategically replaced BPF as the alliance partner of the BJP-led NDA government in 2020, and it then allied with UPPL in local, state, and federal politics. There were sufficient indications that due to the fractured identity between the

BPF and UPPL, the BJP and UPPL had entered into an unofficial electoral understanding before the fourth BTC election poll (Deka, 2020), which later evolved into state politics in Assam and national (Lok Sabha) politics.

4.2. Deepening the Membership strength of the BJP in BTR

Another significant indicator of the BJP's proliferation in the Bodoland region is the increasing strength of the party's primary membership in BTR. As per information from the Assam BJP office and the district BJP offices in BTR, it is observed that, like the rest of the state, the party launched the Prime Membership Abhiyan in 2014 in BTR. Since then, the BJP's membership has steadily increased in Bodoland. But there are no digitised records of the party's first two primary membership drives in the region, held in 2014 and 2019. However, during the interview, the BJP's office secretaries at the state and district offices under BTR stated that, following the 3rd Bodoland Accord of 2020, membership has surged to a massive level. The table below shows the number of prime members of the party in the Bodoland region up to the latest drive in 2024.

Table 3: Registered Members of BJP in Bodoland Region

Date	District	LAC	Form Filled
		1 No. Gossaigaon	23,451
04.10.2024	Kokrajhar	2 No. Dotma (ST)	19,370
		3 No. Kokrajhar (ST)	22,903
		4 No. Baokhungri	41,684
		5 No. Parbatjhora (ST)	44,258
	Total:		1,51,666
20.09.2024	Chirang	19 No. Sidli Chirang (ST)	22,231
		20 No. Bijni	45,522
	Total:		67753
04.10.2024	Baksa	41 No. Manas	44,211
		42 No. Baksa (ST)	43,291
	Total:		87502
19.09.2024	Tamulpur	43 No. Tamulpur (ST)	42,923
		44 No. Goreswar	48,425
	Total:		91348
		45 No. Bhergaon	45,422
04.10.2024	Udalguri	46 No. Udalguri (ST)	42,343
		47 No. Mazbat	41,426
		48 No. Tangla	44,184
	Total:		173375

Sources: Assam Province BJP office and District Offices of the BJP, BTR

Table 3 presents the current membership strength of the BJP in the BTR. The district office secretaries of the Bodoland region's BJP argued that the party has strengthened its political roots in the BTR districts since 2014. During the interview, the district presidents of the BJP in Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts asserted that the party's primary goal was to achieve a substantial membership base of 40,000 in each assembly constituency within the Bodoland region. Notably, the preceding table indicates that eight Assam State Assembly constituencies have successfully reached their respective goals in the region, whereas only four constituencies, i.e., Gossaigaon, Dotma, Kokrajhar, and Sidli Chirang, have not. Of these four constituencies, three are in the Kokrajhar district. In this regard, they also observed that for a long time, the Kokrajhar district has been a bastion of the BPF. However, the party has increased its membership strength in these constituencies compared to the first two drives. As the

table highlights, the districts have attained 151666, 67753, 87502, 173375 and 91348 registered members of the BJP, respectively, as of the last membership drive of 2024. The table also highlighted that not only in the non-reserved Legislative Assembly Constituency (LAC) but also in the ST reserved LACs, except Dotma, Kokrajhar, and Sidli Chirang, the membership strength of the BJP has attained its goal. As informed by the district presidents of the BJP in the Baksa and Kokrajhar districts, the BJP's membership drive has accelerated since 2020. The increase in membership in these LACs is symbolically significant, as it indicates the BJP's proliferation in tribal-dominated areas that were previously assumed to be the pocket votes of the BPF or UPPL.

4.3. Massive level of the BJP campaign

The fourth BTC election served as a semi-final for the upcoming Assam Assembly election, anticipated in 2021. It was an experiment for the BJP to expand its plan in the northeast, testing the party's potential in an unfamiliar zone. The BPF won all 12 assembly seats in Bodoland in 2016, while the BJP won none (Deka, 2020). Therefore, all the high-profile BJP leaders, including Himanta Biswa Sarma and Sarbananda Sonowal, actively participated in the BTC election campaign. Mr Sarma, a star campaigner of the BJP, proactively participated in various public meetings, bike rallies, and other campaigning activities for the fourth BTC election. During the campaigning, allegations and counter-allegations between Himanta Biswa Sarma and Hagrama Mohilary remained appalling in the multi-ethnic, democratic setting of Assam (Hassan, 2020).

Alongside Sarma, Sarbananda Sonowal is also playing a crucial role in increasing the BJP's popularity and support base in Bodoland. As reported, then-Chief Minister Mr Sarbananda Sonowal had attended an election meeting in Nimua, Baksa, where, during his public address, he urged the politically informed citizens of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) to endorse BJP candidates for holistic development (Singh, 2020). He underscored the party's dedication to implementing transformative reforms across BTR's four districts and to rectifying years of mismanagement by ensuring the efficient allocation of central and state government resources. In the same meeting, Sonowal again urged voters to extend their support to the BJP's leadership, as he believed the party's developmental policy was necessary for Bodoland's overall development (Singh, 2020). Such active engagement was instrumental in establishing the BJP's regional presence in BTC politics in 2020.

