

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Election constitutes an important element in the democracy that enables citizens to take part directly in the politics by selecting their representatives and to express their policy preferences (Joseph & Mahajan, 1991). Election is the most important and integral part of politics. While in a democracy, politics is the art and practice of dealing with political power, election is the process of legitimization of such political power (Kaur, 2012). Election thus, legitimizes the power exercised by the government and elect government representatives (Joseph & Mahajan, 1991). Results of the election clearly open up the various aspects of human behaviour that help to point out the factors which shape their political character and voting preference. Election is an important factor to be understood in social sciences. It is a proper field of specialization. The study of election is known as psephology (Bashir & Khalid, 2019).

Voting is the medium through which citizens participate in the election process. It is the main form of exercising political participation in democratic states. Voting is an essential process in the democratic setup and plays a pivotal role in the smooth functioning and existence of democracy (Ganguly & Ganguly, 1975). Voting is an action of individual, which involves a definite behavioural act. Hence, it proves valuable for understanding the social and psychological trends. Voting is a process to understand the mood and behaviour of the respondents (Bashir & Khalid, 2019). It is considered as the mechanism of reaching consensus and at the same time an imperative means of institutionalizing conflicts amid various groups. It is one of those focal points of the democracy where political activities reach a high peak (Ganguly & Ganguly, 1975). Voting is defined in Universal Declaration of Human Rights as "A fundamental right of almost all citizens over the age of eighteen and it ensures that the will of the people is preserved" (Bashir & Khalid, 2019). Though, voting appears to be of transient importance apparently, it surely stirs us a great deal about the society and its linkage with the polity (Elkins, 1975). It is the way of representing political choice of mass in order to constitute government. Voting is an important tool for the respondents to become a responsible citizen and play an active role in matters of the state or in forming the government. In brief, voting is a

medium in a democratic setup to elect the leadership in order to run the affairs of the government (Bashir & Khalid, 2019).

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 behaviour (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). Voting behaviour pertains to the actions or inactions of citizens in respect of participating in the election that takes place for the members of their local, regional, or national governments. The behaviour results either in support for political candidates or parties or abstention from the voting process. The behaviour of voters can be traced to the benefits or disadvantages to their quality of life that they perceive would be a consequence thereof (Michalos, 2014). Voting behaviour and attitudes include the analysis of the voting intentions of the voters- whom they would vote for or have voted for, what are the considerations of voting, the issues that have an impact on their voting decisions, voters' satisfaction levels with the performance of the government, and the popularity ratings of the leadership and the ruling party. It also includes the participatory norms of the voters and their levels of participation in the elections (Eldersveld, 1951). Voting behaviour is shaped and reshaped at two levels. The first level emphasizes on the socio-cultural set ups which effects on the voting behaviour such as religion, caste, ethnicity, feudal structure, and power. On the other hand, the second level focuses on the other techniques such as deception, spreading rumours, believing conspiracy theories and wired projection of candidate at print and electronic media (Bashir & Khalid, 2019). Trends in voting or abstention from voting have demonstrable statistical relationships with the socio-economic characteristics of an electorate and the spatial context within which its political socialization has occurred. Among them, levels of income, age group, ethnicity, religious affiliation or beliefs, urbanization and region are conscious. (Michalos, 2014). A large

number of social and political determinants formulate the voting behaviour and religion is one of them. Religion as a determinant of voting behaviour is best expressed in the votes secured by the religious parties, who use religion for the purpose of electoral success (Bashir & Khalid, 2019).

The term voting behaviour has different connotations for different academic disciplines and the variables that they probe and compute are different from each other. The sociological approach for measuring voting behaviour uses socio-economic variables like class, occupation, ethnicity, sex and age for determining the support of electorates for political parties, candidates and finding co-relations. The focus of this approach is 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.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Over the years, an impressive body of sociological evidence has piled up which convincingly shows that there has been a relationship between religion and politics across history. Religion remains a significant aspect of the human condition even in modern societies and its impact penetrates into the political sphere as well (Ahmed, 1972). Both in the West and East, religion influences political and non-political processes and affects the operation of the institutional framework of the State (Shakir, 1979).

Religion has strong effect on political attitude of individuals and its affect can be seen in two different ways. Firstly, religion affects the core value system. Religious teachings prioritize social values by accepting few and rejecting some of them. This value system influences the political attitude of individuals that formulate their voting behaviour. After

that, religion directly impacts the political behaviour of an individual. Thus, human behaviour is affected by religion both at individual and community level (Bashir & Khalid, 2019).

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 the nations like India, communal consciousness is a strong element in all religious communities, be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian in certain circumstances and is clearly reflected in the electoral statistics. Thus, any generalization about the voting behaviour of any one particular community that does not take the total picture into account is likely to distort the realities of the Indian electoral process (Ahmed, 1972). The voters in India are broadly classified into religious, caste and communities. The available voting patterns show that generally, majority of the Christian and Muslim community support the Congress while sections of the Hindus vote for Hindu nationalists like BJP and a considerable number of Hindus believe in secularism (Arora, 2008). Thus, religion has been a major driving force of Indian electoral politics in various parts of the country (McGuire & Copland, 2007). It has been argued that religious beliefs have lesser impact on the political attitude of people in a society having diversity in terms of religion, culture and ethnicity. Rather, it is ethnicity that tends to influence voting behaviour more than religion. However, in a homogenous society, situation can be different (Bashir& Khalid, 2019).

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). Almost all the major religions of the world are practiced in Assam of which the Hindus are the majority in the state and according to 2011 census while the Muslims comprise 34 percent of Assam's population which is the highest proportion of any state in India apart from Kashmir. From the standpoint of electoral politics, many consider the Muslims as a large 'vote bank' that play a major role as kingmaker in elections of Assam (Goswami, 2009). Although, the congress party has been able to capture the support of Muslim voters since independence, but from 1980's separate political mobilization among Muslims of Assam can also be witnessed with the emergence of EIMA in 1977. By

opposing the Assam Movement (1979–1985) and the Assam Accord, several Muslim and linguistic minority groups came together to form the United Minority Front (UMF), a section of which merged with AUIF in 2005, when the latter was formed (Nath, 2016). The repeal of IM(DT) Act generated fear among immigrant Muslims in Assam. Since the repeal of the law, the Jamiat came forward under the leadership of Badruddin Ajmal to address the fear of the Muslims and in October 2005, 13 Muslim minority organizations came together and formed a new regional political party, the AUIF. After three years of the formation, in February 2009, the AUIF relaunched itself as a national party under the name of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). However, its activities have remained confined to Assam. Since the formation of the AIUDF, the party has been playing communal electoral politics to polarize the religious minority votes in Assam (Nath, 2016).

Since its formation in 2006, AIUDF has raised the issue of absence of security to the minority community as well as the issue of D-voters list. AIUDF's presence has polarized the Muslim vote (Saikia, 2020). The emergence of AIUDF as one of the dominant political parties has broken down the confirmed Muslim vote bank of the Congress Party. It is important to note that immigrant Muslims have always been equated with and branded as 'illegal Bangladeshis' by popular media and some political and non-political organizations of the state. This is creating anguish among the community and it makes them to feel alienated from the mainstream society of Assam. It is realized that a strong political existence is necessary and this has been contributing to the growth of the AIUDF (Nath, 2016). Bengali Muslims to a great extent had shifted its allegiance to AIUDF while the Assamese Muslims still support the Congress or the AGP (Saikia, 2020). As the confirmed Muslim vote bank of the Congress Party got divided between Congress and AIUDF, the Congress Party has adopted a soft Hindutva approach to polarise the non-Muslim voters against the AIUDF since the Assam assembly election, 2006. (Nath, 2016). On the contrary, the landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Assam's Assembly Election, 2016 provokes diametrically opposite interpretations. While for some scholars, the victory reveals a consolidation of Hindutva forces in the state, at the other end of the spectrum, some portions of the intelligentsia assert that the electoral results do not reflect the rise of Hindutva in the state but rather the advance of indigenous and identity politics (Dutta, 2017). The kind of surprising growth of BJP in 2016 became possible partly because of the existence of a regional

vacuum due to the decline of AGP and partly because the Congress faced severe anti-incumbency in the state electoral politics. The BJP attracted mainly the Hindu voters including those of the Assamese Hindus who had once supported the regional party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) because of its consistent stand against Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants (Sharma et. al., 2019).

The election in 2016 turned significant because of the emergence of a Hindu nationalist party as an alternative to Congress which formed a government in Northeast India for the first time (ibid.). Mahanta described the emergence of the BJP in the 2014 election as a phenomenal one and according to him it has marked a new phase of polarized politics in Assam. According to Mahanta, 'for the first time, ethnic, regional and identity-based issues have been sidelined and questions of governance and religion played a more important role in mobilizing voters'(Mahanta, 2014, p. 19). There are some reasons that enabled a party like BJP representing Hindu nationalism to become a dominant political force in Assam. These reasons must be considered because, rather than religion, traditionally ethnicity and identity politics had been the dominant axis of political mobilization in Assam (Sharma et. al., 2019). BJP's political strategy of seeking alliances with 'like-minded parties' to keep the Congress out of power and their rhetoric against the AIUDF which it portrayed as the 'protector of illegal migrants' clearly helped in unifying the Hindu voters. It played a decisive role in ensuring the BJP alliance's landslide victory even as when the Muslim votes remained largely divided between the Congress and AIUDF (ibid.). Interestingly, on the side of religious division, the Muslims, constituting about 35% of the population, did not seem to have voted for the Congress with the same intensity as the Hindus voted for the BJP while the AIUDF scored heavily in constituencies dominated by Muslims of East Bengal origin. A kind of united Hindu vote and a divided Muslim vote could be one of the key reasons for the BJP's victories in the constituencies with substantial Muslim populations like Nagaon (Saikia, 2020). The AIUDF and the BJP, with opposing political and ideological positions, cater to different communities. As their support bases do not overlap, religious polarization thus works in favour of the both (Sharma et.al, 2019). It is essential to understand that despite the attempts of RSS at communalizing the anti-foreigners' sentiment, the Assamese and other 'indigenous' groups in the state continue to see both Bengali Hindus and Muslims as 'outsiders' (Saikia, 2020). AIUDF's capturing attitude to corner votes is seen as alarming by other communities of Assam who continue to feel

threatened by what they claim to be unabated influx of illegal immigrants (Sharma et al., 2019). For the BJP, growth of AIUDF made it conducive to activate a latent religious fault line and recent electoral outcomes indicate that it has succeeded to a greater extent (Saikia, 2020).

