

ABSTRACT

Election enables citizens to take part directly in the politics by selecting their representatives and to express their policy preferences (Joseph & Mahajan, 1991). On the other hand, Voting is the medium through which citizens participate in the election process. The voting pattern focuses on the determinants of why people vote as they do and how they take decision in this regard. In order to understand the voting pattern, the voting behaviour of the electorates needs to be understood. The trends in electoral politics are determined by voting behavior (Bashir & Khalid, 2019). The phrase ‘voting behaviour’ connotes more than just an examination of voting records. It is a compilation of voting statistics and a computation of electoral shifts. It indicates the analysis of individual psychological processes like perception, emotion, and motivation and their relation to the vote decision of group structures and functions and their relation to political action. It also indicates the institutional patterns such as the communication process, and their impact on elections (Eldersveld, 1951).

The sociological approach for measuring voting behaviour focuses on the co-relations between the voters and social settings. It put emphasizes to examine the intensions in the social context and to examine the effects on the voting behaviour of variables such as, caste, communities, socio-economic class, language, religion and rural-urban divides (Kumar & Rai, 2013). Thus, in the present study, religion is taken as the main determinant variable to explore various dimensions and effects of religion on voting behaviour through which a comprehensive picture of the state electoral politics has been tried to analyse. The study has taken voting behaviour as the entry point to explore various dimensions of religion in relation to state electoral politics.

In India, religion has been a motivating factor behind many major political developments. Religion plays an important role in influencing the voting preference of the electorates. In this context, it is interesting to observe that the politics in Assam was not distinctly centered on religion till the last two decades unlike the other parts of India. Electoral politics of the state in the last two decades has witnessed a rise in the number of political parties and the polarization of electorates in the name of religion (Kalita, 2016).

In the recent past, various significant phenomena had taken place in the state which drew the attention of the researcher to study the political atmosphere of the State from the point

of view of religion. In the politics of Assam, Jamiat actively involved itself in the formation of a political party for the very first time. In response to the upsurge of Muslim communal politics, the expansion of a counter narrative based on Hindutva ideology can also be witnessed in the sphere of the Assam state electoral politics. The winning of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 Lok Sabha and 2016 Vidhan Sabha elections made the counter narrative stronger. A constant effort from the part of BJP to polarize the voters by capturing the regional sentiments of Assamese society can be seen in the state. Thus, it becomes all the more important to know how these agendas get manifested at the grass-root level and how the common people have taken (accepted and internalised) these agendas. It is also important to study whether these agendas bring any change into the lives of the people or not. The consequences of these agendas can only be examined by primarily focusing on the voting behaviour of the electorates and the political sphere of the state as polarization in terms of religion, only serve the ultimate political goal of the political parties and organizations. Thus, along with the voting behaviour, the study has explored and analysed the sociological manifestations of BJP's political and religious agendas in selected politically significant sites.

The study has been conducted with the following objectives:

1. To look at the organizational structure, functioning and ideological principles of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Assam.
2. To account the historical trend of elections in Assam from 2006 Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly Election) and the role of religion in it.
3. To comprehend the role of religion in understanding the voting behaviour of the electorates and how it differs vis-à-vis caste, ethnic and religious groups.
4. To understand how the political and religious ideologies of BJP disseminate at the grass root level.

The present study has adopted the sociological model which focuses on the significance of social alignment reflecting the various divisions in a society. In focusing on social groups, the sociological model ignores the individual and the role of personal self-interest. This model considers class, gender, ethnicity, and religion as the most important dimensions of voting behaviour (cited in Kumar & Rai, 2013). As the present research work intends to study the religious aspects of voting behaviour, thus, it is considered as

more suitable to give a broad framework in looking at the empirical reality of the selected research sites.

Three Vidhan Sabha constituencies, viz., Nalbari (Sadar) from lower Assam, Tezpur from middle Assam and Jorhat Vidhan Sabha constituency from upper Assam from the Brahmaputra valley of Assam based on their geographical representations have been selected as the universe of the study. The main target groups of the study were general voters belonging to different political parties and different religious communities, political leaders of different political parties, leaders and workers of different organizations. The key informants are drawn from the above-mentioned categories through purposive sampling. About 75 respondents each from the three selected constituencies have been interviewed constituting a total of 225 respondents. To put on the record, the present study was conducted between the years, 2019 to 2022.

