Tea Tribes Voters in Udalguri District: A Study of Political Participation and Perceptions in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Election

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Abstract*:* With an emphasis on the Udalguri district, this study investigates the political engagement, awareness, and perspective of the Tea Tribes s community in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) elections within the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). One of the most disadvantaged groups in the area is the Tea Tribes, who were first brought to Assam as plantation labourers. One hundred fifty Tea Tribes voters participated in field surveys to gather primary data for the study, which uses a mixed-method approach to incorporate qualitative and quantitative data. The main tool for collecting data was an interview schedule. According to the findings, the percentage of votes cast by Tea Tribes s voters may seem high, but it does not represent meaningful or educated political engagement. Low levels of political awareness and varying perceptions of political engagement indicate that participation is often symbolic rather than substantive. In an area where their identity has long been disputed, some people view voting as a way to establish their citizenship. Participation is a calculated move to assert rights and representation for a community that is more politically unaware. The study highlights the necessity of focused political education and inclusion initiatives to guarantee that Tea Tribes democratic participation is meaningful and well-informed.

Index Terms - Tea Tribes**,** Political Participation**,** BTC Election**,** Political Awareness and Bodoland Territorial Region

Introduction

The political participation of marginalised community is a crucial indicator of the growth and inclusion of a democratic society. The Tea Tribes population, derived from Adivasi labourers brought by the British colonial authority to work on Assamese tea plantations, is among one of the most socially and politically disadvantaged groups in India (Baruah, 2003). Their political participation has frequently been restricted, dispersed, and little understood despite their substantial population presence in Assam, especially in districts like Udalguri inside the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is an independent administrative body that oversees the BTR and has a significant influence on the politics in the

area. Although the BTC elections are an essential political exercise, it is still unclear how much the Tea Tribes voters actually participate in this process. Political participation is not merely about casting votes; it encompasses awareness, informed decision-making, and the ability to influence governance outcomes (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). However, for many voters from Tea Tribes community, it appears that participation in the BTC elections is driven more by symbolic necessity than by political consciousness.

Objectives of the Study:

This study seeks to examine the level of political participation, awareness, and perception among Tea Tribes voters in Udalguri district during the BTC elections.

Literature Review

The political participation of the Tea Tribes community in Assam has been the subject of growing academic interest, particularly in the context of their historical marginalization and evolving identity politics. Scholars such as Baruah (2003) and Sharma (2011) have laid the groundwork by highlighting the colonial roots of the Tea Tribes s s, who were brought to Assam as indentured laborers and have since remained on the periphery of political and social power. Their exclusion from mainstream political discourse has led to a fragmented sense of identity and limited political agency.

Recent studies have focused on the electoral behavior and political awareness of Tea Tribes voters. Laskar (2019) in her study on the Lok Sabha elections observed that while voter turnout among Tea Tribes s s is relatively high, it often lacks informed engagement, with many voters unaware of party ideologies or policy implications. Similarly, Das (2020) emphasized the gendered dimension of political awareness, noting that Tea Tribes women in Biswanath district exhibit growing interest in politics but still face structural barriers to full participation.

The politicization of identity among Tea Tribes s s has also been explored by Sharma (2018), who argues that their demand for Scheduled Tribe status and the formation of ethnic-based political organizations reflect a broader struggle for recognition and resource access. Thapa and Champia (2020) further elaborate on this in their book *Politics of Identity and Assertion of Tea Communities in Assam*, where they document the rise of grassroots movements and the community's efforts to assert political visibility.

Indrajit Sharma's work on identity politics in Assam situates the Tea Tribes s s within the larger framework of ethnic mobilization in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), where competition over land, resources, and representation has intensified inter-community tensions. This is echoed in the study by Singh (2008), which critiques the limited autonomy granted under the Sixth Schedule and its implications for non-Bodo communities in BTC-administered areas.

Broader literature on marginalized communities in India, such as Verba et al. (1995) and Rao (2023), underscores the importance of political awareness and civic education in fostering meaningful participation. These works argue that structural inequalities such as caste, class, and education continue to hinder the political empowerment of tribal and backward communities.

Together, these studies reveal a complex picture: while Tea Tribes s s are increasingly visible in electoral statistics, their participation often lacks depth due to historical marginalization, limited awareness, and fragmented identity politics. The literature calls for targeted interventions both institutional and educational to bridge this gap and ensure that political participation translates into genuine empowerment.