Scholars like Malini Bhattacharjee critically looks at the position of BJP and its affiliated religious organizations by arguing that from the very beginning, BJP and RSS adopted novel strategies for navigating through the complex particularities of this region in order to establish itself in the cultural and political imagination of the people. She also argued that moving away from their standard techniques of mobilising support through the invocation of Hindu stereotypes like 'Ram' or 'Ayodhya', it instead focuses on adapting local cults and symbols such as, those associated with Kamakhya and Sankardev and Sattria traditions. Coupled with this, it also consolidates support by providing welfare services in the field of education, health and cultural development through a range of affiliate bodies (Bhattacharjee, 2016). While discussing the strategy of BJP pertaining to its Hindu nationalist discourse in the context of 2016 Assam election, Christophe Jaffrelot (2016) clearly pointed out how BJP has adjusted to the local variant of Hindu culture as part of their project of vernacularizing process by appropriating Sankardev, a 16th-century socio-religious reformer of Assam who was against the Brahminical orthodoxy and famous for Vaishnavism movement (Jaffrelot, 2016). The primary education wing of RSS, Shishu Shikha Samiti established in 1979, started a series of schools in different parts of Assam and named it after Sankardev as 'Sankardev Shisu Kunj' or 'Sankardev Sishu Niketan'. It served the larger project of the Hindutva imagination in the mind of the mass (Gohain, 2003).

In this context, Malini Bhattacharjee argued that the BJP's political experiment in making inroads into Assam over the past decades has been given so much attention, but at the same time it is important to understand the contribution of the social and cultural wings of its *Parivar* in deepening the roots of Hindutva in Assam. Bhattacharjee also opined that it is only because of the quiet and determined hard work of the RSS cadres that BJP could make inroads in this region for the very first time after independence (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 80).

It has been observed that the ultimate success of the BJP lays in its ability to convert anti-outsider sentiments among the Assamese and tribal populations into fear of being

outnumbered by ‘illegal migrants’ belonging to one religious category. BJP raised the issue of protection of *jati, mati, bheti* (‘community, land and homestead’) from ‘illegal Bangladeshi Muslim migrants’ and managed to draw support from diverse ethnic communities with its promise of freeing the land from the foreigners’ clutches (Sharma et. al., 2019). It is important to add that the elementary aspects of the formation of Axomiya society, historically, have been language and a composite culture but the proclamation to legalize the Hindu Bangladeshi infiltrators through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 1955, tries to extend Axomiya society towards a religious angle (Kalita, 2016). Although, the protection of the rights of the Khilonjiyas (the indigenous) has been one of the main campaigns for the BJP-led alliance in the Assembly election. But it is important to understand the way ‘indigenous’ was constructed as an exclusionary category to bring in communal divisions in the electoral battle. In this whole articulation, the Bengal-origin Muslims became the ‘other’ and an excluded category in the political vocabulary of ‘*Jati, Mati, Bheti*’ (Dutta, 2017). However, religious categories overlap the insider-outsider divisions, and hence political equations in a changing situation become vulnerable to varying types of ethnic mobilization (Sharma et. al., 2019).

There was a clear consolidation of Hindu votes to the advantage of BJP in 2014 Lok Sabha Election of India and 2016 Vidhan Sabha election of Assam. It was assumed that the Bengali Hindus have on previous occasions voted for the BJP as a counter to the Assamese support for AGP or Congress. But in the 2014 election, riding on the Modi wave and its consistent position on the ‘illegal immigrants’ issue, the BJP managed to cater both Assamese and Bengali Hindus into its fold. Data reveals that support for the BJP among the Assamese Hindus rose by 53% between 2011 and 2014. Thus, it can be said that RSS and BJP’s strategy of inflecting religious polarization into Assam politics have been mostly effectual when adapted to the region’s local concerns with immigration and preservation of ‘indigenous’ lands and identities (Saikia, 2020).

From the above discussion it can be easily understood that religion has emerged as a potent identity in the state electoral politics of Assam. The results of the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha and 2016 and 2021 Vidhan Sabha elections showed clear religious polarisation in the state. Along with the national politics, the electoral results of both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections revealed shifting voting trends in favour of BJP

in Assam. Thus, a new political atmosphere has been witnessed in Assam with various overlapping political and religious ideologies which demands critical analysis and interpretations.

1.3 Significance of the Study

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. Though Jamiat was involved in the formation of the UMF, its role was marginal. In 2000, the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari announced that he would play a direct role in setting up a political party for Muslims to ensure the “lost rights of the minorities” are to be regained (Engineer, 2003). He blessed Badruddin Ajmal for forming the AIUDF. From the very beginning, AIUDF has been trying to polarize the Muslim voters on religious line through various statements. For example, on 22 March 2014, after returning from Mecca, AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal declared in a public meeting that if BJP wins because of the mistakes of his party, almighty Allah would not forgive him (Nath, 2014). Jamiat leaders openly campaigned for AIUDF both in the 2006 and 2011 assembly elections. Thus, the direct involvement of Jamiat in Assam State electoral politics and the rise of AIUDF as one of the dominant political parties in the state politics can have larger implications in the Assamese society, especially among the Muslims of Assam. In response to the upsurge of Muslim communal politics, the expansion of a counter narrative based of Hindutva ideology as represented by BJP and Sangh Parivar can also be witnessed in the sphere of Assam state electoral politics.

Among the several incidents of the pro-Hindutva activities, mention can be made of RSS workers mounting the roof of the Kareng Ghar and raised pro-Hindutva slogans, permission for a RSS camp in Mariani College during the college vacation, the sudden urge to ‘Indianize’ and even ‘Hinduise’ the Brahmaputra by bringing the priests from the Gangetic heartland, establishment of government colleges in the name of Dindayal Upadhyaya, attempts to term the Ambubachi mela as a ‘mini Kumbh Mela’ by allowing the Naga sadhus within the temple premises in Kamakhya etc. On the other hand, trying to grant citizenship base on religious identity can also be witnessed (Mishra, 2017). Mention can also be made of the LuitPoriya Hindu Sammelan organized by the

RSS for the purpose of bringing the Sangh closer to the people of Northeast India in January 2018, wherein RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, the then Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, the then Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and former Chief Minister from AGP Prafulla Kumar Mahanta also joined. Several heads of village bodies, 20 tribal kings from different tribes as such the Karbi, the Naga, the Khasi, the Hajong, the Tiwa, the Garo, the Jayantiya, the Mishing etc., all the Satradhikars of the *satras* of Assam and more than 35,000 Swayamsevak participated in the programme (Sharma et. al., 2019).

These phenomena have been seen by many scholars as part of a wider, insidious agenda of swallowing up the distinct local traditions and practices and replacing them with a particular brand of North Indian Hinduism. Various attempts in order to appropriate the local traditional practices into the greater monolithic Hindutva fold and to wipe away the differences between different varieties of Hinduism as practiced in the country can also be witnessed in the recent past (Mishra, 2017).

In this context, scholars like Malini Bhattacharjee opined that the analysis of BJP's victory and communal polarization assumes importance primarily because Assam (like her other north-eastern sister states) does not provide a particularly fertile territory for the growth of Hindutva, an ideology, which finds a natural point of entry in the "Hindi heartland" states with its invocation of Ram Mandir, cow protection or the propagation of Hindi and Sanskrit languages. Assam's complex demography—a melange of races, ethnicities, faiths, customs and cultures—and a multiplicity of issues make it extremely difficult for an ideology forming on religious nationalism to gain a foothold in the state. It, therefore, becomes important to understand how Hindu nationalism navigates through this difficult terrain to establish itself in the cultural and political realms (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Although Bhattacharjee's interpretation needs to look at critically but it definitely raises questions on the possible ideological agendas of political parties, which needs to be considered seriously.

Before the Assembly election, 2016, a group of Assamese intellectuals under the leadership of Hiren Gohain appealed the people of Assam to not vote BJP, as according to them BJP's political agenda was dangerous for Assamese society which comprises multiple religious and ethnic groups. At that time, their appeal created a mixed response

among the people. Although that appeal needs to be looked at critically but their concern demands serious attention and further analysis.

The results of the 2016 and 2021 Vidhan Sabha elections revealed that the BJP nevertheless managed to localize the contest by exploiting the already polarized debate on immigration without taking a hard-line Hindutva stand. It may be mentioned that the RSS has worked vigorously to communalise an existing anti-immigrants narrative and the growing influence of the AIUDF in state politics only exacerbated the politics of fear that the BJP was able to capitalize on (Saikia, 2020).

From the above analysis, it can be understood that a constant effort from the part of political parties can be seen in the State in order to polarise the voters by capturing the regional sentiments of Assamese society. Thus, it is important to know how these agendas get manifested at the grass-root level and how the common people have responded these agendas. It is also important to study whether these agendas would bring any positive change into the lives of people or not. The consequences of these agendas can only be examined through focusing primarily on the political sphere of the state as polarization in terms of religion that only serve the ultimate political goal of the political parties and organizations. Thus, the researcher has tried to study sociological manifestations of these political and religious agendas in a politically significant area of study.

1.4 Major Research Questions

1. What is the organizational structure of the Bharatiya Janata Party and how do they function?
2. What are the major ideological principles of Bharatiya Janata Party and their affiliated organisations ?
3. What are the voting trends in Assam, especially in the selected area of study and what role do religion plays in it?
4. What are the main determinants of voting behaviour in the selected area of study?
5. What is the role of religion in voting behaviour and how it differs from one community to another?
6. What are the changes in the lives of people because of the politico-religious agendas of BJP?

