

CHAPTER 4

Voting Behavior of the Electorates vis-a-viz Caste, Ethnic and Religious Groups

4.1 Introduction:

This chapter intends to understand the voting behaviour of the electorates vis-à-vis caste, ethnic and religious groups. For this study, three Vidhan Sabha constituencies has been selected viz, Nalbari, Tezpur and Jorhat. To understand the voting behaviour of the electorates of Nalbari (Sadar), Tezpur and Jorhat during vidhansabha, lok sabha, and panchayat elections, the researcher conducted various interviews and focus group discussions among the respondents. Key respondents are selected randomly from the different communities and different caste groups. Interviews are also conducted among the leaders and members of different political parties and civil society organizations. Respondents have been asked about their opinions on different matters related to the voting behaviour. They were also interviewed to know their voting choices and voting behaviour during the Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections.

4.2 Political Parties, Electoral Politics and Voting Behavior: Vidhan Sabha Election

In Nalbari Sadar, there are different ethnic communities and religious groups who have their voting rights. Among all the communities, caste Hindu Assamese voters are the majority. A considerable number of Brahmins live in the Nalbari Sadar area. Apart from the Brahmins, Kalitas are the majority among caste Hindu Assamese voters. A small portion of Marwari and Bihari community also have their presence. In the main town area of Nalbari, Assamese Muslim community lives. In Nalbari, almost all Muslims are Assamese speaking Muslims and the presence of Bengali speaking Muslim is almost insignificant. Presence of Nepali and Bengali community is also minimum who confined their limited role in the electoral politics of Nalbari unlike other constituencies of Assam. Till the 2011 Vidhan Sabha election, AGP and Congress were the dominant political parties of Nalbari. During that period, religion played a very minor role in the voting behavior of the electorates of Nalbari (Sadar). In 2001, Congress came to power in Assam and in Nalbari also Congress came to power. It continued to stay in power for three consecutive terms. In the 2016 vidhan sabha election, Ashok Sarma of BJP won

the election from the Nalbari seat. But in 2021 election, he didn't get the party ticket and Jayanta Malla Baruah won the Nalbari Sadar seat from the BJP ticket.

In Tezpur Vidhan Sabha constituency also different communities live. Among all the communities, caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. Nepali community is also present in the constituency with a considerable number. In the main locality of Tezpur town, Assamese speaking Muslims are present, while in the outskirts of the Tezpur Town Bengali speaking Muslims have their presence in a considerable number. Caste Hindu Assamese population is scattered all over the area. Bengali population is also there although the number is less. Harijan community also has their presence in Tezpur constituency. From the time of Assam movement, Tezpur has been a hotspot of state politics. It was AGP who ruled the constituency for the longest period of time. Since Assam movement, congress could manage to win the constituency only one time. From the voting pattern, it is easily understood that Tezpur constituency has been a constituency who has primarily regionalist vote bank. The AGP candidate, Brindaban Goswami had been the MLA of the constituency for the longest period of time. But after BJP came into power in 2016 the whole equation of state politics got changed. Although BJP and AGP formed alliance but different political equation has been formed within the alliance itself. In this new politics, Brindaban Goswami was sidelined from his own party. Although he was the MLA of Tezpur from 2016 to 2021, but in the 2021 Assembly election, he was denied party ticket from the constituency. Prithviraj Rabha who is the son of late Bishnu prasad Rabha- the cultural icon of Assam got elected in the 2021 assembly election with the AGP ticket. He got elected as a candidate of AGP-BJP alliance. Prior to the election, Brindaban Goswami came out openly against the decision of their party leadership to give the party ticket to Prithviraj Rabha. But later he cooperated with the party leadership.

During the last election, BJP workers were demanding tickets for their own party. On the other hand, AGP had a considerable number of vote bank in the Tezpur constituency. Both the party workers were in conflict with each other because of the party ticket. Eventually both the party's leadership decided to give party ticket to Prithviraj Rabha, the son of late Bishnuprashad Rabha. The ex-MLA Brindaban Goswami alleged that his party's leadership conspired to destroy his political carrier and with him some of his party workers also protested against the party's decision. But later that issue was

resolved by the leadership of BJP and AGP. AGP and BJP were in pre-poll alliance with each other. Although some of the BJP members were offended due to party high commands decision of leaving Tezpur seat to AGP. But later it was resolved. Eventually the AGP-BJP alliance won the assembly election in Tezpur and Prithviraj Rabha became the new MLA of Tezpur. The caste Hindu Assamese voters were in favour of BJP because of the clear polarization. As a result majority voted for the AGP candidate. The voting trends of the caste Hindu Assamese voters clearly revealed that issues of identity and questions of security supersede other important issues in the election.

One of the BJP workers of Tezpur, age 35, said that,

Aami aamar pora ticket bisarislu kintu kisuman kotha manage koribo loga hoi noh. aami bujisu aru upai nai. Ata kotha bhal lagise je brindaban goswamik nidile ticket aibar. Prithviraj Rabha teutu Bishnu Prasad Rabhar lora hoi noh.. Himanta Biswa sarma ahile, teukoise je ohabar BJPke dibo. (We wanted ticket from our party but for the party's larger interest, somethings have to be managed. We are glad that this time they did not give ticket to Brindaban Goswami. Himanta Biswa Sarma assured us that next time they will give ticket to a BJP candidate.

In the Jorhat constituency, again different communities are present. Among all the communities, Caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. Considerable number of Brahmins are present in the main town area of Jorhat and in its nearby areas. Apart from the Brahmins, Kalita, Koch, Sut and Kaibartas are also present in the constituency. In the nearby locality of Jorhat Town, Muslim community also has their presence. Almost all the Muslims of Jorhat are Assamese speaking Muslims and the presence of Bengali speaking Muslims are almost insignificant in the constituency. In the main town locality, some Marwadi and Bengali population also have their presence. In Jorhat, caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. In Jorhat, Assamese nationalist sentiment is strong and it was AGP candidate, Hitendranath Goswami who won the seat most of the time after the Assam Movement. Later, he shifted to BJP party and has been winning the Jorhat vidhan sabha seat with the BJP ticket. In the 2016 and 2021 vidhan sabha elections, Hitendranath Goswami of BJP defeated the congress candidate Rana Goswami who was the MLA of Jorhat during the congress rule in Assam.

The rise of BJP in both Jorhat and Tezpur is a recent phenomenon. It has been observed that it is the regional forces which have been managed to cater maximum support in favour of them. The arguments made by H. Srikanth in his commentary is correctly reflected in both the Jorhat and Tezpur constituencies as he argued that BJP was more benefited by the continuous failure of the regional party, AGP, than the failure of Congress (Srikanth,1999). Only in 2016, BJP managed to win the assembly elections of Jorhat and while in Tezpur, the AGP candidate only managed to win with the support of BJP. In the last assembly election, the candidate of Asom Jatiya Parishad managed to get around 7000 votes. Interestingly, the candidate of Congress party, Rana Goswami lost to BJP candidate Hitendranath Goswami with the difference of 2500 votes. According to many respondents, Hitendranath Goswami would not have won the election if AJP candidate Nirod Changkakoty did not divide the anti-CAA and anti-BJP votes and managed to get around 7000 votes.

In the Vidhan Sabha election, the electoral politics of the state has a huge influence. The Hindu versus Muslim binary was the major issue in the state Vidhan Sabha election. The politics of the constituency is also centred on that.

Nani Gopal Mahanta analyzed the emergence of the BJP in the 2014 election as a phenomenal one and further states 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 the questions of governance and religion played a more important role in mobilizing voters' (Mahanta, 2014).

4.3 Political Parties, Electoral Politics and Voting Behavior: Lok Sabha Election

The Nalbari vidhan sabha constituency comes under the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. From this lok sabha constituency, the BJP candidate, Dilip Saikia won the election in the last lok sabha election. The Mangaldoi loksabha constituency constitutes of few other vidhansabha constituencies apart from the Nalbari constituency, namely, Kamalpur, Rangiya, Panery, Kalaigaon, Sipajhar, Mangaldoi, Dalgaon, Udalguri and Majbat. In the 2009 and 2014 elections, Ramen Deka won from Mangaldoi with BJP's party ticket. Last time, it was Dilip Saikia of the BJP vs Bhubneswar Kalita of the Congress. Dilip Saikia of BJP won the Mangaldoi loksabha seat with a huge margin. In the Nalbari LAC, the caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. Most of the respondents

want to make a Hindu candidate win from the Mangoldoi constituency. They believe that for the larger interest of the Hindus, it is important to make the BJP candidate win. Within the Mangoldoi Lok Sabha constituency, there are other communities as well. A considerable number of Muslim population is also present in the Mangoldoi constituency. Apart from Muslim population, a considerable number of tea tribe population also live in this constituency. However, the king maker has always been the caste Hindu Assamese voters. It has been observed that a clear polarization happens in this constituency as a result of which the BJP candidate has been winning despite having a considerable number of Muslim population within the Lok Sabha constituency. In the Lok Sabha election, party background and national as well as state level issues matter the most.

Tezpur Vidhan Sabha constituency comes under the Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency. In the Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency, the main contests were between the BJP and the Congress. Although there are other political parties, but BJP and congress had stolen the show. In the last Lok Sabha election, Pallab Lochan Das won the L.S. election. He won the election by representing the BJP party. Pallab Lochan Das was the MLA of Rangapara constituency during that time. Against Das, the Congress had given ticket to M.G.V.K Bhanu who was a retired IAS officer. For many times, Mani Kumar Subba, who was allegedly a lottery mafia, won Tezpur L.S. According to the respondents, he has been winning by money power and at the same time, the tea community voters supported the Congress party during that time. After BJP came into power at the centre, the vote bank of tea tribe community has shifted to the BJP party. In the 2019 loksabha election, BJP gave party ticket to Pallab Lochan Das who is a member of the tea tribe community. This time the picture has changed in favour of Pallab Lochan Das. Mani Kumar Subba was not well and did not get the Congress party ticket. Pallab Lochan Das won the election with a huge margin. Different factors were responsible in the electoral mandate of 2019 Lok Sabha election.

The Jorhat vidhan sabha constituency comes under the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency. From this lok sabha constituency, the BJP candidate Topon kumar Gogoi won in the last lok sabha election. The Jorhat loksabha constituency constitutes of few other vidhansabha constituencies apart from the Jorhat constituency, namely, Titabar, Mariani, teok, Amguri, Nazira, Mahmara, Sonari, Thowra and Sibsagar. In the 2014 lok sabha

election, Kamakhya Prasad Tasa of Bharatiya Janata Party won from Jorhat LAC. Last time it was Topon kumar Gogoi of BJP vs the Congress. Topon Gogoi of BJP won the Jorhat loksabha seat with a huge margin. As jorhat has a major portion of tea tribe community, so their voting plays an important role. Another community, which plays an important role in the politics of Jorhat loksabhaconstituency, is the Ahom community. They have a dominant position in the Jorhat loksabha constituency. Within the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency, the caste Hindu Assamese people are also present in huge number. A considerable number of Muslim population is also present in the Jorhat lok sabha constituency. However, the king maker has always been the Ahom and tea tribe community voters. In the Jorhat lok sabh constituency, the centrel politics has been playing an important role in the voting choices of the respondents. A clear polarization is witnessed in the lok sabha election of the Jorhat lok sabha constituency.



Image 4.1: Interaction with the respondents of Jorhat

4.4 Question of Security

The researcher has asked the respondents of all the constituencies about their voting choices in the last Vidhan Sabha election and attempted to analyze the responses.

One Brahmin respondent, who is a retired police officer of Nalbari, age 65 said that,

Sauk eyate agot Ashok sarma MLA asil aru aibar Jayanta Malla Baruahk ticket dia hol. Ashok Sarmaiou kam korisil aami nokora buli kobo nuwaru kintu Jayanta Malla Baruah alop young manuh hoi na gotike teur uparat aamar expectation besi. Candidate kun seitu dangor kotha nohoi. Ji party e aamak security dibo tenekeua party aamak laage. Xei security BJP r baade aan kune dibo paaribo? (“Earlier Ashok Sarma was the MLA and this time Jayanta Malla Baruah was given the party ticket. Although Ashok Sarma also worked during his tenure, but as a young candidate they have more expectations from Jayanta Malla Baruah. Whomever is the candidate, it doesn’t matter. We want that party who can give security to us and who else will be able to provide security, except the BJP?”)

One respondent of Jorhat with the title Dutta, age 52 said that,

BJP ye hindur kotha sinta kore. Aji BJP ohar pora aapuni sauks muslimor utpat kiman komi goise. Pakistanye bhoi khai thake. Ketia surgical strike kore thik nai Modiye. Gotike aami BJP bisaru Assamotou. (“BJP thinks about Hindus. You see, after the BJP came to power, the Muslim aggression has reduced. Pakistan is also in fear that when Modi might order for surgical strike. That’s why we also want BJP in Assam.”)

One respondent of from Tezpur with the title Kalita, age 52 said that,

Congressye Asomkhon khai dile. Sihotor karaneha Asomot eman miya hobole pale. AGP keitau kom nohoi. Sihoteu eku nokorile. Atia BJP logot thoka karaneha support korisu, nohole nokorilu hoi. (“Congress has ruined the state. Because of them, only the population of Miyas increases to such an extent. AGP is not less responsible than they are. This time we only supported because it was with BJP.”)

One caste Hindu respondent from Tezpur who is a member of Jongom - a socio-cultural organization of Tezpur, age 55 said that,

aami baru besi hindu muslim kori thaki bhal napau kintu aitu kothatu misa nohoi je Asomot muslim population bohut bahise. Sob kheltutu numberore na. atia Pachmiletu gutei miya raizya hoi go. Aapuni moi tat goi thakibo nuwaru. (“We don’t like to talk in terms of Hindus and Muslims, but you cannot ignore the fact that Muslim population is increasing at a rapid rate. Eventually it is a number game. Government should bring some strong population policy to control the Muslim population”).

Many other respondents of all the constituencies have shared similar opinions

From the responses of all the caste Hindu Assamese respondents, it can be said that the issues of security matter the most while exercising their voting choices. Question of security and issues like protection of the rights of indigenous people gets prominence in the election. Most of the caste Hindu respondents want the BJP candidate to win. It is not because of his caste or individual identity, but because of his party background. They believe that only BJP is capable to take strong action for the interest of the state and the indigenous Assamese people. According to them, Congress has been doing the politics of appeasement but after its pre-poll alliance with AIUDF, they feel Congress has become a communal party. According to them, Congress is responsible for the deteriorating demography of Assam. Caste Hindu Assamese people are very much concerned about the increased population of Muslims in the state. From the responses of the respondents, it is visible that there is a genuine fear among the people regarding the rapid change of demography in the state. People have insecurity that if no action is taken, then Assam will become second Kashmir very soon. One of the respondents revealed that it is high time that the government should adopt strong population policy to control the Muslim population. Caste Hindu Assamese people of Nalbari are worried about the increase of Bengali speaking Muslims in lower Assam. Many people believe that polygamy and the production of many children is a part of the large agenda of Islamic state. Many people have the view that Bengali speaking Muslims are involved with many crimes and other socially prohibited activities. Many of them do not have problem with Assamese speaking Muslims because they believe that they are part of the same Assamese society. However, they are not ready to accept Bengali-speaking Muslims as a part of the larger Assamese community.

The ultimate success of the BJP lay in its ability to convert an anti-outsider sentiment among 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). In this context, Udayan Mishra argued that the BJP's image of a Hindi-speaking Hindu party had to accommodate the regional aspiration of the Axomiyas 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 Axomiya identity from the infiltrators. Identity politics and elements of Hindutva crossed paths as BJP won a resounding victory (Dutta, 2021). According to Mishra, 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 the neighboring state, i.e. Bangladesh (Mishra, 2016).

It can be argued that the insecurity of the caste Hindu Assamese society with regard to illegal infiltration and increasing population of one particular religious group was rightly captured by BJP in Assam.

4.5 The Modi wave and BJP factor

One respondent of Nalbari, age 52 said that,

Main kothatu hol BJPk aanibo lage centralot. Karon BJP thakileha bharat gutei biswasot bhal position pabo. Aru BJP aamr hindur kotha sinta kora party hoi. Aji BJP ohar pora aapuni sauk muslimor utpat kiman komi goise. Pakistanye bhoi khai thake. Ketia surgical strike kore thik nai Modiye. Gotike aami BJP bisaru Assamotou. Dilip Saikiatu kotha nai kintu Modijitu aneu jiki ase. Aamar eyar porau jikuatuha kotha. ("Our main aim was to bring BJP at the centre because only then India will occupy a good position in the world. BJP thinks about Hindus. You see, after BJP came to power, the Muslim aggression has reduced. Pakistan is also in fear that when Modi might order for a surgical strike. That is why we also want BJP in Assam. More than Dilip Saikia, it is important that Modi should win. So, we should also make our candidate win to help Modi").

Ram Thapa, age 62 who is party member of BJP in Tezpur said that,

Asomot BJP ohatu jaruri asil karon miyar kiman utpat hoisil aapuni sauk. Atia alop Thanda hoise. Aagot Tezpur towntou Paanchmiler miya lorai amar Hindu sowali jukai. Aamak aahi koitu. Atia alop komise. Atiai action nolole pisot aru time nohobo. (“It was essential to bring BJP into power because Miya Muslims’ aggression was increasing. Now somehow it is under control. Earlier, our girls were teased by MiyaMuslims in Tezpur town. They informed us about that. Now it is in control, if we do not take action against it right now, then it will be too late.)”

During the last Lok Sabha election, the caste Hindu voters were in support of BJP. Apart from the old Congress workers, most of the caste Hindu voters were in support of BJP. Narendra Modi’s image at the centre and HimantaBiswa Sharma and SarbanandaSonawal’s leadership at the state level attracted the voters to vote in favour of the BJP candidate.

One respondent from Jorhat, age 35said that,

Lok sabha politicstu main kotha hol centralot ki soli ase seibur kothaha besi matter kore. 2014 pora Modi dhoutu ahil, atia agotke Asomot alop komil jodiou atiyau ase. Aru ata kotha ki sauk Asomot BJP leader hol HimantaBiswa Sarma aru SarbanandaSonowal. Gotike afale hoi gol Modi afale Rahul Gandhi. Aru Asomot afale hol Himanta Biswa Sarma aru Sarbananda Sonowal aannfale hoi gol Rokibul Hussain, Ripun Borah aibur. Kot aru BJP logot patta pabo. (In Lok Sabha politics, what is going on at the centre matters the most. In 2014, Modi’s wave started in the country. Now it has been decreased to an extent but it is still there. Again, see, in Assam, BJP leaders are Himanta Biswa Sarma and Sarbananda Sonowal. So, at the centre, it is Modi versus Rahul Gandhi and in Assam it is Himanta and Sarbananda Sonowal versus Rokibul Hussain and Ripun Borah. How can they fight with BJP?)

Similar opinions are given by most of the respondents of all the research sites who support BJP.

From the responses of the respondents, inferences can be drawn that in the lok sabha election, the central politics has been playing the key role in the voting choices of the

respondents. Modi wave and the image of the BJP as a nationalist party attracted voters in their favour. From the responses, it can be said that apart from the Mangaldoi constituency, the voters of Tezpur and Jorhat votes in favour of the party, which is in the dominant position at the centre. It has been argued that states in northeast India, owing to their small size with low economic and political capital, have high propensity of going with the party in power at the Centre (Saikia, 2020). The trend of of Jorhat and Tezpur clearly support this argument.

4.6 AGP – BJP alliance

In the vidhan sabha election, the caste Hindu Assamese people voted for the AGP candidate of Tezpur because BJP and AGP were in alliance. Majority of the respondents belonging to the Bengali and Nepali community voted for the AGP candidate in the last vidhan sabha election because AGP-BJP was in alliance.

One Bengali respondent with the title Biswas, age 42, said that,

“aamitu BJP hoi bhai. BJP support korimei na, hindu party hoi. Aaru Bengali manuhok support kori ase. Atia BJP support nokori ki muslim party support korim nki? Atiatu AGPk vote dia mane BJPk vote dia. aamitu nohole AGP candidate vote nidilu hoi. Aami bisarisilu eyate BJP manuhok ticket dibole kintu nidile aru ki koribo?” (We support BJP because it is the only party who support us. Other parties only work for the interest of Muslims. Now tell me, shouldn't we support BJP or should we support the party who support Muslims? We wanted a BJP candidate here, but did not get it, so we had to support the AGP candidate).

People believed that AGP-BJP are two different sides of the same coin only. Srikanth argued that the alliance with AGP benefitted the BJP during that time (Srikanth, 2009). However, in the current situation, it shows a different picture where AGP could only managed to win in Tezpur with the support of BJP. On the contrary, AGP gave a much-needed secular flavour to BJP (Mishra, 2016) which was necessary for BJP to win.

4.7 Voting as Hindus

Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) portrayed the 2016 assembly elections using the metaphor, ‘the last battle of Saraighat’, to evoke a sense of urgency against what it claimed as ‘the

demographic, cultural and political aggression of the illegal Bangladeshis' (Sethi&Shubhrastha, 2017) in Assam and it was successful to consolidate the Hindu votes. In 2021 vidhan sabha election, BJP made the whole election campaign as a civilization war. The BJP nevertheless managed to localize the contest by exploiting the already polarized debate on immigration without taking a hard line of Hindutva (Saikia, 2020).

In both Vidhan sabha and the Lok Sabha elections, religion plays an important role. Polarization of votes in the name of religion is clearly visible in all the constituencies. In the vidhan sabha election, the whole electoral campaign was conducted to polarize the Hindu votes. In Nalbari and Jorhat, majority of the caste Hindu voters voted for the BJP candidates. Other Hindu voters also supported BJP because they believe that BJP is a party, which supports Hindus. The image of congress as a Muslim sympathizer also distances it from the Hindu voters of all the constituencies. The pre-poll alliance of Congress with AIUDF made it easy for the Hindu voters to support BJP over congress.

One respondent from Jorhat with the title Dutta, age 56 said that,

Asomot jikaidat Muslim population bahise aamak alop hindur kotha sinta kora government dorkar. Congress ahile muslimok tel mariha kam koribo. Gotike aami BJPkei vote diu. (The way Muslim population has been increasing in the country, we need a government who works for the interest of Hindus. If Congress comes to power, then Congress will only do politics of appeasement. That is why we voted for BJP.)

Many other caste Hindu respondents of all the constituencies share similar opinions.

One Neali respondent with the title Newar who is a BJP leader in Tezpur, age 46 said that,

Himanta Sirye je muslimor vote nalage koise, sosa kothai koise. Aneutu sihote aamak vote nidiyei congress ba AIUDF baad di. gotike openly koise bhalei hoise. (When Himanta Sir said that we donot want Muslim votes, he said the truth. Anyway, Muslims donot vote for us and only support either congress or AIUDF).

From the responses, it is understood that a clear Hindu Muslim binary is created in the society and BJP targeted the Hindu votes by clearly excluding Muslim votes specially

Miyas. People have the believe that the increase of the Muslim population especially *miyas* can make the state second Kashmir where Hindu people will lose their political rights and eventually have to live like second-class citizen. The respondents believed that in Assaam, it was essential to bring BJP into power because the demography of the state was rapidly changing and BJP is able to take firm action against *miyas*. In the vidhan sabha election, the non-Assamese voters of Tezpur supported the AGP candidate because the nationalist party BJP supported it. Most of them participated in the campaign process as well.

In the Lok Sabha election, a clear polarization is seen in the field. In all the lok sabha constituencies, Caste Hindu Assamese voters have a major share and it is clear from the responses of majority of the respondents that they want to make a Hindu candidate win from their constituencies. They believe that for the larger interest of the Hindus, making the BJP candidate win is important.

One caste Hindu respondent from Mangaldoi who works at the Mangaldoi court, age 35 said that,

Mangaldoi lok sabhat emanbur Muslim manuh thokar pisotou aami BJPr beya dinotou Ramen Dekak jikai thoisu. muslimyetu BJPk vote nidiye. Tar mane Asomot congress sorkar thoka timeotou aamar eyar Hindu manuhkhini ek hoi BJPk vote dse lok sabhat. Nohole eyat miyar utpat bohut besi hoi gol heten. Aamar manuhor kothatu hol candidate kun hoi seitu dangor kotha nohoi aasol kothatu hol muslimor hatole power jaboledibo nuwari. (“Despite of having a considerable Muslim population in our Mangaldoi lok sabha, we made Ramen Deka win even during BJP’s bad days. You know the fact that Muslims donot vote for BJP, which means Hindus unitedly voted for BJP in lok sabha even when there was a Congress government in Assam. Our people believe that no matter whomever the candidate is, but the power shouldnot go into the hands of the Muslims. Otherwise, it will be difficult to live in Muslim aggression”)

It is observed that in the Lok Sabha election, the voters of Nalbari show a significant voting trend. Hindus of the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency unanimously voted for the BJP candidate. That is why, the BJP candidate has been winning from Mangoldoi even before BJP tasted victory in other constituencies of Assam. In the last lok sabha election, consolidation of the Hindu votes in favour of the BJP candidate irrespective of

caste and community is clearly visible in all the lok sabha constituencies. 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. The data reveals that support for the BJP among the Assamese Hindus rose by 53 percent between 2011 and 2014(Saikia,2020). From the responses of the respondents in Nalbari, inferences can be drawn that in the lok sabha election, the threat of the Muslim 'other' has been a constant factor in the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. People think that voting for a party, which has an image of sympathizer of Muslims will bring threat to their identity. BJP rightly used this image of the Congress during electoral campaign through different narratives and rhetorics. Even after years of Hindu majoritarianism, the idea that Muslims are 'pampered' by 'pseudo-secularists' continues to prevail in the Hindutva discourse and the Congress has been projected as 'pseudo- secularists' (Anderson& Jaffrelot, 2018). On the other hand, BJP's pro-Hindu image attracts the Hindu voters to get rid of the threat of the Muslim 'other'. That is why the Hindu voters unitedly voted for the BJP candidate even when BJP was not in power at the centre. Interestingly on the other side of religious divide, the Muslims did not seem to have voted for the Congress with the same intensity as the Hindus voted for the BJP in both vidhan sabha and lok sabh elections of all the research sites. Muslim votes didnot consolidate as compared to the Hindu votes as seen in the AIUDF scoring heavily in the areas dominated by Bengali speaking 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 constituencies with substantial Muslim populations, like Mangaldoi.Credit must be given to BJP for successfully converting anti-outsider sentiments among Assamese and tribal populations into fear of being outnumbered by 'illegal migrants' belonging to one religious category (Sharma et al., 2019).

The non-Assamese communities like Bengali, Nepali, etc. voted in favour of BJP candidate. In all the elections, be it loksabha, vidhansabha or panchayat, they supported BJP. According to them, they voted for the party because it is a national party and serves the interest of the Hindus. They believe that the Hindus of the constituency as well as the country must be united for the larger interest of the country. Many respondents want Hindi as the national language and they believe that the BJP government wants to spread the Hindi language across the country. They openly said that only BJP thinks about the

interest of Hindus. Therefore, to protect the interest of the Hindus it is important to vote for BJP.

One female respondent with the title Dahal, age 54 who is a member of BJP Mohila Morcha of Tezpur said that,

Aamartu nepali manuh 90% buli koleu bhul nahaba BJP supportot ase eyat. Karon BJP national issuet bhal kam kori ase na. Hindur karane sinta kori ase. Tezpurot lok sabhat kun uthise tatse dangor kotha hol ata hindu candidate jikai Modik jikabo lage aami. aapunalokor Asomiya manuheha miyak support kora partyk vote diye aamitu nidiu. Alop strict hobo lagibo nohole eyate muslimr raaj hobo. (“More than 90% of our Nepali people support BJP. Because BJP has been doing good in national issues. BJP is in favour of our Hindu people. More than who contested from Tezpur lok sabha, making Modi and a Hindu candidate win is more important. Ironically some of your Assamese people vote for that party who support Miyas, we donot. We have to deal with this issue strictly otherwise miyas will rule us.”)

They think that caste Hindu Assamese people donot understand the fact that this Muslim appeasement is ruining the state. The threat of the ‘other’ is the reason, which pushed the Hindu voters to forego their caste identities and voted as a one Hindu community. The winning of the BJP candidate from Mangaldoi even during the bad time of BJP only denotes the consolidation of Hindu votes irrespective of caste and community identities. In this context, Omar asserted that the idea of the Muslim ‘other’ is necessary to maintain Hindu identity and remain defenders of the ‘self’ for the Hindu nationalist organisations. Therefore, the Muslim is, constructed as an object of fear, disloyalty, hatred and envy. The intention is to create a sense of insecurity among the Hindus and mobilise them to protect their identity from the ‘Other’ (Omar, 2021). Although the argument of Omar cannot be generalized and need to look at critically but in the context of Nalbari, it can be said that the existence of ‘Muslim other’ has benefitted BJP in the Lok Sabha election even before 2014 and now in Vidhan Sabha also, the ‘Muslim other’ has been used to polarize people. According to many respondents, they had chosen BJP because it is the nationalist Hindu party and it took strong stand in nationalist issues. Thus, it can be argued that by undermining other identities, Sangh Parivar has succeeded in establishing the Hindu versus Muslim binary as the line of cleavage in the society. It also undermines caste differentiations and regional identities. In Assam, this strategy has

become successful. The difference between Bengali speaking and Assamese-speaking Muslims has been abolished. Now the whole focus is given on Muslims as one identity and Hindus as one identity. Now it is evident that a large number of Bengali-speaking Hindus, Assamese-speaking Hindus and Nepalese are thinking and planning of voting for the BJP together (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). The observation of Jaffrelot is correctly reflected in the opinions of the respondents, where irrespective of their community identities, people are thinking of voting for BJP in solidarity.

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). From the insights of the research sites, polarization of votes is clearly visible in all the research sites in the Loksabha election.