Research Methodology

In order to study the political participation among Tea Tribes voters in the Udalguri district, the present study employed a mixed-method approach that combined both qualitative and quantitative data. A total of 150 respondents were selected by using a probability sampling technique to guarantee representative and impartial participation in the structured field surveys used to gather primary data. The primary tool used to collect data was an interview schedule. Three tea estates in the Udalguri district—Dhunseri, Lamabari and Mazbat were the area of the study.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The data in table 1 shows a 100% voter registration rate among respondents. All 150 respondents surveyed have confirmed that they are registered voters. There were no unregistered respondents.

While such a complete registration rate may seem to reflect high political awareness or civic participation, in the context of the Tea Tribes communities, it also carries a deeper socio-legal significance. For many Tea Tribes voters, having one's name on the electoral roll is an essential form of identity affirmation and confirmation of citizenship, in addition to being a route to political participation. Voter registration is frequently seen as crucial proof of recognition and belonging within the Indian state in areas where citizenship and paperwork have historically been delicate topics. Therefore, the widespread voter registration in this area may be a reflection of civic intent as well as administrative outreach and the community's effort for social integration and legal protection.

Table 1: Voter Registration Status

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	150	100%
No	0	0
Total	**150**	**100%**

Data in Table 2 shows that out of the 150 respondents, 147 (98%) reported voting in the last Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) election. Only three respondents (2%) didnot vote. Voting, however, is often more than just a political act in the context of the Tea Tribes community; it is also a way to affirm one's place in the Indian democratic system, proclaim one's identity, and demand rights. Election participation is seen by many in this society as an essential declaration of citizenship and a proof of one's right to social, political, and economic rights.

The exceptionally high voter turnout (98%) among registered respondents reflects a strong motivation to participate in the electoral process.

The respondents who abstained from voting were migrant labourers who had left the tea gardens in quest of job elsewhere. Instead than being apathetic or disengaged, their absence from the polls is probably the result of logistical difficulties, suggesting that the obstacles were incidental rather than motivating.

Table 2: Voted in Last BTC Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	147	98%
No	3	2%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 3 shows that all 150 respondents (100%) reported that they "always" vote in elections.

The consistently high electoral participation aligns with the broader understanding that electoral participation among the Tea Tribes community in BTR is not just a civic duty but a deliberate and symbolic act of asserting citizenship and socio-political recognition.

As discussed earlier, voter registration and turnout are often motivated by the desire to claim inclusion, demand rights, and engage in processes that affirm their identity as rightful citizens. Given the socio-historical marginalisation of the community, consistent voting can be interpreted as a form of collective political assertion; a way to ensure visibility and inclusion in state mechanisms and welfare systems.

Table 3: Frequency of Voting

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always	150	100%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Table 4 shows that 33.33% of the respondents have contested an election for the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), while 66.67% have not. The limited contestation among respondents can be attributed primarily to structural and institutional factors within the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), which governs the region, reserves 40 of its 46 seats for Scheduled Tribes (STs). Since the majority of the Tea Tribes community in Assam is not classified as ST, their eligibility to contest BTC elections is severely limited to the handful of unreserved or nominated seats. The Tea Tribes s /Adivasi community is a significant demographic in the Udalguri area, and candidates from this community are usually fielded in the Non-ST or Open category seats. Furthermore, at the grassroots level, conventional Panchayati Raj Institutions are discontinued in BTR, and governance is carried out through Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs). While VCDCs play a role similar to that of panchayats, they do not operate through direct elections in the same way, which limits formal electoral opportunities for community members.

Table 4: Ever Contested in BTC Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	50	33.33%
No	100	66.67%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Data in Table 5 shows that only 35 out of 150 respondents (23.3%) reported being members of a political party, while the majority (76.7%) stated they are not formally affiliated with any party.

Although the overall rate of formal political party membership remains low, the fact that 33.33% of respondents have joined political parties reflects a growing political consciousness within the Tea Tribes community. A growing understanding that formal political activity may be required to express and satisfy long-standing demands for rights, welfare, and respect is shown by the growth of political affiliations.

Members of the Tea Tribes have strategically allied themselves with a variety of parties in recent years, frequently from different ideological backgrounds, in an effort to gain influence and representation in the political system.