7. How do the common people perceive ideological and political principles of BJP at the grass root level and how it gets reflected in their every day practices?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

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 politico-religious ideologies of BJP disseminate at the grass root level.

1.6 Concepts

1.6.1 Voting Behaviour

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).

1.6.2 Religion

According to A.W. Green, "Religion is a system of beliefs and symbolic practices and objects, governed by faith rather than by knowledge which relates human beings to an unseen supernatural realm beyond the known and beyond the controllable."

According to Malinowski, "Religion is a mode of action as well as a system of belief and a sociological phenomenon as well as a personal experience."

1.6.3 Electoral behaviour

Electoral behaviour indicates the voter's choices and preferences. It also indicates programmes, alternatives, agreements, ideologies and concerns among others in respect of the many questions of issues on which the different elections are fought. Thus, apart from being an individual choice, the voting behaviour and aptitude indicates the dynamic role that one plays in the achievement of a collective end. It implies the essential assertion of his rights and commitments to the society and the nation. It is also interested in the ways people tend to vote in elections and the reasons why they vote as they do (Sills, 1972).

1.6.4 Hindu, Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism

According to Savarkar, “a Hindu is one who considers the Land of Hindustan from the ocean to the Sindhu River as his fatherland and holy land and who identifies himself with the culture of this land” (Savarkar, as cited in Snehi, 2003, p.12).

The name ‘Hinduism’ given to the most ancient and persistent religion on the Indian subcontinent. Hindutva is the name by which the ideology of the Hindu right, represented by the political party Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People’s Party (BJP), is known. Hindutva is also the ideology of the cultural body known as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteer Corps (RSS). The word ‘Hindutva’ was used to refer to ‘Hinduism’ not as a religion but as a culture. The name ‘Hindutva’ was given to this uniting culture, which was shared by all those and importantly for whom India was the land of both their birth and the birth of their religion. The primary way of understanding the difference between Hinduism and Hindutva would be to recognize that Hinduism is a religion (however defined) while Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, is a political ideology, whose relation to the religion of Hinduism could be considered analogous to the relationship between Christianity and Christian fundamentalism or Islam and Islamic fundamentalism (Sarma, 2020).

Christophe Jaffrelot in his book argued that the development of Hindu Nationalism is a modern phenomenon that has developed on the basis of strategies of ideology-building, and despite the original characteristics of diverse set of practices clubbed under the rubric of Hinduism. He believes that during the British rule, Hindu nationalism

developed as a reaction to Muslims not only because of their equation with British as evident from the separate electorates issue but also because of their mobilization during Khilafat movement. Therefore, according to Jaffrelot, Hindu nationalism appears for the first time as resulting from the superimposition of a religion, a culture, a language and a sacred territory- the perfect recipe for ethnic nationalism. Jaffrelot mentioned that according to Savarkar, as religious minorities are the outsiders they must adhere to Hindutva culture, which is a national culture. In the private sphere they may worship their gods and follow their rituals, but in the public domain they must pay allegiance to Hindu symbols. Jaffrelot believes that Savarkar wrote Hindutva in reaction to the pan-Islamic mobilization of the Khilafat movement (Jaffrelot, 2019).

1.6.5 Neo-Hindutva

(Anderson & Longkumer, 2018) stated 'neo-Hindutva' as a way to understand and identify 'idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism. It operates outside of the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar'. Two 'categories' of neo-Hindutva- hard and soft were proposed by them. Under the label of hard neo-Hindutva, groups like the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, Voice of India, Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Forum for Hindu Awakening, Shri Ram Sena, and various other militant and vigilante outfits can be put (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018).

1.7 Theoretical Framework

In literature a number of approaches can be found which explains the voting behavior. Social science disciplines also use several approaches to measure voting behaviour like sociological or social contextual approach, political, socio-psychological, ecological or aggregate statistical and rational choice approach. In the overall understanding and explanation of voting behavior, all these approaches have been contributed significantly (Kumar & Rai, 2013).

Sociological or social contextual approach concentrates on the relationship between individual and social structure. It placed the vote in a social context and examines the effects on voting of such variables as social class, language, religion, nationalism and rural-urban contrasts. It refers to the social setting in which individuals or the voters function and their voting behaviour is affected by it (Johnson et al., 1999).

The political approach is mostly used by the discipline of political science. It intends to compute voting behaviour using political factors such as electoral issues, political programmes, electoral campaigns and the popularity of political parties and leaders based on the opinion and attitudes of the voters. It focuses on the three main areas: the structure and the motivations of the electorate; the operation and effect of the party and the election system; and the impact of social and political institutions on voting behaviour. Political theorists are concerned with understanding the political community and the political animal and to understand them eventually by means of precise and general statements (Eldersveld, 1951). The measurement of voting behaviour and attitudes by the political science discipline has not produced conclusions or patterns that can be theorized at the broader level but have been successful in explaining the political behaviour of the electorates in definitive terms.

Ecological or aggregate statistical approach try to find out the correlation of voting patterns and trends with the characteristic features of a geographical area like the ward or village panchayat, constituency and the state.

Socio-psychological approach tries to relate voting decisions to the voter's psychological predispositions or attitudes. For example, their party identification, attitudes to candidates and so on.

Finally, rational-choice or the institutional context approach attempts to explain voting behaviour as the outcome of a series of instrumental cost-benefit calculations by the individual by assessing the relative desirability of specific electoral outcomes in terms of the issues addressed and policies espoused by the different parties or candidates. The institutional context refers to specific institutional structures, rules and procedures that formally or informally define relationships among individuals and in turn influence individual behaviour.

Each of these broad approaches tends to be associated with different research techniques and each makes different assumptions about what motivates political behaviour. All these approaches contribute significantly to the overall explanation of voting behaviour (Kumar & Rai, 2013). The Sociological Model connects the voting behaviour to group membership. It suggests that the voters aim to accept a pattern of voting which reflects the social and economic position of the group to which they belong. This model focuses

the importance of a social alignment reflecting the various divisions in a society rather than development of psychological attachment to a party. Class, gender, ethnicity, religion are the most important dimensions. The impact of socialization is relevant to sociological model. In so far as the interests of group may help to shape party allegiances, the social base explanations allow for rationality. The sociological model links the voting behaviour to group membership, suggesting the electors tend to adopt a voting pattern that reflects the economic and social position of the group to which they belong. In focusing on social groups, the sociological model ignores the individual and the role of personal self-interest (ibid.). The present study has adopted the sociological model which focuses on the significance of social alignment reflecting the various divisions in a society. This model considers class, gender, ethnicity, religion as the most important dimensions of voting behaviour. As the present research work intends to study the religious aspects of voting behaviour thus, it is considered as more suitable to give a broader framework in looking at the empirical reality of the selected research sites.

1.8 Review of Literature

Many literary studies have examined the dynamics of voting behaviour and its relation to religion. Although all of them offer different interpretations and understandings but they provide a comprehensive picture of voting behaviour and its relation to religion. This attempt aims to understand the voting behaviour and its different dynamics.

Akhter & Sheikh (2014) discusses that human beings are not so rational in their political or economic behavior unlike their philosophical self. Various irrational factors influenced the human behavior such as influence of money or charismatic personality of a leader. It is also influenced by invocation of religious and communal factors by different pressure groups and many other irrational factors and forces that can impact voter's mind. The authors therefore, argued that the role of these irrational forces can be discerned or discovered in case a student of empirical politics focuses his attention on how the results of an election are obtained. This is not unique to India but applies to every democratic system (Akhter & Sheikh, 2014) Thus the present study has looked at empirically the irrational behaviour of human being actually existed in the select area of study.

Weiner & Kothari (1965) found that in the election, debates and discussions related to the issues of public policy didn't influence people's voting choices. They were more influenced by the activities of the local administration than the policies of the central government. The study concluded that rather than broad policy, voters of India are inclined towards administration. Rather than other factors, material and practical reasons are more important in determining the voting behavior (Weiner & Kothari, 1965). The present research work tries to investigate the relevance of broad policies in shaping the voting behaviour in the selected constituencies.

Joseph & Mahajan (1991) pointed out about the general assumption that group affiliations such as caste and community can be used to mobilize support for a candidate or party which is the base of vote banks. But the authors also mentioned that people have multiple identities. They may be simultaneously members of a caste, occupational or gender-based group or religious community. Their interests may at some level coincide with those of an ideal-prototype Hindu/OBC/woman/rural poor, as a member of such groups. A person could be a member of each of these vote banks. However, according to the authors which of these identities comes to the forefront depends upon many factors. It is also possible to have contradictions internal to an identity. The clashes between identities are also a possibility. The authors emphasized that political parties are consistently trying to identify groups to mobilize for political support. To mobilize people, they sometime construct new identities by redefining and reconstructing the boundaries of existing ones. However, for the authors the success of this manipulation depends upon the perceptions of the agents (Joseph & Mahajan, 1991). While looking at the insights of the article, the present study has attempted to unveil different overlapping identities across different religious groups and their role in shaping voting behaviour under the select area of study.

Bhambhri & Verma (1971) discusses about the caste breakup of the candidates contesting for municipal election, and also mentioned that both the higher and lower caste Hindus are keen to exercise political power and participate in the election. Business community is quite active in the local politics. According to their findings, in municipal elections candidates with lower levels of education are involved actively. The candidates believe that the issues which are related to election are a very insignificant factor in determining the voters' choice. Instead, it is candidates' personal qualities which

determine the voter's choice (Bhambhri & Verma, 1971). The study encourages the present research work to critically examine the socio-economic background of the candidates in order to understand their voting behaviour.

Bharucha (2003) argued that the creation of vote banks among particular social groups leads to the emergence of differential consciousness and leads to voting stereotypes. A reutilization of decision-making precludes decisive breaks in the voting patterns. In addition, the author also pointed out that electoral politics has been faced with the tension between political equality and social inequality. It leads to the decline of democratic norms and also conceptions about the ignorance of the voters of the country (Bharucha, 2003). The current study also investigates the creation of vote banks among different groups like Bengali Hindus or Bengali Muslims has created different consciousness and also created stereotypes regarding voting behaviour of the electorates.