To better understand the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), an attempt has been made to study the organizational structure and how the different organizational bodies of BJP contribute to the functioning of the party. The study also tries to give a brief description about the affiliate organizations of Bharatiya Janata Party. In addition, the study also intends to understand the ideological principles of Bharatiya Janata Party and how over the period of time, the ideologies of the party evolved with the contribution of different prominent figures of the party. The study argues that the ideological principles of the party is rooted in its history, therefore, it makes an effort to understand the historical background under which BJP has emerged as a separate political party. The study insightfully looks at the organizational structure, functioning and ideological principles of Bharatiya Janata Party and also explores the journey of BJP and its affiliate organizations in Assam and Northeast, which in turn helps to have a comprehensive understanding of BJP and various dynamics related to it in the state politics as well as in the research sites. In this context, the study argues that the political construction of Seva served by the RSS and its affiliate organizations have been playing an instrumental role in the growth of Sangh Parivar, which further helped the BJP to expand its political dominance in Assam and the Northeast (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

In the study, efforts have been made to understand the electoral politics of Assam from the pre-Independence period to 2021 election, to highlight the communal angle in the electoral politics of Assam. In addition, the study also tries to analyze the electoral trends of Assam

in general from 2006 Vidhan Sabha election to 2021 Vidhan Sabha election and how religion played its role over the years. The study has also highlighted the electoral trends of the three selected research sites from 2006 Vidhan Sabha election onwards and try to understand the role of religion in those trends. Based on the records of the past elections, the researcher has tried to highlight and decipher the meaning, tune, and the line of communal politics in Assam. An attempt is thus made, to understand its genesis, evolution and the changing trends.

The study attempts to understand the voting behaviour of the electorates and the role of religion in it. The study also intends to study the politico-religious ideologies of Bharatiya Janata Party and how these ideologies disseminate at the grass roots. The study has attempted to understand whether these agendas bring any changes into the lives of people.

From the empirical data, discussion and analysis, the study concludes that a clear polarization based on religion has been manifested in all the research sites. Assam becomes a potential fertile ground for radical political mobilizations. In understanding the voting behaviour of the electorates, the identity of religion undermines all other aspects in Assam (as seen in the research sites). People are increasingly voting as Hindus or Muslims. Despite opposing CAA, caste Hindu Assamese people voted for BJP, because for them, the insecurity of *Miyas* undermines the insecurity of Bengali-speaking Hindus. It is observed that people have practiced their voting rights based on their comparative understanding of the threats from the outsiders.

The pro-Hindu image of BJP helps it to grab the Hindu votes irrespective of caste and communities. BJP has been successful in creating a narrative in which Congress become synonyms of AIUDF and the godfather of *Miyas* for the caste Hindu Assamese voters.

It is also observed that the Muslims did not seem to have voted for the Congress with the same intensity as the Hindus voted for the BJP in both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections in all the research sites. A kind of united Hindu vote and a divided Muslim vote could be one of the key reasons for the BJP's victories in constituencies with substantial Muslim populations, like Mangaldoi and Tezpur (Sharma et al., 2019). It is interesting to observe that the same Muslim people who criticize BJP as a communal party supported and voted for the AGP candidate despite knowing that AGP-BJP are in pre-poll alliance.

The Assamese-speaking Muslims are trying to create an identity based on language by segregating themselves from *Miyas*; while on the other hand, BJP and the right-wing organizations along with the Hindi-speaking Hindus are trying to create an identity based on religion. In both the identity constructions, the Bengali-speaking Muslims become the ‘other’. Caste Hindu Assamese people are not ready to accept *Miyas* as part of the same Assamese community. A fear psychosis is created in the name of *Miyaseven* in the areas with negligible *Miya* population like Nalbari and Jorhat. This fear is instrumental in the radicalization of society and also polarization of votes.

From the narratives in the field, it can be said that the elements of fear, anxiety and anger already exist (such as love jihad and cow slaughter) in the minds of Hindu people which makes it easy for BJP and other right-wing organizations to mobilize people against the Muslims. Because of such mobilizations, people associate themselves with right wing politics and as a result BJP has been gaining politically.

There has been a connection in the rise of BJP and RSS with the increase of organizing Hindu religious programmes and rituals such as, kirtans, Paalnaam, Hanuman puja, etc., in the research sites. It is also observed that as a counter to Hindu religious programmes and rituals, religious activities among the Muslims have also increased.

An increasingly exclusivist nature of buying and selling of lands can be observed in all the research sites where Hindus try to restrict the land ownership among the community members itself by not allowing the selling of lands to Muslims.

From the field experiences it can be argued that the Hindutva organizations are already successful in establishing Hindutva in the cultural and political imagination of the people. The thesis argues that although Hindutva organizations initially focused on adapting local cults and symbols (Bhattacharjee, 2016), but with the passing of time, they have been aggressively mobilizing people through the invocation of Hindu stereotypes like ‘Ram’ or ‘Ayodhya’, saffron tilak or Saffron clothes, etc. It is interesting to note how the local cultural icons like Sankardeva and Lachit Barphukans are being appropriated by right wing organizations. By doing that, they try to create a common identity or belongingness for people across different communities and ethnic groups to identify themselves as Hindus. Finally, it can be argued that Assam has become a fertile ground for the rise of Hindutva activities in the line of north Indian politics, which has been reflected in the polarization of Hindu votes in all the research sites during both Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections.