

## Commentary

# Political Tension and Violence in Western Assam During India's 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election, 2014

Bhasker Pegu

The recurrence of violence in early May 2014 in western Assam, especially the Bodoland region, at the time when national elections were conducted in phased manner, is one of significant issues in the history of Indian democracy. The timing of targeted killings right after the Lok Sabha poll in the region has left many to wonder whether citizens can exercise their right to franchise according to their conscience. The orchestrated violence has been discussed hotheadedly in the political circles with a succour of national dimension as it had more to do with political parties' impending votes those churning secular rhetoric. The wave of violence in post-poll period in Bodoland autonomous region of Brahmaputra valley before the announcement of results indicated the looming peril in the north-eastern region, whose history is interwoven with ethnic mobilisation and violence by numerous indigenous groups. The massacre in Assam linked to the future political insecurity, threats and tensions among competing groups over political representation in the Parliament of India. The poll results also showed that majority of the voters were not in favour of the Bodo candidates in Kokrajhar constituency.

**Keywords:** Political Violence, Peace Accord, Political Representation, Lok Sabha Polls, Kokrajhar constituency

The recurrence of violence in early May 2014 in western Assam, especially of Bodoland region, at the time when national elections were conducted in phased manner, is one of significant issues in the history of Indian democracy. The timing of targeted killings right after the Lok Sabha poll in the region has left many to wonder whether citizens can exercise their right to franchise according to their conscience. The orchestrated violence has been discussed hotheadedly in the political circles with a succour of national dimension as it had more to do with political parties' impending votes those churning secular rhetoric. The wave of violence in post-poll period in Bodoland autonomous region of Brahmaputra valley before the announcement of results indicated the looming peril in

---

Bhasker Pegu is research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Guwahati, India.

the northeastern region, whose history is interwoven with ethnic mobilization and violence by numerous indigenous groups. The massacre in Assam linked to the future political insecurity, threats and tensions among competing groups over political representation in the Parliament of India. The poll results also showed that majority of the voters were not in favour of the Bodo candidates in Kokrajhar constituency.

The political-administrative headquarter of the Bodos—Kokrajhar— as well as the parliamentary seat with the same name which Bodoland statehood advocates has always hold continuously since decades has for the first time witnessed multi-cornered contest among the Bodos themselves. Sansuma Khunggur Bwismuthiary, a fiery parliamentarian representing the Bodos, who was four-time MP was denied ticket from his own party—the ex-rebel floated Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) — but Chandan Brahma, another former powerful cabinet minister of Assam in alliance with ruling Congress state government, was given officially the luck for berth into Parliament. But Sansuma jumped for poll with his party's dissident supporters. Together the Bodo single group majority parliamentary constituency showed the entry of high profile candidates like Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary, a former National Security Guards (NSG) chief and former Meghalaya governor on Trinamool Congress ticket. Again, the unified lobby of over 20 organizations of non-Bodo conglomerate of an organization named Sanmilita Janagosthiya Aikyamancha (SJA), against ruling elite of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) that has been advocating for integrated Assam, fair political representation, exclusion of non-Bodo majority villages, alleged social injustices and insecurity in Bodoland areas had created a wedge than ever before against the traditional incumbent representing Bodo voices cutting across religious, linguistic and ethnic lines. The non-Bodos altogether constitute over 70 per cent whereas Bodos are close to 30 per cent, who becomes the largest single ethnic group in autonomous territory.