Chakraborty (2000) argued that in the electoral process there are a numerous factor which play an important role in voter mobilization. Hence, demographic composition of the electorate alone cannot help electoral predictions. Selection of candidates, ethnic balance, and different issues raise by the parties, campaign strategy and performances of the ruling party, etc., are all equally important in determining the election results. In a multi-ethnic situation, the credibility of the candidate and the ethnic balance play a key role in candidate's selection (Chakraborty, 2000). The findings of this study have been helpful for exploring various possibilities in the studied area. As the selected area is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious situation, thus the findings of the article guided the study to explore different dimensions related to selection of candidates, ethnic balance, and different issues raised by the parties, campaign strategy, etc.

While observing the Odisha Assembly Election of 2009, Bhuyan (2009) mentioned about the well-known secret that Naveen Patnaik was not happy with the front organizations of Sangh Parivar ever since communal violence hit Kandhamal district in 2008, which embarrassed him nationally and internationally and he appeared to have taken a calculated risk by deciding to go alone in the election. Blaming the BJP for the communal riot in Kandhamal district, he charged the BJP as dividing the society in the name of religion. Bhuyan also mentions that in the state election, the BJP party diluted its Hindutva image by raking up the issue of Ram Sethu, a chain of lime stone shoals between Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, and Mannar, Sri Lanka. Bhuyan (2009) is relevant

in the context of present BJP-AGP coalition Government in Assam. During the Panchayat election and at the initial time of the introduction of Citizenship Amendment Bill, the AGP party tried to mobilize people against the communal agendas of the BJP party (Bhuyan, 2009). The present study also tried to understand people's perspective along with the party perspective as well. The findings of the study on Sikkim are helpful for exploring various possibilities in the studied area. As the selected area is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious situation, there are different dimensions of Hindutva politics, which has been unveiled in the present study.

Various literatures have been talking about the role of religion in the politics of India, many of which need to be questioned critically. From the available literature, a historical trajectory of the different relations between politics and religion can be drawn.

Perrett (1997) discusses different views on how to look at the relationship between religion and politics. According to one view, there is a long-standing traditional opposition between religion and politics in India because its highest value (moksha) is renunciatory and asocial. According to another view, separation of religion from politics is contrary to Indian ways of thinking and the present picture is the product of various colonialist strategies (Perrett, 1997).

Aiyar (2007) highlighted that after the trauma of partition that took place, Indians under the leadership of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru decided to separate religion from politics (Aiyar, 2007). Mitra (1991) tries to give an analysis by separating normal politics from the range of events associated with the political expression of religion, which are awkwardly referred to as communal state according to the author. For him, it is paradoxical how a secular state like India that did not provide any formal role for religion in public affairs was superimposed on a society in which religion was responsible for interpersonal relations (Mitra, 1991). In this context, Aiyar (2007) mentioned about Mahatma Gandhi who advocated that there can be no politics without religion and that his politics was his religion. Interestingly, in 1948, Gandhi insisted that not only should India be a state without a religion but, more importantly, that there should be an affirmative action in favour of the minorities.

Madan (1987) argued that secularism is dream of the minorities. That dream wants to shape the majority in its own way. It also makes an effort to imply its urge upon history

despite lacking the powers to achieve that under a political entity which is democratically organized. He also pointed out that the state will reflect the character of the society in case of an open society. The author regarded secularism as a social myth. Secularism draws a cover over the failure of the minority which tries to segregate religion from politics in the society. Thus, he criticized Secularism for its superficiality. He considered the idea of projecting secularism as the law of human existence as political folly and also moral arrogance (Madan, 1987).

Mitra (1991) argued that India's secularism was half-hearted. It allowed propagation and conversion. But it did not take any specific measures which actually intend to totally disappear religion. In fact, until in 1976 it was added to the Preamble of the Constitution, the word 'secular' was not there in the constitution. The author believes that it was added by the authoritarian government under the state of emergency (Mitra, 1991).

Ahmad (1972) mentioned that during independence struggle while the political sentiments and feelings of the Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Scheduled Castes in the Indian sub-continent found their expression through their separatist movements, the political tendencies on the Hindu side were subsumed under the national movement to a considerable extent. According to him, the concept of nationalism was itself improvised through the use of certain Hindu deities, such as Durga, Laxmi and Saraswati. There may have been no vigor in Hindu communal politics at the all-India level and Hindu communalist forces may have lacked an all-India organizational base, but there certainly was a considerable organized expression of Hindu religious attitudes in politics at regional levels (Ahmad, 1972).

While talking about the role of religion in India's struggle for independence, Shakir (1979) that in the Swadeshi Movement and the Gandhi dominated Congress, religious sentiments of the people were constantly exploited. Hindu symbols were used to mobilize the people. The Muslim community too adopted a similar strategy of using Islam for political purposes. The leaders wanted the members of the community to believe that they were fighting for the cause of Islam. Secularism is not viewed as separation of religion and politics but as giving 'equal status' to all religions, though in practice the new rulers consider Hinduism as the fundamental factor in the field of politics. The renaming of India as 'Bharat' in tune with old Hindu tradition; the urge to promote Hindi (of a Sanskritised kind) as the 'all-India' language; an emphasis on the

adoption of such symbols like Dharma Chakra; popularization of superstition ridden festivals as Ramlila; broadcasting of Bhajans and devotional songs in the early morning programme of All India Radio; extension of the governmental patronage to the Sadhu Samaj etc., betray a strong Hindu bias in the approach of the new rulers. It is also argued that Hinduism not only provides ideological and cultural content to the Indian State but also prepared the people to accept the social and political system.

According to Perrett (1997) the term Hinduism doesn't refer to an essence, it is just the name the West has given to a highly variegated complex of facts. In this sense, he referred to Cantwell Smith who claimed that Hinduism as historical reality cannot be defined and the concept of a religion called Hinduism is entirely inadequate to that historical phenomenon (Perrett, 1997).

During the post-independence period, there was a conflict in Indian political dimension mostly between three different varieties of nationalism i.e. a secular nationalism, a Hindu nationalism, and two separatist nationalisms in the states of Kashmir and Punjab, that Varshney (1993) mentioned in his article. Considering Hindu imaginations about India's national identity, there was always a conceptual space for nationalism according to the author. Even after that it remained a political force which was very weak. He attributed the rise of Hindu nationalism to a proximate and underlying base. He observed that the political circumstances of the 1980s supplied the proximate reasons. The Separatist agitation of 1980s created anxiety about the future of India. It also came from a deepening institutional and ideological vacuum in Indian politics. Hindu nationalists presented themselves as an ideological and institutional alternative while claiming to rebuild the nation in the ideal way (Varshney, 1993). According to Varshney, Hindu nationalism poses the most serious challenge to the governing principles of the country. He believed that the future of India depends on the power and position of the Hindu nationalists. He mentioned about the ideological stand of Hindu nationalism according to which non-Hindu groups must assimilate. They are not allowed to maintain their uniqueness. Hindu nationalism becomes exclusionary if minorities don't accept assimilation. He also mentioned about Hindu nationalists who argued that it's not laws, politics and institutions which make a nation, but it's the emotions and loyalty which makes it a nation. He asserted that rather than relying on laws and institutions, one should try to integrate with Hinduism which is the major source of Indian culture, (ibid).

Shakir (1979) argued that the Hindu community practically remained indifferent and aloof towards the efforts of the Muslim revivalists. Similarly, the Muslims were not stirred by the efforts made by the Hindu reformers. Thus, mutual apathy may be viewed as the perpetuation of the medieval legacy. People lived together for centuries but did not constitute a society (Shakir, 1979)

Before the arrival of the British, religion, dominated Indian state and society. The idea of secular civic society did not come into being in India during that time. But the Independent India took a different approach to run the country. It adopted secularism as one of the basic pillars of Indian polity. The British rule constituted a break from the ancient traditions. The horrid experience of partition riots convinced the Indian elite to minimize the role of religion in politics. However, unfortunately, except for the abolition of the separate electorates, the ruling elite in India have faithfully followed the British policy. Secularism is not viewed as separation of religion and politics but as giving 'equal status' to all religions, though in practice the new rulers consider Hinduism as the fundamental aspect in the field of politics (Shakir, 1979).

The dominant political discourse during the immediate post-independence period was mostly secular. It was not aligned with the religion or caste. However, it has increasingly become communal, caste based and sectarian political discourse since the mid-1980s. The political parties transformed this politically potential discourse into electoral capital (Kumar, 2007). Consequently, during the post-independence period important changes had taken place in the nature of electoral competition. To secure their political parties started relying on communally divisive 'vote bank politics'. Based on the political arithmetic, the pampering of Muslims or other communities has also observed in various occasions (ibid).

In almost every state of India, the process of communalism has accentuated by their own electoral politics which includes nomination of the candidates, communal representation, campaigning and so on, (Shakir, 1986). This is perhaps because religion is a uniting factor in the lives of people and it is a source of identity in the developing societies like India (Arora, 2008). Thus, religion becomes an integral part of politics and also become very important factor in electoral policies. In the process of political mobilization in India, caste, religion and language continue to remain the most important and effective

factors even after so many successful decades of democracy in the country (Chakrabarty, 2008).

Politicians who are hungry for votes knew from the outset that a society structured and stratified along the lines of caste and integrated through complex networks of pan-Indian religions could be reached by establishing political links with primordial sentiments and social networks based on them (Mitra, 1991). Congress has been trying to create vote banks among Muslim and other minorities. On the contrary it is observed that BJP had tried to create their vote among Hindus. The Congress (I) practiced 'soft Hindutva' in comparison to the militant and aggressive Hindutva politics of BJP. The party and its leaders had compromised with principles when they have had to win elections. It has been observed that Congress has always relied on the votes of Muslims and other minorities by ignoring the religious interests of the majority (Bhambhri, 2007).