4.4. The factor of Anti-incumbency

Anti-incumbency factors have significantly affected the outcome of the fourth BTC election, reducing Hagrama Mohilary's chances of re-election. Before the election, some analysts and commentators suggested that people did not like the status quo, and the numerous corruption claims against the former BTC head could significantly impact the outcome (India Today, 2020). Since the formation of the BTC under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the BPF's continued success has resulted in the monopolisation of certain political elites and increased corruption in Bodoland's governance. While addressing a crowd at an election meeting, the BJP leader, Dr Sarmah, alleged corruption charges against the BPF leaders prior to the 2020 elections for the BTC. He also alleged that BPF council members misappropriated central and state funds for personal gain (Staff, 2020). The dissatisfaction of these ordinary people leads them to consider an alternative party in BTC. During the interview, some respondents stated that since the formation of BTC, the BPF has played a dominant role in the politics of Bodoland and has governed the BTC without any interruptions from other national or regional parties. Therefore, a conventional ruling elite emerged within the party, which began to undermine the people's dissatisfaction with the region's socio-political, economic, and administrative mechanisms. There is also manifest uneven development, massive corruption in the utilisation of public funds, infrastructural gaps, poor road conditions in rural areas, and even political patronage in Bodoland, which has led to a massive anti-incumbency wave against the BPF regime. Similarly, several respondents gave examples of how the political elite of the BTC misused public funds in the name of road construction, implementation of government schemes, etc., in the Bodoland region during the BPF government.

A similar allegation was also made by Sarbananda Sonowal during the electoral campaign, in which he raised corruption charges against the long-serving BPF government, highlighting the embezzlement of public funds and corruption in BTC, which had prevented much-needed development in the region. He said the BJP would end

corruption in Bodoland if it won BTC, as it has in the rest of the state (Singh, 2020). Additionally, the Kokrajhar-centric development agenda of the BPF government fuelled public dissatisfaction with the BPF in the BTC's fourth election, indirectly helping the BJP, UPPL, and other political parties increase their strength in the Bodoland region.

4.5. Impact of the 3rd Bodo Accord and Developmental Agendas of the BJP

The 3rd Bodoland Accord resulted from years of sustained mass mobilisation by the Bodo in the Bodoland region. Since 1996, this region has become the hotspot for ethnic violence, both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic, as well as movement against the government, which makes the entire area more violent and leads to massive homelessness. Therefore, in January 2020, the 3rd Bodoland Accord was signed, and this tripartite BTR agreement significantly contributed to the development of a new political spectrum in the BTC (Hassan, 2020) and to peace and development in the Bodoland region. Regarding the Accord, Home Minister Amit Shah stated that 'this 3rd Bodo agreement is another success of the PM's vision of Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas' (Press Information Bureau, 2020). Through this Accord, the long years of violent movement have ended, and over 1500 armed cadres abjured violence and joined the mainstream. According to the provisions of this Accord, the Union Government will provide a unique developmental package of ₹1,500 crore over three years to undertake specific projects for the development of Bodoland areas (Press Information Bureau, 2021). It also promised to establish new institutions, including central and state universities, a medical science institution, and a National Institute of Technology (NIT), among others, for the overall development of the region. However, different academicians and civil society groups argued that this accord would consolidate the BJP in the ethnic regional space of Bodoland. Bhuyan (et al. 2022) also observed:

'On the one hand, the 3rd Accord consolidates the autonomy of the Bodos and institutionalises their identity on a wider scale. However, from an electoral point of view, it was just insinuating an unprecedented shift rooted in the consolidation of the BJP in the politics of the north-east, or what may be called the *Rising Tide of Saffron*.' (Bhuyan et al., 2022).

Therefore, the 3rd Bodo Accord has enabled the BJP to strengthen its regional base ahead of next year's Assembly election. The BJP itself believes it is imperative to be part of the council to consolidate its position in the region ahead of next year's Assam Assembly election (Basumatary, 2020).

4.6. Social Consolidation

The Bodo are the largest plains tribe in Assam, primarily residing in the four districts of the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River, namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. The Bodo people make up less than one-third of Bodoland's total population. In contrast, the non-Bodo population comprises around 70 per cent, including Assamese, Tea Tribes (Adivasis), Bengalis, Muslims, Koch Rajbanshi, Rabha, and Nepalis (Hassan, 2021). Therefore, the non-Bodo vote becomes crucial to winning the election, mainly if all this follows a similar pattern (Pandey, 2020). Drawing on references from Naba Sarania, the BJP attempted to consolidate all non-Bodo voters in the Bodoland area in the fourth BTC election. For example, in the fourth BTC election, the BJP provided candidature to all the Bodo and non-Bodo people. This is not an overstatement when considering the current BTC executive committee. Several non-Bodo members are elected from the BJP, including Arup Kuman Dey (Fakiragram), Abhiram Mahanayak (Thuribari), Gautam Das (Mathanguri), Dharma Narayan Das (Nagrijiuli), Sanjib Tanti (Nonwi Serfang), Diganta Baruah (Mwdwibari), among others. Additionally, the BJP has adopted a bottom-up approach throughout its entire political journey, which has enabled it to make inroads in tribal areas and portray itself as the insider party (Bhuyan et al., 2022).

4.7. Strong Leadership of the BJP in Assam

Leadership is one of the most critical factors for the success of any political party. After independence, in the first three general elections, the INC became the single largest party in Indian politics, where its leadership played a prominent role in the party's successes. Since 2014, the BJP has played a dominant role in Indian politics, with its national leadership a key factor in its rise to power. As with national politics, the state politics of Assam is also

dominated by the BJP, where the strong leadership of Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, Sarbananda Sonowal, and other political leaders played a significant role in the BJP's sudden success. This leadership factor has also become very prominent with the recent victory of the BJP in the politics of BTC, Assam. As discussed above, the three earlier BTC elections, in 2005, 2010, and 2015, were entirely dominated by the BPF, the most potent regional political party in Bodoland, under the strong leadership of Hagrama Mohilary. However, in the most recent BTC election, in 2020, the BJP emerged as the dominant and most influential political party in the BTAD area. The BJP got only one seat in the third BTC election of 2015. However, it suddenly increased to nine in the 2020 election, where strong leadership, electoral decisions, and the election campaign played a significant role in the BJP's recent success in the BTC election. In this regard, we cannot overlook the political nimbleness of Himanta Biswa Sarma, Sarbananda Sonowal, and other prominent BJP leaders who actively participated in the election campaign, rallies, and public meetings to popularise their policies and agendas among voters.

4.8. Particular focus on local issues

Although the BJP is a national political party in India, it primarily focuses on national and state-level issues. However, it has become more regionally focused since 2014, and BTAD is at the top of its priority list. The BJP government began addressing local issues and problems in BTAD that had previously remained unresolved. One of the most crucial issues of BTAD was the enduring movement of NDFB, which was resolved through the 3rd Bodoland Accord of 2020 by integrating all NDFB fractions as well as other Bodo organisations like ABSU and providing them the BTR, replacing the earlier BTC and also promising to offer some new institutions like Central and State Universities, a Medical Science Institution, a National Institute of Technology (NIT), etc. Additionally, BJP leaders assure the people that they will eradicate problems such as corruption, favouritism, and the embezzlement of public funds in Bodoland and ensure equal development throughout the BTAD region.

5. Conclusion

The provision of the Autonomous District Councils were established under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India to preserve, promote, and sustain the ethnic identity and self-governing system for the tribal people of the four northeastern states of India, including Assam. Currently, there are three autonomous district councils in Assam (Gogoi, 2018). Ethnic political parties traditionally dominated the politics of these autonomous councils, enabling them to fulfil their aspirations. Slowly and steadily, a right-wing Hindu nationalist party, namely the BJP, began to enter the politics of these autonomous councils. For example, we can discuss the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). Earlier, the politics of KAAC were dominated by either the INC or the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). However, in the last two elections of KAAC, the BJP became the most dominant force in Karbi Anglong. Like KAAC, the BJP also began to proliferate in the politics of the BTC.

As we have already discussed the trends in BTC's politics, we observe that since its formation, BPF has successfully dominated BTC's politics for an extended period. However, after the formation of UPPL in Bodoland, it began challenging the BPF's monopoly in the region. These intra-group electoral rivalries benefited the national political parties in making inroads into the regional space, as evidenced by the fourth BTC election in Bodoland. The results of the fourth BTC election show how the BJP has capitalised on regional rivalries to create a presence at the BTC. Arguably, the BJP, as a national political party, was engaged in the politics of BTAD only after the formation of BTR in 2020. The increasing dominance of national political parties in local politics has raised questions about the existence and future of regional political parties. They always try to nationalise the regional space as a national political party. For example, in Assam, the AGP's role in Assam politics is declining after it entered into a coalition with a national political party. In Bodoland, the diverse ideologies and aspirations of the BPF and UPPL provide spaces for the BJP to mobilise voters in favour of the party, leading to changes in political trends throughout the region. The rising organisational strength, membership and support base and the improvement in the political performance of the BJP in BTR have shown two trends: one, the decline of political legitimacy of the traditional and regional political bodies among the natives of Bodoland; and second, growing acceptance of national political parties and their ideologies among the people. However, it can also be expected

that the divided regional space in BTR, if it joins hands, may challenge this possibility of nationalising the regional space.

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