Table 5: Political Party Membership

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	35	23.3%
No	115	76.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 6 show that early on, one-third (31.33%) of respondents reported frequent attendance at political rallies or meetings. Another 22.67% attend occasionally, while only a small portion (8.67%) reported never attending such events.

Participation in political rallies and meetings is relatively high among the Tea Tribes community. However participation isn't usually motivated by ideology or voluntarism. People are frequently mobilised by political parties or candidates, who set up transportation and occasionally offer incentives like food or small payments. This shows a complicated interaction between patronage-based mobilisation, socio-economic vulnerability, and political engagement. Many responders go because of social pressure, pecuniary support, or outside influence, even while some may do so out of genuine interest or support for party causes.

Nevertheless, such interactions often serve as a gateway to political exposure, which may, over time, foster greater awareness and involvement.

Table 6: Attendance in Political Rallies/Meetings

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Frequently	47	31.33%
Occasionally	34	22.67%
Never	13	8.67%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 7 shows that the majority of respondents (32.67%) selected "Others" as the basis for their voting decision, followed by candidate-based choices (28%) and party preference (24%). A smaller segment (15.33%) reported voting based on community preference.

The data reflect a diverse and fragmented set of motivations influencing voting behaviour within the Tea Tribes community.

Even though the majority of respondents vote based on party ideology or candidate qualifications, the majority of responses fall into the "Others" category. Caste and class dynamics, promises of social programs, personal benefits, and influence from employers or local authorities all of which are especially prevalent in community settings like tea estates are likely examples of this.

The comparatively large percentage of candidate-based voting indicates that candidates' visibility, accessibility, and personal reputation are important factors possibly more so than their more general ideological beliefs. Identity-based voting is still a factor, albeit not a dominating one, according to the influence of community preference (15.33%).

Table 7: Basis of Voting Decision

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Party	36	24%
Candidate	42	28%
Community Preference	23	15.33%
Others	49	32.67%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 8 shows that all 150 respondents (100%) reported being aware of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

The data indicate that respondents are aware of the BTC. This suggests that the existence and function of the Council are widely known in the community. Respondents are generally mindful that the BTC is headquartered in Kokrajhar, and that it plays a central role in local governance, development planning, and administration across the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

Table 8: Awareness of BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	100%
No	00	00%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 9 shows that 121 respondents (80.67%) reported knowing their local BTC representative, while 29 (19.33%) stated they did not.

While a significant majority of respondents are aware of their local BTC representative, nearly one-fifth remain unaware of either the name, party affiliation, or political role of their elected member.

Table 9: Knowledge of Local BTC Representative

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	121	80.67%
No	29	19.33%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 10 shows that a majority of respondents (65.33%) follow political news occasionally, while only 16% do so very regularly, and 10.67% are regular followers.

This distribution reveals that while there is a general interest in political news among the Tea Tribes community, sustained or habitual political engagement through news consumption remains limited. Most respondents appear to follow political developments on an irregular or issue-based basis, likely responding more to event-driven interest (e.g., elections, protests, rallies) than ongoing political discourse.

The relatively low percentage of "very regular" followers suggests that daily political awareness is not deeply embedded in the community's media habits. This could be due to factors such as limited access to consistent information sources, educational background, time constraints, or political fatigue. This trend also reflects an earlier pattern (seen in Table 9) where institutional knowledge (of BTC) is high, but awareness of representatives and political nuances is comparatively low.

Table 10: Regularity of Following Political News

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Regular	24	16%
Regular	16	10.67%
Occasionally	98	65.33%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 11 shows that social media used by 45.33% of respondents is the most popular source for political news, followed by television (28%). A smaller percentage depends on radio (1.33%), newspapers (4%), or other sources (21.33%), which could include political gatherings, mobile apps, or word-of-mouth.

Social media's predominance as a political news source emphasises the digital transformation of political communication, especially among younger or more mobile segments of the Tea Tribes society. Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are probably important platforms for information exchange, campaign messaging, and community discussion.

However, the low reliance on conventional media (such newspapers and radio) may also indicate to concerns of literacy, affordability, or accessibility. Particularly for people who have little exposure to digital media, television is still a vital medium. On the other hand, 21.33% of the respondents were found to be dependent on other sources of information as, informal networks, such as discussions in the workplace, tea garden quarters, or village meetings etc.

Table 11: Preferred Media for Political News

Media Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
TV	42	28%
Newspaper	06	4%
Social Media	68	45.33%
Radio	2	1.33%
Others	32	21.33%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 12 shows that a slight majority of respondents (57.33%) believe that political participation is necessary for development, while a significant minority (42.67%) disagree.