The BJP made an appeal to Hindus to vote in religious lines by mobilizing people based on Hindutva related issues. The BJP allegedly raises issues such as uniform civil code, Islamic terrorism and Christian conversions as part of its larger agenda (Arora, 2008). Religion also impacted the politics of BJP in various parts of India. In many states, the right-wing organizations changed strategies. They started polarizing Hindu voters against Christians rather than Muslims. It was especially observed since Sonia Gandhi, an Italy-born Catholic and wife of late Rajiv Gandhi- former Prime Minister of India took the charge of the president of the Congress party (Arora, 2008). Thus, the political stand of BJP is questionable while it comes to religion, which demands critical interpretations.

Muslims often vote strategically where they found themselves at a vulnerable position. Muslims try to seek support and protection from the mainstream parties. It is also observed that they always have a tendency to stay in the side by the party in power. Muslims do not express their best choice in voting whenever they are numerical minority. But Muslims increasingly felt it important to vote as Muslims which can protect their own interest. Congress have taken the solace in Congress to get protection from the dominant Hindu parties (Choi, 2009). Thus, the position of religious minorities especially of Muslims have been very crucial in the context of Indian electoral politics and voting behaviour. Therefore, in the present research, the researcher has engaged critically to investigate the voting behaviour and the role of different communities and interest groups in the larger context of Assamese society.

Many scholars have examined different dynamics of Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism. Although all of them have different understanding and interpretations but they are helpful in order to understand Hindutva or Hindu nationalism and its influence in the present politics of the state as well as in the select area of study.

Anderson & Jaffrelot (2018) argued that Sangh Parivar will never compromise on the issues of Muslims and also to some extent on Christianity. According to the authors, in order to flourish politically, Sangh Parivar needs these others and that is why they keep 'othering' Muslims and Christians. The authors argued that in order to maintain a semi-permanent state of mobilization, the Sangh Parivar always needs a new cause like love jihad, ghar wapsi, beef ban, triple talaq. The authors claimed that by mobilizing people on such issues, the Sangh Parivar attempts to foster fear and anger among people. It must generate some anger against Muslims, secularists and so on. The authors claimed that a large number of Indians – in each community – are turning their backs to multiculturalism and are embracing ethno-religious nationalism. Words and ideas that were used marginally have received a new legitimacy at the expense of others. The authors believe that Secularism has acquired a bad name and its proponents are readily branded as 'anti-national' or 'sickular' (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

The authors put a detailed light on the expansion of Hindutva as they emphasized that for a long time, the south and the eastern India seemed out of the Hindu nationalists' influence because of its Hindi oriented discourse and upper caste dominated organization. However, according to the authors, it is not the case any more in the provinces where the Sangh Parivar has succeeded in highlighting the Hindu versus Muslim cleavage as the line of cleavage at the expense of other identities. Anderson & Jaffrelot (2018) claimed that the strategy of Sangh Parivar has worked in Assam where a large number of Bengali-speaking Hindus and Assamese-speaking Hindus thinking of voting together for the BJP as a counter to Muslim 'others'. The findings of the present research also supplement the arguments of (Anderson & Jaffrelot. 2018) where the right-wing organizations find love jihad as a cause to mobilize people against Muslims. The observation of the authors is correctly reflected the opinions of the respondents where they are thinking of voting BJP irrespective of their communal identities.

Snehi (2003) highlighted different political incidents to talk about the rise of communal politics in India. He described how communal politics was manifested through the works

of different political and civil society organizations. According to him, the main opposition to the unapologetic communalism of the British and Muslim League came not from the Congress (except initially), but from the Hindu Mahasabha (HMS). Snehi claimed that the Sangh Parivar has used 'hatred' as an important weapon to fight the supposed depreciation of the foundations of Hinduism. Moreover, he argues that in the name of holy war, the Sangh Parivar justifies violence against Muslims. Snehi also argued that no other organized force in the country harbors as deep and pathological hatred towards Muslims like the RSS (Mangalik as cited in Snehi, 2003, p.12). He argues that after the demolition of Babri Masjid, the Muslim community has distanced itself from 'Hinduised' practices. It is argued that to this date, as Snehi believed, the fear of Islamization has been exploited as a strategy to propagate Hindutva, which keeps harping on the 'dangers of Islam'. Snehi mentioned about the Hindutva ideologues who professed that it would lead to disappearance of 'Hindu culture', which sustains the 'Hindu Rashtra'. The activities of Christian missionaries are categorized as anti-Hindu and threatening to the integrity of the nation' (Snehi, 2003). Snehi's article provides valuable insights into understanding the communal politics of the state as well as the select area of study. Likewise, the present study tried to understand the attitude of BJP and SanghParivar towards Muslims. However, this study like Snehi's argument, explores the gradual distancing of Muslim community from 'Hinduised' practices in the select areas of study.

Swamy (2003) tried to draw the linkage between the growth of Hindu Nationalism and expansion of BJP's organization in pan India. He argued that Hindu Nationalists are concerned with the strength and unity of Hindus as a political community, their forms of worship is different thing. They have charged religious minorities with divided loyalty and responsible for organized mass violence against them. The author further argued that although Hindu Nationalists were "concerned not simply to conserve Hinduism but to develop the latent power of the Hindu community" (Swamy, 2003). The present study itself inspired from the Swami's article to investigate the growth of Hindu nationalism in Assam and gradual expansion of BJP's organization throughout the state.

Singh (2015) narrated how after the massive win of BJP in 2014, the Hindu Nationalist forces get more power and strength. The victory of BJP brought the opportunity to Hindu nationalist organizations to plant their agenda. He becomes critical about country's recent

inclination towards the right. According to him, it might bring radical changes in the secular character of Indian democracy (Singh, 2015). The article written by Jas Singh has been helpful in understanding the politics of BJP and other Hindu nationalist groups.

Shukla & Pandey (2019) mentioned that the RSS has been articulating and propagating its own 'idea of India' since its inception and it was obviously before the BJP emerged as a party. The authors also mentioned about the views of the RSS. According to the ideologues of RSS, the BJP has the free hand to use electoral means to achieve its goals. But RSS will only rely on its ideology and how it disseminates at the ground. The authors believe that RSS always seek to influence lives of the people be it political or social, through ideology (Shukla & Pandey, 2019). The present study also studied the nexus between BJP and RSS, and the relation they share with other right-wing organizations.

Anderson & Longkumer (2018) claimed that the level of political 'saffronisation' suggest that India could be heading 'toward a Hindu state'. The authors highlighted the fact that ambitions of Hindutva go considerably beyond the ballot box and the Hindutva movement has its commitment to root and branch societal transformation in the form of so-called 'Hindu Renaissance.' According to the writers, the Hindutva movement has made inroads into education, development, environment, industry, culture and almost every other aspect of public life. The authors believe that different groups of the Parivar have grown and evolved over the past decade and increasingly making their presence felt across the whole Indian society. The writers pointed out in the article that with the backing of government, organizations and individuals who previously were peripheral and considered outlandish, now have a seat at the table. However, they claimed that Hindutva is ever-changing and the Sangh Parivar which consists of the 'big three' - RSS, VHP and BJP as well as different closely connected groups fails to encompass the full diversity and multi-polarity of Hindutva. Thus, according to the authors Hindu nationalism now permeates into some new spaces like institutional, territorial, conceptual and ideological. The authors stated 'neo-Hindutva' as a way to identify and understand 'idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism which operate outside of the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar' (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018) The concept of New Hindutva as propagated by the authors is also reflected in the present

study where the field narratives highlighted different examples which shows growing influence of the Sangh Parivar in every aspect of public life.

Sharma (2020) states that the primary way of understanding the difference between Hinduism and Hindutva would be to recognize that Hinduism is a religion while Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, is a political ideology, whose relation to the religion of Hinduism could be considered analogous to the relationship between Christianity and Christian fundamentalism or Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. The author mentioned that historians of the Hindutva school claims that the real struggle on the Indian subcontinent was and continues to be the struggle between Hinduism and Islam for the possession of the subcontinent. Sharma (2020) is very insightful in understanding Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism for the present study (Sharma, 2020).

Tharamangalam (2016) highlighted different factors which helped BJP to win elections. According to Tharamangalam, India's electorate was frustrated by a Congress-led government with a worsening record of corruption, inefficiency, constantly shifting and dysfunctional electoral coalitions and entrenched dynastic rule because of which they were desperately looking for a change. This article has argued that the BJP's recent victory in capturing power was achieved by consolidating a new imagination that combines a right-wing and pro-business agenda and a Hindu nationalist assertion against the imagined humiliations of the past by the non-Hindu other. According to author, the victory of BJP was also achieved through a brilliant and lavishly funded campaign with the expectation to deliver high growth and recover the country's past glory under its popular and strong leader Narendra Modi. From the article written by Tharamangalam, the transition from Congress rule to BJP rule in Indian politics can be understood (Tharamangalam, 2016).

While analysing 2019 election, Jaffrelot & Verniers (2020) argues that the results of the Lok Sabha election signify a long-term ideological consolidation in favour of the BJP. Jaffrelot and Verniers agrees to Suhas Palshikar that ideologically, socially, and electorally Hindu nationalism is on its way to establish its hegemony over India. Jaffrelot and Verniers mentioned that ideologically, Hindu nationalism is the product of the successful conflation between nationalism and Hindutva, which gives BJP immense advantage and ensures that anti-BJP would necessarily be equated with the 'anti-national' (Palshikar as cited in Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). While all the components of

the Parivar and all its leaders believed in the same ideology, they demonstrated it in different ways (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). Like the findings of the article, the present study similarly found that Hindutva forces have become stronger in the select area of study.

Omar (2021) mentioned that Muslims are the primary targets of the Hindu nationalist organizations, wherein an idea of a dangerous outsider is constructed to represent the Muslim as an object of fear, disloyalty, hatred, envy and everything wrong that has happened with the country and is the cause of all problems. According to Omar, the intention behind this construction is to create a sense of insecurity among the Hindus and mobilize them to protect their identity from the 'other'. Omar argued that the idea of the Muslim 'other' is necessary to maintain Hindu identity and remain defenders of the 'self' for the Hindu nationalist organizations. Omar alleged that as a ruling party, BJP promotes narratives of 'otherness' as more acceptable in the social sphere and right-wing extremism become the new normal. In his article, Omar also asserted that Hindutva narratives create a fear psychosis among the Muslim communities. Omar claimed that since 2014, there has been a significant rise in vigilantism influenced by the ideology and narratives of the Hindu Right. According to Omar, the perpetrators also receive state protection through non-interference and often complicity of the police in case of vigilantism. Omar believes that this kind of informal protection and complicity that vigilantes of Hindutva organizations receive makes them unofficial state actors. Like the arguments of Omar, the present study has argued on the basis of empirical findings that the issues of love jihad, cow slaughter, etc., have become instrumental in mobilizing people against the 'common other' i.e. Muslims and right-wing organizations have been successfully mobilizing the common Hindu people against the common 'other' irrespective of caste and community background.

Mofidi (2014) talks about how Indian public space has been converted to Hindu space by the politico-religious processions. The author believed that Hindutva ideology has been naturalized through various media which makes it reachable and popular to common people. The author alleged that BJP launched negative propaganda against Muslims for their political gain. Posters leaflets, pamphlets, videos, audio cassettes and were circulated. It instilled stereotypes of Muslims in the minds of common Hindu people. The author asserted that caste versus caste politics was the earlier feature of Indian

society. It was replaced by religion versus religion politics through the Ayodhya campaign. For the Sangh Family, it became a massive political success (Vanayak as cited in Mofidi, 2014). The author argued that use of religion has become a common practice in mobilizing people for electoral and political purposes (Mofidi, 2014). Like the findings of the article, the present study similarly found that different politico-religious processions as organized by right-wing organizations converted Indian public space as Hindu space and conveying the basic script of Hindutva discourse. Although the intensity to organize such processions is higher in Nalbari, but in the other two research sites has seen it increasing.

Ebersole (1960) argued that there is a relation between religious affiliation and party affiliation. The correlation, however, does not usually indicate a religious vote. For Ebersole, as minority awareness declines, trends in voting change. The changing status of ethnic and religious minorities is causing political change. There is no pattern of voting for or against candidates because of their religion. Luke Ebersole mentions that without regard for its historical meaning, the principle of separation of church and state is often used as the chief basis for criticism of political activity by religious groups. Ebersole pointed out that in practice, religion has not held itself aloof from government. In the name of religion planned and organized efforts to influence government can be observed in the past also and it has been a part of the political process. There is evidence that the changing status of ethno-religious minorities is causing political change (Ebersole, 1960).

This argument is significant in the context of electoral politics of Assam. It can be argued that the rise of Muslim population in the state can have large implications in the electoral politics of the state as well as in the selected area of study. Like the arguments of Ebersole, the present study found that the religious affiliation of the parties indicates religious vote in the selected area of study. The study also attempted to understand the more complex overlapping and underlying affiliations of religion with political parties and how it influences the political behaviour of common people.

Sax (2000) argued that the relation of religion to politics in India is problematic from both a theoretical and a practical point of view. According to the author, in practice, religion plays a growing part in contemporary Indian politics, as is clear not only from the formation of a Hindu nationalist government at the Centre but also from the

increasing importance of caste in regional politics. He concluded that perhaps we need to rethink our categories and recognize that politics always has a religious element while religion is always a political force. The article highlighted the relation between politics and religion and the existing nexus between the two. The author also talks about the theoretical understanding of religion and politics which is sometimes overlapping (Sax, 2000). The present research work not only includes Hindus as the target group but also incorporated people of other religions and ethnic communities present in the research sites as well.

Schlenso (2007) pointed out that until the end of the 1960's, Muslims and Hindus lived peacefully with each other in India. However, according to the author, with the rise of religious and nationalistic Hindu organizations and parties, tension between Hindus and Muslims has grown. For the author, the core of the religious nationalist movement is the RSS, which was founded with the goal to unify India under the saffron flag, a symbol of Hindu power deriving from the reign of Shivaji (Schlenso, 2007). The article written by author is helpful in understanding how communalism had emerged in Indian context especially in reference to Hindus and Muslims. In addition to the religious aspect, the present study has tried to bring politics into it and also tried to explore the influence of communal politics in everyday interaction. The study also tried to understand the functioning of BJP and the way principles of the parties gets manifested at the grassroots level.

Jaffrelot (2019) argued that the development of Hindu Nationalism is a modern phenomenon that has developed on the basis of strategies of ideology-building, despite the original characteristics of diverse set of practices clubbed under Hinduism. While talking about the history of Hindu nationalism, the author mentioned that the Hindu Mahasabha was not a party in its own right but a sub-group of Congress members. According to the writer, in addition to religion, land and race, language is another pillar of Hindu identity. In this context, the author mentioned about Savarkar where he established the equation between Hindutva and "Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan" (Savarkar as cited in Jaffrelot, 2019). Therefore, according to the author, with the superimposition of a religion, a culture, a language and a sacred territory, Hindu nationalism appears as the perfect recipe for ethnic nationalism. The author mentioned that according to Savarkar, as religious minorities are the outsiders they must adhere to Hindutva culture which is a

national culture. In the private sphere, they may worship their gods and follow their rituals, but in the public domain, they must pay allegiance to Hindu symbols. Jaffrelot believes that Savarkar wrote Hindutva in reaction to the pan-Islamic mobilization of the Khilafat movement and therefore, most of his thoughts derive from his deep-rooted hostility to Islam and its followers (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Jaffrelot (2019) also talks about political strategy of Hindu nationalism. Where he mentioned that, the Jana Sangh always divided into two strategies: one moderate and the other more militant. The book also put light on the journey of RSS and Jana Sangh and how the Jana Sangh eventually becomes BJP. The book written by the author is helpful in understanding Hindu nationalism in the country (ibid). The present study has been enriched with the broad understanding of the author on BJP, RSS and other Hindutva organizations. The present study also takes reference on the ideological foundations of Sanghparivar from the book, which eventually helps in the development of its own arguments.

Compared to the literatures available on the Indian state electoral politics and religion, literatures focusing on religion and Assam politics are less. In the recent past with the rise of BJP and AIUDF the political atmosphere of the state become more crucial and demands critical analysis and new interpretations. Scholars like Malini Bhattacharjee, Udayan Mishra, Akhil Ranjan Dutta, Monoj Kumar Nath, etc., have been critically engaging with the nexus between religion and politics in Assam. Some of them are referred to in the present study.

In the last two decades, the electoral politics of Assam has been witnessed a tremendous change in terms of the number of political parties and the politicization of multiple ethnicities and religion. Explosion of ethnicities and multi-polar competition are the common characteristic of contemporary Assam. Pre-existing social cleavages which earlier went under the carpet has also emerged. All these incidents have made contemporary Assam significant and the state turned into a virtual laboratory of the politics of ethnicity and religion (Kalita, 2016). It is important to mention that Muslims of Assam joined the Congress Party after partition, under Syed Saadulla's leadership. An enduring alliance between the Congress Party and Assamese Muslims were created with the initiative of the former Muslim League premier of Assam. This alliance was the mutual necessity for both the parties. The Congress Party wanted to have Muslims to

maintain its secular image and also get capture the vote bank. On the contrary, with the alliance with Congress, Muslims get safety, secular image and also the opportunity to share power with the Congress Party (Kar, 1990).

After signing the Assam Accord, United Minority Front (UMF) was created. In the newly formed party convention many minority organizations like All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), All Assam Minority Yuva Parishad, All Assam Minority Front and others were participated. The protection of the minorities post Assam Accord atmosphere was the main commitment of UMF (Ahmed, 1999). Both religious and linguistic minorities of the state supported UMF in 1985 assembly elections. With the emergence of AIUDF in 2006, the political scenario of the state has suddenly shifted to a new direction. From 2011 and 2016 assembly elections, immigrant Muslims remained the main supporters of AIUDF. Since the formation of the AIUDF party, the communal politics become the main political agenda of all the political parties. (Nath, 2016).

The president of AIUDF Badruddin Azmal's electoral campaign was clearly communal which polarized the voters of both Hindu and Muslim community along communal lines. It paved the way for BJP to mobilize Hindu voters. Majority of the immigrant Muslims and a large section of the indigenous Muslims supported AIUDF to oppose the BJP. On the contrary, to defeat the AIUDF, majority of the indigenous Assamese people supported the BJP (ibid.). The above-mentioned arguments from the existing literatures arises various questions on the political parties of Assam, which may have different interpretations. However, as researcher, one cannot ignore the seriousness and complexity of Assam state political atmosphere.

In the state's electoral politics, the Assam Jamiat has been playing a very crucial role. It can be observed that Congress won the elections conveniently whenever Jamiat give its support to congress. On the contrary whenever Jamiat has not supported the Congress by standing as a preferable alternative, Muslim voter show their support to that alternative. When the Jamiat is not supporting the Congress and also failed to give an alternative which is acceptable for Muslims, the Muslim voters got divided. Among immigrant Muslims of Assam, Jamiat has a strong presence and influence. It is important to note that popular media and some organizations of the state always branded immigrant Assamese Muslims as "illegal Bangladeshis" or *Miyas*. This has been creating anger and frustration among them which further alienated them from the mainstream Assamese

society. They realize the importance of a strong political party who can protect their interest and as a result they started supporting AIUDF (Nath, 2016).