The consensus candidate of this amalgamated unison was again a pro-talk former guerilla with a name of his own during his rebel days with dreaded 709<sup>th</sup> battalion of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)—Heera Saraniya—who is a non-Bodo. His real name is Naba Kumar Saraniya, who belongs to Saraniya Kachari tribe, a sub-group of once umbrella Bodo-Kachari fold, where Bodos too are one of it. With the passage of time and cultural influences over the centuries, the Saranias like many other ethnic groups now have emerged themselves from monolithic lineage who no more speaks their original Bodo-Kachari language but a variant closer to Assamese tongue. The Bodos are the largest of Bodo-Kachari ethnicity whose sub-groups are spread across a few northeastern states and neighbouring West Bengal. Kokrajhar is a constituency reserved for Schedule Tribes (ST). Heera Saraniya's claim of being an ST was contested by Bodo groups even after the acceptance of nomination for the Lok Sabha polls. Some indigenous groups had challenged the credibility of his certificate. Meanwhile, Heera Saraniya was expelled by pro-talk Ulfa group for contesting in the election which the outfit says their "conflict situation" has not been resolved hitherto to participate in Indian parliamentary democracy.

The All Bodoland Minority Students' Union (ABMSU) and a faction of All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) had indeed come out in open support of Heera Saraniya during the poll campaigns asking people to vote for who can represent the causes

of non-Bodos. The organizational influence of ABMSU in minority areas who clubbed with similar advocating groups representing interests of majority but unrepresented non-Bodos was believed to have shifted the voting behaviour this time. The Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrants as well as the Koch Rajbongshi communities' social organizations have outwardly expressed their opposition against the bifurcation of Assam especially the creation of Bodoland state.

The organizations of Koch Rajbongshis too had been demanding creation of Kamatapur state, whose organizations were invited for talk in September 2013 with the centre after an intense series of mobilization in lower Assam. The proposed Kamatapur map overlapped the present Bodoland territory as well as part of West Bengal which is based on historic Koch dynasty.

The non-Bodo interests in the election campaigns were very crystal clear: they want alternative voices other than the Bodos to represent them in the Parliament. It was in these circumstances Heera Saraniya was extolled by the majority non-Bodo amalgamated population of BTAD especially in Kokrajhar constituency. The non-Bodo population of this part of the state mainly comprises the caste Assamese, Koch Rajbongshis, Adivasis, SaraniyaKacharis, Bengali-speaking Hindus and Bengali-speaking Muslims. In fact, it was reported that the incumbent four-time MP Sansuma was denied ticket by his party because he raised more of Bodo issues ignoring the concerns of other communities. The BPF leadership sensing the possible erosion of vote parted with the firebrand leader.

Earlier before India went for national election, the influential All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) had opposed the Centre's pacifying move of setting up an expert committee on the feasibility of Bodoland state to carve out of Assam to restraint rising conflict and tension in northeast region in the wake of Telangana state demarcation from Andhra Pradesh. However, the Hagrama Mohilary—led ruling BPF had strongly endorsed the Centre's announcement plummeting the Bodoethno-nationalists into disparate camps during the following polls. The ABSU had been advocating for direct application of Article 2, 3 and 4 for demarcation of separate Bodoland state instead of such committees which allows the Parliament virtually in unilateral manner by simple majority vote. ABSU claims that their demand was a constitutional right in order to protect their language, culture and identity without victimizing others. Contemporary Bodo nationalists have asserted their indigeneity that the land of Assam historically belongs to them. Their forefathers had ruled over the Assam valley till the advent of the Ahoms in 1228 C.E. The Ahom kingdom lasted about 600 years until insurrectionists and Burmese intruders plundered the valley. The Burmese depredation ended with the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826, a place located by the Irrawaddy river in present day central Myanmar, when British colonial troops intervened after royal call for assistance to restore peace and stability in the region. The Anglo-Burmese war is regarded as one of the longest and most expensive war that colonialists had ever waged in Indian history.

There were reports of clashes between BPF and ABSU workers in the run-up to poll in Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts (BTAD). In fact, the ABSU had extended their support to independent candidate, UrkhaoGwra Brahma, a former MP and former student leader. The polarization among Bodos themselves and non-Bodo indigenous

cum immigrants' brigade filled the political ambience of recent Lok Sabha poll lurking in deep unprecedented outcome. The spurt of poll related political violence was highest in Bodoland region in Assam in recently held election according to the police.

The implication of non-Bodo elected lawmaker was that it could harness the political mileage of Bodo that was held previously by non-Bodo conglomerate majority that would likely rift the demands for separate state and possible policy repercussions.

The tilting powers of crafting federal unit from existing state by the central government have observable lacunae as was evident with recent tensions in Andhra Pradesh. This phenomenon of carving separate state is contentiously marked by opposition in Assam's Bodoland region within in every move toward such direction. The chief minister of Assam had to assured time and again during his election campaigns and before in lower Assam that there would be no further division of Assam. The psychology of living in politically Bodo dominated homeland have posed serious unimaginable dilemma in the minds of heterogeneous social classes and groups whose political mobilization has been on rise since the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003.

The political arrangement of territorial autonomy to the Bodos was accommodated by centre under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution as a response to years of armed movement of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). The political movement for autonomous territorial unit in northern belt of Brahmaputra river called Udayachal was started in 1967 by the Plain Tribes Council of Assam (PTCA) before the birth of Bangladesh. The Udayachal movement, idealized by all plain tribes of Assam, had suffered immature death due to divisions in the rank and file of leadership. The movement of 1970s under such circumstantial failure came to ABSU dominance from 1987 onwards, which began bold assertion for separate homeland. The 1987 movement for Bodoland with "divide Assam 50:50" slogan was stirred up by late Upendra Nath Brahma, revered as "father of the Bodos", expressing discrimination against the then sitting Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government, the political party that won the assembly polls formed after the students-led six-year long anti-foreigners' agitation.

A series of repression through anti-terror laws were pronounced by government to douse the Bodo uprisings in late nineties. In 1993, a proposal of autonomous arrangement within Assam was rejected over differences in boundary issues by the Bodo nationalists. The other way round was escalating violent armed movement in following years that triggered inter-group riots and large scale displacement of East Pakistani origin Muslims and colonial era immigrant group such as Adivasis. The 2003 BTC settlement came only after defined territorial arrangement with decentralized powers and functions along with recognition of Bodo language under Eight Schedule was laid down. It was conceived that peace had returned. But there had been renewed occurrence of violence since 2008 mostly targeted at immigrant settlers. In 2012, the inter-ethnic riots led to large scale displacement of Bodos as well as Muslim communities in the region which also witnessed flight of northeastern people from Indian metros due to fear of reprisals. It is notable to mention that in 2003 the Sixth Schedule which was applicable only in hill areas of northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura was amended to conciliate the grievances of Bodos overlooking the other communities' interests. Even the assembly house of Assam does not have single non-Bodo legislator of the twelve

representatives of Bodoland region. The constituencies are all reserved for schedule tribes that are virtually won by ethnic Bodos which is resented by the non-Bodos resulting in accusation of usurping voices of concerns and protests. The delivery of good governance based on the multi-cultural mosaic by the ruling party in the special administrative region is questioned. The Bodo student group had termed the BPF-run BTC as a decade of “misrule”. The years of dissension and deprivation of non-Bodos had found outlet of expression through the ballot. Of course, the rise of some section of leaders among the non-Bodos for petty interests of their own cannot be ruled out. The Centre’s peace policy of intervention and accord with particular ethnic group had failed to address the democratic voices of many communities leaving vast majority in aggrieved state. The ethnic leadership of autonomous council must opened up their ears and eyes to social realities and the concerns of the other communities if they are meant for inclusive development.

The capricious climate of unpredictable political future and uncertain representation of indigenous Bodo voices in India’s national Parliament had unleashed unto killings and burning of houses against immigrants by invisible hand of politics. In addition to speculation of ethnic militia involvement in current Assam violence, local media reports and victims were alleging that surrendered poachers and forest guards of famed United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) listed World Heritage Site, Manas National Park, too have their hands. History tells us that permanent settlement of immigrants is resented across Assam and in other parts of North East India due to threats of cultural identities, competing fight for resources as well as fear of outnumbering in election.