The data reveal a divided perception among respondents regarding the role of political participation in fostering development. While more than half recognise the importance of political involvement, a notable portion of the population remains sceptical or unconvinced of its impact on developmental outcomes.

This division may stem from lived experiences where political engagement has not consistently translated into tangible improvements in infrastructure, education, healthcare, or opportunities for livelihood.

Table 12: Is Political Participation Necessary for Development?

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	86	57.33%
No	64	42.67%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The data in Table 13 indicate that a majority of respondents (74.67%) believe their community is politically underrepresented, while only 25.33% disagree.

The perception of political underrepresentation is widespread among respondents. This may be because of the Sixth Schedule status of BTR due to which majority of the seats are reserved for ST.

Moreover, with Panchayati Raj Institutions discontinued in the region and replaced by Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs), which do not operate through regular democratic elections, the scope for grassroots political representation is limited for many marginalised groups. This fuels the sentiment that

the Tea Tribes community limiting both institutional access and a political voice, despite consistently participating in elections (as shown in earlier tables).

Table 13: Is Your Community Politically Underrepresented?

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	112	74.67%
No	38	25.33%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Findings & Discussion

The analysis of responses from 150 individuals belonging primarily to the Tea Tribes s community in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) reveals several critical insights into their patterns of political participation, awareness, representation, and media engagement.

To begin with, voter registration and turnout are near-universal within the surveyed population. All respondents reported being registered voters, and 98% stated they had voted in the last Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) election. Additionally, all respondents reported that they "always vote" in elections. Due to a low awareness level among the Tea Tribes community, voting is often seen as both a civic obligation and a means of proving one's identity and citizenship.

Many respondents view their inclusion in the electoral roll as vital documentation of their belonging in the Indian state, particularly in regions where citizenship documentation can have direct implications for access to state benefits and services.

However, political participation does not necessarily equate to political empowerment. While 15% of respondents are members of political parties—indicating a growing awareness that political affiliation is essential to advancing community demands, none reported ever contesting an election. This is mostly because of structural constraints: Tea Tribes s s are not recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Assam, therefore their presence is limited. The BTC has 40 elected seats especially reserved for STs. Further restricting opportunities for democratic contestation at the local level is the replacement of Panchayati Raj Institutions with Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs).

A significant majority of respondents (74.67%) believe that their community is politically underrepresented, reinforcing the disconnect between formal participation and substantive representation. Even while a large number of people attend political rallies—some regularly (31.33%) and others infrequently (22.67%)—their involvement is typically coordinated by political figures who offer food, transportation, or other financial incentives. This implies that participation at this level might be less empowered and more performative.

In terms of awareness, knowledge about the BTC as an institution is high (100%), but only 80.67% could identify their local BTC representative. This suggests that, although the institution is visible and its role is well-known, especially given its central administrative position in Kokrajhar, individual political figures are less well-known, possibly due to limited outreach, educational barriers, or political disengagement at the representational level.

Media engagement patterns further reflect a mix of awareness and limitations. The majority of respondents (65.33%) only rarely follow political news, compared to 26.67% who do so frequently or very frequently. The most popular source of political news is social media (45.33%), with television coming in second (28%). The low usage of radio and newspapers could be a reflection of shifting media consumption patterns, accessibility problems, or literacy levels. Notably, reliance on social media also raises concerns about the quality and reliability of political information being consumed.

Lastly, while a majority (57.33%) believe that political participation is necessary for development, a substantial 42.67% do not. This division probably reflects community-level dissatisfaction with the specific results of political participation, particularly in the absence of structural inclusion and representation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the paradox of high political participation but limited political representation among the Tea Tribes community in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Despite the high level of voter registration and participation, structural barriers like the Sixth Schedule's reservation policy and the dissolution of panchayati institutions limit their ability to run for office and be represented. The results also show that identity assertion and pragmatic incentives, rather than ideological alignment or empowerment, are frequently the driving forces behind political activity. The study does have several drawbacks, though. It may not accurately reflect the variety of experiences found in the larger BTR or other tea tribal populations because it is based only on primary data gathered from a specific district. Future research should adopt a broader geographic scope and incorporate comparative perspectives to deepen understanding of marginalised communities' political behaviour in northeast India.

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