The Muslim population of the state is being divided, that is why the normative Hindu-Muslim binary that operates in other parts of India fails to explain the relation between the two communities in Assam. The parties representing the indigenous Assamese Muslims, Sadou Asom Goriya Moriya Desi Jatiya Parishad, Sadou Asom Goriya Yuba Chatra Parishad, Khilongia Asomiya Musalman Unnayan Parishad, Khilongia Musalman Suraksha Mancha, Ujoni Asom Muslim Kalyan Parishad and Asomiya Muslim Kalyan Parishad reposed their faith in the BJP's Vision Document in the run-up to the last Assembly election. The indigenous Muslim groups also expressed their opposition to Badaruddin Ajmal's AIUDF and described Ajmal as a threat (Centre for Policy Research). In its Vision Document 2016 for Assam, the BJP's approach to the Muslim population of the state is clearly biased against the Muslims of East Bengali origin. Under the sub-section 'Religious Minorities Welfare,' there is a resolution to protect the "socio-economic and political identity of indigenous Assamese Muslims like Goriya, Moriya, Desi, Maimol and others." The vision document of BJP didn't have offer any commitment or resolution to protect the interest of the immigrant Muslims and their descendants (Kalita, 2016). It is argued that the BJP's image of a Hindi-speaking Hindu party had to accommodate the regional aspiration of the Assamiyas and the party did it with an effortless tweak: they couched their Hindutva agenda in the familiar idiom of the burning need to check infiltration of Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh. At the same time, the machinations of Hindutva propped up the BJP's professed resolve to protect Assamiya identity from the infiltrators. Identity politics and elements of Hindutva both crossed each other's paths in the electoral politics of Assam. In 2016 Assembly election, BJP won a resounding victory (ibid.).

Mishra (2016) argued that the success of BJP in Assam was the result of the BJP's success in garnering the support of regional forces like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and the Rabha, Tiwa and other plains tribal organizations. According to Mishra, there was no Hindutva agenda as such in these elections and the emphasis was clearly on preserving the identity and culture of the indigenous people of the state in the face of swift demographic change triggered by

infiltration from neighboring Bangladesh. The AGP gave the BJP a much-needed secular flavour from which it benefited (Mishra, 2016).

Mishra (2017) showed his trust in the year-long social harmony and secular beliefs of Assamese society. He therefore, strongly believe that even the Vaishnava Satras or monasteries, many of which are with the VHP, would think twice before jumping into the bandwagon of militant Hindutva because their very ethos is extremely difficult for it to wean the Assamese people away from their secular beliefs and religious tolerance by trying to impose simple equations of Hindu versus Muslim or nation versus regional identities. He pointed out about the stands of RSS-VHP combine who tends to reinforce the argument that the RSS's role in last year's Assam elections has been much hyped. According to Mishra, it also reinforces the argument that the overwhelming majority of the people of the state did not vote for any saffron agenda but had put their trust in the BJP-AGP-BPF alliance, supported by several plains' tribal bodies, because they believed that under the new dispensation, their land and identity would be safeguarded. Mishra is very much sure about the fact that organizations like RSS are bound to face difficulties, if they try to steamroll diversity and identity issues into one single fold (Mishra, 2017).

Dutta (2017) talked about the 2016 assembly election in Assam. He argued that the entire debate and discussions on the *Khilonjiyas* has been manufactured by the BJP and is full of contradictions. The author claimed that with the actual rights of the indigenous people, it has no relation. The idea of *Khilonjiyas* was an appropriation for political mileage. According to Dutta, BJP's articulation of *Khilonjiyas* definitely provides the party a local sanctity. However, its inherent religious orientation in political pursuits and commitment to neo-liberal economic policies immediately brings BJP into conflict and contradictions with indigenous Assamese groups of the state (Dutta, 2017).

On the other hand, Bhattacharjee (2016) argued that ideologues of Hindutva intelligently make use of the opportunity to construct an identity for the Assamese, the mission being to define a connection between Assam and 'Bharat', since the ancient times. They selectively highlight references to Assam in a variety of Vedic, Puranic and epic texts to impart a strong Hindu identity to Assam. Hindutva activists have therefore, from the very beginning, adopted novel strategies for navigating through the complex particularities of this region in order to establish itself in the cultural and political imagination of the people. It moved away from its standard strategies of mobilizing people through the

invocation of Hindu stereotypes like ‘Ram’ or ‘Ayodhya’. Instead, the Hindutva discourse tries to adapt local cults and symbols which are associated with Kamakhya, Sankardev or Sattra traditions. Coupled with this, it also consolidates support by providing welfare services in the realm of education, health and cultural development, through a range of affiliate bodies (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

Sharma et. al., (2019) argued that through its consistent stand against Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, BJP attracted mainly the Hindu votes including those of the Assamese Hindus who had once constituted the regional party Asom Gana Parishad or AGP’s backbone. The kind of surprising growth of BJP in 2014 became possible partly because of a regional vacuum owing to the decline of AGP and partly because the Congress faced severe anti-incumbency. According to the authors of the article, there are some reasons that enabled a party like BJP representing Hindu nationalism to become a dominant political force in Assam. The authors highlighted the fact that traditionally, ethnicity and identity politics had been the dominant axis of political mobilization in Assam rather than religion. According to the authors, 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 Nagaon. The authors referred to Sharma’s work (2014) while arguing that the AIUDF and the BJP, with opposing political and ideological positions, cater to different communities. As their support bases do not overlap, religious polarization thus works in favour of both, though such polarization may not hold for long in the backdrop of linguistic and ethnic tensions. According to the writers of this article, the ultimate success of the BJP lay in its ability to convert anti-outsider sentiments among Assamese and tribal populations into fear of being outnumbered by ‘illegal migrants’ belonging to one religious category. Sharma, Gogoi and Tripathi highlighted that BJP raised the issue of protection of *jati, mati, bheti* (community, land and homestead) from ‘illegal Bangladeshi Muslim migrants’ and managed to draw support from diverse ethnic communities with its promise of freeing the land from the foreigners’ clutches. However, according to the writers, religious categories overlap the insider-outsider divisions, and hence political equations in a changing situation become vulnerable to varying types of ethnic mobilization (Sharma et. al., 2019). Sharma’s article gives a detailed analysis and also helpful in understanding of the state electoral politics with a critical lens. The article also enriched the present study by elucidating the changing dynamics of electoral dimension of Assam with the

rise of political parties like BJP and AIUDF, and with the decline of parties like AGP and Congress.

Mahanta (2014) analyzed the emergence of the BJP in the 2014 election as a phenomenal one and it has marked a new phase of polarized politics in Assam. According to him, 'for the first time ethnic, regional and identity-based issues have been sidelined and questions of governance and religion played a more important role in mobilizing voters' (Mahanta, 2014, p. 19). The argument of Mahanta is also reflected in the findings of the present research sites where religion become most important in mobilizing votes of the electorates.

Saikia (2020) stated that the RSS played a key role in transforming the Assam movement 'from being anti *bahiragat*(outsiders) to being an anti-*videshi*(foreigners) movement' (cited in Sethi&Shubhrashtha, 2017, p.71). The author states that the BJP's rise in Assam, besides other reasons, is premised on an unprecedented crystallization of the Hindu vote owing to the party's ability to capitalize on and appropriate the state's existing politics and its attendant cultural symbols. However, according to Saikia, this religious consolidation over other political cleavages was not achieved through the BJP's hard-line Hindutva politics seen in 'mainland' India. The article also gives a detailed glance on how the RSS played a crucial role in the transformation, which eventually enabled BJP to mobilize the Hindu-Muslim cleavage otherwise latent in the state. However, there was a clear consolidation of Hindu votes to the advantage of BJP in 2014. According to Saikia, riding on the Modi wave and its consistent position on the 'illegal immigrants' issue, the BJP managed to lure both Assamese and Bengali Hindus into its fold. Saikia in the article mentioned about the data, which reveals that support for the BJP among the Assamese Hindus rose by 53 percent between 2011 and 2014. Based on the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey (2016) findings, Saikia argued that RSS and BJP's strategy of inflecting religious polarization into Assam politics have been mostly effectual when adapted to the region's local concerns with immigration and preservation of 'indigenous' lands and identities. These findings are, however instructive in showing that religion has emerged as a potent identity. According to Saikia, it underscores the BJP's strategy of exacerbating a collective fear psychosis of the 'Muslim foreigner' rather than of the 'Bengali foreigner' (Hindu or Muslim) (Saikia, 2020).

The author asserted that despite the attempts of RSS at communalizing the anti-foreigners' sentiment, the Assamese and other 'indigenous' groups in the state continue to see both Bengali Hindus and Muslims as 'outsiders'. For the BJP, AIUDF's growth made it conducive to activate a latent religious fault line, and Saikia believes that the recent electoral outcomes indicate that it has succeeded to an extent. The consolidation of the Hindu votes is also observed in the research sites where BJP managed to capture both Assamese and Bengali speaking Hindus. In the line of the article, the present study also holds the opinion that religion has emerged as the most important identity in the state electoral politics of Assam and it overpowers other identities like caste or community (ibid).

Srikanth (1999) discusses about the emergence of regionalism in Assam. He believed that regionalism was able to prevent BJP from propagate their Hindutva agenda in the state for two decades. Weak governance and performance of AGP government created a space for BJP's entry into Assam. The author believes that Muslim fundamentalism enabled BJP to cater the support from both Assamese caste Hindus and Bengali caste Hindus. The author concluded that more than the failure of Congress, BJP got more benefited by the failure of AGP. However, the author didn't address the other factors which were responsible for the rise of BJP in Assam. The article is instrumental in understanding the reason behind the decline of AGP and how it that decline opened the door for BJP in Assam. The article also encouraged the present study to critically engage with Muslim fundamentalism in the research sites.

By taking the Lok Sabha poll of 2004 as its focal point Ahmed et al., (2006) epitomizes an insightful discussion on the electoral politics throughout the state of Assam. It covers various issues on which the elections were fought. This book also provides an analysis of the popular mandate. It indicates the trend in the elections and includes the profile of certain constituencies, case studies etc. The book is helpful for getting a comprehensive understanding of the Assam state electoral politics and electoral trends of different constituencies. In addition to the election trends, the present study intends to look at various nexus behind the agendas and principles of political parties and the role of religion in it. Thus, the present study has tried to go beyond the quantitative analysis of electoral trends and seek to bring subjective understanding of the electoral politics in Assam (Abu Naser Saied et al., 2006).

Das (2022) has done extensive study on the election and electoral politics of the state. Based on the findings of the field the author discussed the intersectionality of caste, religion and politics in Assam. The embedding nature of caste and religion-based politics and everyday form of governance is truly manifested in his discussion (Das, 2022).