On the other hand, it was projected that Congress as a party has soft corner for immigrant Muslims and also it does not take strong stand against Pakistan. In the Hindutva discourse, Congress has been projected as the savior of *Miya* Muslims through different narratives and rhetorics. Congress has been projected as 'pseudo-secularists' who pampers and cares for the Muslims (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

4.8 For or against the Congress

One Muslim respondent from Tezpur who is a shopkeeper, age 56 said that,

Aamitu baap dada dinor porai congress kori ahisu. Congress ye aamar deshor karane kiman kam korise. BJP yetu atia sob congressye bonai thoi jua bostu besiha ase. Aaji Congressor obostha weak ase. Seitutu sosa kotha. Aami haribo buli janiou congressoke vote disu. BJP yetu direct koi a sihotk amar vote nalage buli. Aru aneu sihotr politicstutu hindutwabadiye hoi. Aami kiba pau napau agore porai congress kori ahisu. (We have been supporting Congress from our grandparent's days. Congress has done so much to this country. The present government is only good at selling. It is true that at present, the Congress' situation is weak but we voted for Congress even after knowing that Congress may lose. BJP openly said that they donot want our votes. From earlier days, we have been voting congress whether in good or bad days.)

Similar opinions are shared by many other Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking respondents of all the constituencies.

One caste Hindu Assamese respondent of Tezpur with the title Goswami, age 45 said that,

Aami AGP vote disu karon AGP BJP r logot ase. Congress tu dibo nuwariye pura muslim party boni goise. BJP ji holeu hindur kotha sinta kore Congress ye aamar eyat Mani subbar nisina manuh eman bosor ticket dile. Aru Asomot je eman miya anile seitu kune korile. Eman bosor sorkar asil sihote bisora hoitu Asomor eman besi beya obostha nohol hoi. Congress ye tu agote sob miya aanile Asomot. Khali vote lage baki jati, dharma bhar main jaye. (We have only voted for AGP candidate because it is a partner of BJP. We can not give vote to Congress because they will only support *miya* Muslims. BJP atleast support Hindus. Congress had given ticket to people like Mani Subba from Tezpur. Who allowed so many immigrant Muslims in Assam? For so many years they were in power, they could have controlled the illegal migrant situation if they would have good intention. They only want votes. For them, interest of the people doesn't matter.)

From the responses of the Muslim respondents, it can be realised that they supported the Congress party because of their year long association or loyalty and not because of the hope to win election. Although some of the conscious Muslim voters agree to the crisis of leadership in the opposition but they strongly asserted that at any cost they are not ready to vote for a party who are against the Muslims or Islam. According to the majority of the Muslim respondents in all the constituencies, the developmental works are mostly concentrated on the Hindu dominated areas and they are alienated from the government's developmental schemes. Feeling of 'othering' and marginalization is clearly visible in the comments of most of the Muslim respondents in all the constituencies. They are quite apprehensive about the ongoing identity assertion steps taken by some of the Hindu right-wing groups.

From the responses of the respondents in all the constituencies, inference can be drawn that the image of the Congress as a sympathizer of the Muslims and the saviour of *Miyas* has distanced the party from the caste Hindu Assamese and the other Hindu voters. On the contrary, the pro-Hindu image of BJP attracted the Hindu voters in their favour. Many

Caste-Hindu Assamese voters revealed that they have no other option than BJP because they can not support the Congress. Respondents believe that although the Congress earlier used to do politics of appeasement but now it turned into a Muslim party. According to the respondents, Congress didnot do anything to protect the interest of the Assamese people and they are responsible for demographic change in Assam. People have the fear that if Congress comes to power again, then the Muslims may become majority in Assam.

4.9 Caste and Voting Behaviour:

Respondents of all the three constituencies were asked about their opinion on caste and its role on the selection of the candidates and caste-based voting behaviour.

From the respondents, the researcher could gather that Brahmins have a dominant position in the RSS and BJP organization of Nalbari. That is why they always backed the Brahmin candidates. Earlier, Ashok Sarma was the MLA from the constituency but in 2021, Jayanta Malla Baruah got the BJP party ticket who has a very good relation with Himanta Biswa Sarma. In Tezpur, it was Brindaban Goswami-a Brahmin who had been winning from the AGP party for many times. It is said that the upper caste population of Tezpur has always supported Brindaban Goswami. But in 2021, he was denied the AGP party ticket while the ticket was given to Prithviraj Rabha, son of Late Bishnuprasad Rabha. Again, in the Jorhat constituency, it is observed as an unwritten rule that the representative of the constituency must come from the upper caste. For the last several years, the MLA candidate of Jorhat has been coming from Brahmin family. Apart from the Brahmins, the caste Hindu Assamese people also support Brahmin candidates. Presently, Hitendranath Goswami is the MLA of Jorhat from the BJP party who is a Brahmin and in his opposition; the Congress candidate Rana Goswami, also a Brahmin was the MLA of Jorhat from 2011 to 2016.