Candidate	Party	Votes
Naba Kumar Sarania (Hira)	Independent	634428
UrkhaoGwra Brahma	Independent	278649
Chandan Brahma	Bodoland Peoples Front	243759
Sabda Ram Rabha	Independent	20074
RanjitShekharMooshahary	All India Trinamool Congress	17537
SansumaKhunggurBwismuthiary	Independent	11239
None of the above	None of the above	18183

*Figure 1.00: Lok Sabha poll result of Kokrajhar parliamentary constituency, 2014. The figure shows independent candidate Naba Kumar Sarania had the largest votes share in the poll. Source: eci.nic.in*

The poorer and less resilient groups settled in vulnerable spots of forest tracts become target in expression of political resentments and grievances. The National Register for Citizens (NRC) should be speeded up in the region to distinguish between citizens and aliens so that legally settled common people do not become frequent target and stay wary with Bangladeshi tag. The deportation of illegal migrants that is raised with political overtones should be dealt as per acceptable international norms with the concerned countries so that bilateral relationship is not affected. These horrendous incidents of

recurring conflict are withering moral bonding among the communities in Assam over the decades. Political blame game at nationwide scale without pragmatic handling would spur more sufferings to vulnerable groups in northeastern region. The post-poll violence in Assam is part of nexus between identity politics and pretension over political representation of the dominant indigenous group that was perceived to be always theirs since prerequisites of post-BTC Accord and ethnic aspiration have much to do with national voices. The mandate against ruling party of the region is perceived as verdict against monolithic ethnic dominance which would be very crucial toward understanding ethno-nationalist movements. The victory of Naba Kumar Saraniya with overwhelming votes share only proved the political discontent of various social groups.

It is increasingly observed that Assam violence has national implication which is to be taken seriously. While keeping the much-cared about ethnic autonomies intact of the indigenous groups, the aspiration for development and political representation of unsecured and vulnerable divergent groups must be addressed equally in northeast India. Stringent measures against culprits involved in violence would set an exemplar to prevent repeated occurrence since the enduring consequences do not fall only upon a particular community after mindless massacres. The government's talk of arming people with weapons would be a myopic measure that would only falter the restive situation. Above all, the government, student organizations, civil society groups and political parties of both Bodos and non-Bodos together should evolve confidence building measures to reach at common ground to conciliate and co-exist peacefully in heterogeneous society. Partisanship and politicking are uncalled for. The people must learn to live in harmony in a democracy together irrespective of political difference. This is urgently needed for the sake of long lasting peace and stability in the region as well as to prove the quintessence of being world's largest democracy.

## References

- Saikia, Pahi (2011): *Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in North East India*, Routledge, New Delhi.
- All Bodoland Students' Union campaigns for ex-Ulfa leader Hira Sarania, April 7, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/All-Bodoland-Minority-Students-Union-campaigns-for-ex-Ulfa-leader-Hira-Sarania/articleshow/33381463.cms> (Accessed August 21, 2014)
- Rebel kills 30 in Assam for not voting for Bodos, May 3, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/Rebels-kill-30-in-Assam-for-not-voting-for-Bodos/articleshow/34550292.cms> (Accessed August 21, 2014)
- Relatives bury victims of Indian national park massacre, May 5, 2014. <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/05/04/india-election-violence-idINL3N0NQAQ20140504> (Accessed August 21, 2014)
- Pegu, Bhasker (2014): 'The real story of the conflict in western Assam', May 8. [www.livemint.com/Opinion/DkmMauJSK8Wtcxy5F82o7H/The-real-story-of-the-conflict-in-western-Assam.html](http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/DkmMauJSK8Wtcxy5F82o7H/The-real-story-of-the-conflict-in-western-Assam.html) (Accessed August 21, 2014)