Goswami (2009) talked about the 2009 lok sabha election. The author had witnessed a fractured politics where almost every community started asserting their identities. On the contrary, Ideology was a negligible factor in that election. The author has pointed out about the polarized politics in communal and linguistic line. While Assamese speaking Muslims keep the support with the Congress, Bengali speaking Muslims shifted to AIUDF. The author also observed polarization in linguistic line. However, the author didn't address the gradual consolidation of votes in favour of BJP and AIUDF due to such polarization. The article, thus, give a detailed analysis of the 2009 Lok Sabha election, which becomes a reference point in understanding the electoral politics of the select constituencies, and overall political dimension of Assam.

Sandhya Goswami (2003) has made an extensive analysis on the changing electoral trends in Assam. The author studied the elections held between the years 1985 to 1999 in Assam. From 1985, the author observed significant changes in the politics of Assam. The BJP and AGPs poll alliance has largely contributed to these changes. With the AGP-BJP alliance, the trend of electoral politics of Assam also changed according to the author. In the backdrop of the article, the present study attempted to understand the loss and gain of BJP in the state electoral politics after the alliance with AGP.

Thus, from the existing literatures, it is evident that different scholars have varied interpretations of the political victory of BJP and the role of AIUDF in Assam's state electoral politics. However, from their writings, it can be understood that the politics of Assam has become more complex in the recent past. The fact that political parties are constantly trying to polarize people is also evident from the existing literatures. In the light of the existing literatures, the present study tried to investigate whether the politico-religious agendas of Bharatiya Janata Party get manifested in the society or not and found that the politico-religious agendas of the political parties have huge implications in the society. The present study has become increasingly relevant because of the radically polarized electoral politics and society in Assam.

1.9 Methodology

As it is required to analyze election trends as well as people's behaviours, the study is qualitative as well as quantitative in nature.

1.9.1 Selection of the Field

For the present study, composition of the population is an important requirement as it intends to explore various dynamics related to religion and voting behaviour. In Assam, political nexus can be seen mainly between two religious communities, viz., Hindus and Muslims. Thus, for the present study, both Muslim and Hindu population is a necessity for proper representation of the categories. Further in order to understand a comprehensive picture of the present socio-political patterns of Assam, it is also a necessity to realize the presence of the dominant political parties in the select area of study. The present study also seeks to look at a research site where the activities of Hindutva brigade like RSS or Muslim organizations such as AIUDF, AAMSU are more visible.

Three Vidhan Sabha constituencies have been selected as the universe of the study from the Brahmaputra valley of Assam based on their geographical representations. Therefore, Nalbari (Sadar) from lower Assam, Tezpur from middle Assam and Jorhat Vidhan Sabha constituency from upper Assam have been selected as the representative sample sites. The main reasons for selecting these three constituencies over other constituencies are:

- a. Demographic composition
- b. Presence of active Hindu and Muslim political organizations
- c. Presence of all the prominent political parties
- d. Nalbari is called the Nagpur of Assam because of the strong hub of RSS and BJP
- e. RSS, AIUDF and AAMSU activities are more prominent and visible in these Vidhan Sabha constituencies.

The main target groups of the study are general voters belonging to different political parties and different religious communities, political leaders of different political parties, leaders and workers of different organizations. As the study is mostly a qualitative approach, thus, the key informants are drawn from the above-mentioned categories

through purposive random sampling. About 75 respondents each from the three selected constituencies have been interviewed constituting a total of 225 respondents.

1.9.2 Method of data collection

In the present study, interview has been used as the key method for collecting the primary data. It has been supplemented by case studies and some select FGDs. 5 FGDs from each constituency with a total of 15 FGDs had been conducted. Interviews have been conducted with the help of semi-structured interview schedules too.

1.9.3 Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data has been used in the study. Primary data is collected directly from the field; on the other hand, secondary data is collected from the existing government reports, magazines, new papers, election commission reports etc., apart from the books, articles and e-resources.

1.9.4 Profile of Sample Constituencies

1.9.4.1 Nalbari (Sadar)

Nalbari (Sadar) Assembly Constituency comes under the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency.

It is situated in Nalbari District. Nalbari (Sadar) is the 59th assembly constituency of Assam. According to 2021 Assembly election data, Nalbari has 2,07,754 electorates.

The number of Muslim voters in Nalbari assembly is approximately 46,792. It constitutes around 24.1% of the total voters as per voter list analyses. Other VidhanSadhac constituencies included in this parliamentary constituency are Kamalpur, Rangia, Paneri, Kalaigaon, Sipajhar, Mangaldoi, Dolgaon, Udalguri and Majbat. If we notice the recent 2021 assembly election results, then it can be seen that along with NalbariSadar, BJP has won Kamalpur, Rangia, Nalbari, Paneri and Sipajhar assembly segments.

1.9.4.2 Tezpur

Tezpur Assembly constituency comes under the Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency. It is the 74th constituency among 126 other constituencies in the state. It is located in Sonitpur district of Assam. According to 2021 assembly election data, Tezpur has 1, 88,449 electorates.

There are 86 villages and 4 main towns in Tezpur assembly constituency. In Tezpur, 5.54% and 1.4% voters are SCs and STs respectively as per 2011 census. According to the same data source, the number of Muslim voters in Tezpur assembly is 57,170, which is 31.7% as per the voter's list analyses. 31.7% is a notable factor in a representative democracy, but due to the lack of community voting, the whole Muslim community's vote is divided between INC, AGP, AIUDF and other independent candidates.

From the 1996 assembly election, Asom Gana Parishad had a strong hold in Tezpur Legislative Assembly. Brindaban Goswami had been MLA of the constituency for 25 years and he is the longest serving MLA of the constituency. Tezpur Parliamentary constituency constituted of nine assembly segments of Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts. They are Dhekiajuli, Barchala, Tezpur, Rangapara, Sootea, Biswanath, Behali, Gohpur and Bihpuria. In all the assembly segments of Tezpur parliamentary constituency now, BJP has its own MLA or has MLA from NDA alliance. In the last Lok Sabha election, Pallab Lochan Das won the MP seat of Tezpur. Considering community-wise population, Muslim are in the largest number with 16.1%, which is followed by STs with 13.5% of votes and SCs with 5.9% of votes.

1.9.4.3 Jorhat

Jorhat Vidhan Sabha constituency comes under the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency. It is the 98th constituency of Assam Legislative Assembly and it is located in Jorhat district. According to 2021 assembly election data Jorhat has 1 86,273 electorates. If we look at the demography of Jorhat assembly segment, as per 2011 census, SC voters at Jorhat assembly is approximately 14,091, which is around 8.04%, ST voters are approximately 3,418 which is around 1.95%, Muslim voters are 1,38,846 that is around 7.95%. The amount of rural and urban voters is 35.13% and 64.87% respectively. The largest caste

Hindu Assamese community in Jorhat assembly segments are Bora with 14% of the population, then Dutta (with 8.4%), Das (8.2%) and Muslims has 7.95% of the vote share. Goswamis are mainly the upper caste Brahmin. In the last four consecutive assembly elections, winning of the Goswami leader as the BJP candidate is significant and clearly denotes the hierarchy of caste in political power.

On the other hand, Jorhat parliamentary seat is constituted of (98) Jorhat, (100) Titabar, (101) Mariani, (102) Teok, (103) Amguri, (104) Nazira, (105) Mahmara, (106) Sonari, (107) Thowra, & (108) Sivsagar. In 2011 Assembly election, all of the ten assembly constituencies had Congress MLA's. Yet still in 2014, the parliamentary election due to nation-wide wave of Narendra Modi, BJP won the Jorhat parliament seat. In 2016 Assembly election, 6 of the 10 Assembly segments had MLAs from NDA alliance, as either of BJP or of AGP. This made 2019 parliament election easier for BJP. In the Jorhat parliamentary segment, Muslim voters are approximately 1,11,141 or 8.2% as per voter list analyses.

1.10 Chapter Schematization

The Chapter one starts with a brief description about the Voting Behaviour and Religion in the electoral politics of India and as well as Assam. The Chapter one also gives a brief description about the electoral politics of the state and how religion plays its role in it. This chapter introduces the problem of the study and also describes the significance of the study. The chapter put light on the political journey of BJP and the changing Voting Behaviour of the people. The chapter also mentions the objectives and the Methodology of the study.

Chapter two explores organizational structure of Bharatiya Janata Party and different functions, roles and responsibilities of those organizational structures. This chapter also attempts to understand the ideological principles of the Bharatiya Janata Party and different right-wing organizations who are commonly known as Sangh Parivar. The chapter also tries to put light on the relation of BJP and RSS. The later part of the chapter talks about the journey of BJP and RSS in the Northeast India, specifically in Assam. The chapter talks about different struggles and strategies of how BJP and RSS get an entry in this region.

Chapter three attempts to depict the voting trends of the select area of study as well as state electoral politics. The chapter first tried to put light on the electoral politics of Assam during the pre-independence period and the communal representations during those elections. The third chapter also tries to understand the electoral politics of the state in the post-independence period. By talking 2006 as the millstone year of Assam politics, the chapter attempts to understand the role of religion in the select area of study in particular and the whole Assam state electoral politics in general.

The fourth chapter tries to explore the voting behaviour of the electorates vis-a-vis caste, ethnic and religious groups. By focusing on the select area of study, the chapter tries to understand voting behaviour of the respondents during Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections. The chapter puts an effort to understand the various determinants of voting behaviour and why voting behaviour varies across different communities and across different elections.

The fifth chapter vitally attempts to explore the politico-religious ideologies of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its affiliated organizations and how the common people perceive those ideologies. The chapter tries to understand the change or difference that has come due to the politico-religious ideologies of the political parties like BJP.

The sixth chapter is the Summary and conclusion chapter. The chapter summarizes the main findings of all core chapters. The chapter also put forward the main arguments of the thesis.

The study concludes that a clear polarization based on religion has been manifested in all the research sites. 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. 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.

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