One Brahmin respondent of Nalbari who is school teacher, age 45 said,

“Eyatetu besike Asomiya hindu manuhe ase gotike eyat agore porai Asomiya hindu manuhe jiki ase aru eyat caste hindu Asomiya manuhoke ticket diye political party bure. Aamaktu aamar manuhe laage. Nijor manuhe jimaan aamar kotha sinta koribo, aan kune koribo? (In Nalbari, caste Hindu Assamese are the majority, therefore candidate of

caste Hindu Assamese community has been winning this seat. Political parties also give ticket to caste Hindu Assamese people. We want our own people. Who else will think for us more than our own people?)

When he was further asked to throw light on the word *aamar Manuh*, he explained that by “*aamar manuh*” he tried to denote people from the caste Hindu Community, preferentially Brahmin. He further clarified that if he has to choose between Brahmin and any other caste, he would always go for the former. In addition, the Brahmin school teacher said,

Otitore pora Nalbari Seat tu Brahmin manuhorei seat. dui eta ifaal xifaal hoise kintu imaan brahmin manuh thokaa, seat Assam t keitaa ulaabo? (From the past, most of the time this seat was won by Brahmin candidates. Only few times, this winning tradition has changed. However, how many other constituency seats in Assam you will find with so many Brahmin populations like this?)

Brahmin respondents of Jorhat and Tezpur gave similar arguments.

One of the respondents with the title Kalita, age 35, said that,

Eyate Brahmin manuh ase kisu. Kintu aami general caster manuhou bohot asu. Kintu ki Congress, ki BJP, Ki AGP sobei agor porai Brahmin candidateoke di ase. Gotike atia aneke diute diute aitu niyom huadi hoisege je Jorhator pora MLA hobole brahmin hobo lagibo. (Here in Jorhat, some Brahmin populations are there, but we the caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. However, all the political parties have been giving party tickets to Brahmin candidates only. Now it has become an unwritten rule that only Brahmin candidate become the MLA of Jorhat”).

One respondent with the title Saikia, age 64 said that,

Manuhe kobo pare caster kotha nai buli kintu ki hol eyattu political party keitai beleg manuhok ticket nidiye. Duijonei jetia Brahmin hoi gotike manuhe atia teulokor party ba, kam saiye vote diye. Kintu jodi Brahmin candidate nohoi ajon brahmin aru ajon general casteor manuh hol heten tante Bamun manuh khiniye general candidatetuk vote nidiye, lagile party jiye nohouk. (People can say that there is no caste issue in Jorhat but then why political parties donot give party ticket to non-Brahmins. When two opposing

candidates are Brahmins, then Brahmins will vote based on party or the efficiency of the candidate but if one candidate belongs to general castes (other caste than Brahmin) and one belongs to Brahmin, then Brahmins would have never voted for the non-Brahmin candidate irrespective of party or efficiency of the candidate).

Some of the respondents alleged that in Nalbari and Jorhat Vidhan Sabha constituency, Brahmins are given more priority while giving the party tickets. From the conversation with the shopkeeper and the lawyer, it is revealed that in all the constituencies, caste Hindu Assamese people are in the dominant position. It has become an unwritten rule that the candidate of Vidhan Sabha constituency must be from the Brahmin caste. That is why all the political parties give party tickets to Brahmin candidates. Many respondents believe that political parties do not even try to experiment with new candidate who belongs to other caste except Brahmins. But it is also true that in Jorhat both Hitendranath Goswami and Rana Goswami are the state leaders of their respective parties and no other candidate of Jorhat is strong enough to compete with them for their respective party tickets. It reveals the fact that the caste hierarchy is clearly visible in the Jorhat society although many people denied that. As the main candidates of both the dominant political parties belong to the Brahmin caste, so in the election, caste did not play any role as people voted for a Brahmin candidate either way. After getting the ticket, the development factors and party issues played an important role. People also voted on the basis of party affiliation.

Hindu Majoritarian politics is ingrained in the political atmosphere of all the constituencies. Within the caste Hindu Assamese people, Brahmins are getting upper hand in the selection of the candidates of each party. Consolidation of Brahmin votes are clearly visible, because of which the political parties are afraid of giving party tickets outside the Brahmin caste. During the last assembly election, the AGP-BJP alliance directly focused on the caste Hindu votes of the constituency. In the Tezpur constituency although Prithviraj Rabha belongs to the Rabha ethnic community but the caste Hindu Assamese voters did not treat him differently from their own community member because of his association with Bishnu Prasad Rabha and also, he was very active in Tezpur civil society. In Tezpur, the AGP party already had a strong base among the caste Hindu Assamese society as well as other communities. Affiliation with BJP brings them together with the non-Assamese communities as well. From the findings in all the

constituencies, it can be said that in Nalbari and Jorhat, caste has been playing the most important role in the selection of candidates. In Tezpur constituency also, the dominant position of the upper caste Hindu people can be witnessed although in the last election, different factors compelled the upper caste Hindu people to accept a tribal candidate.

Andre Beteille in *Caste, Class and Power* talks about a village, Sripuram. Traditionally, political power is in the hands of Brahmins, but now the power has been shifted from Brahmins to Non-Brahmins. Also, the political parties are now in favour of non-Brahmins. From the 20th century itself, Brahmins began to lose ground in education and administration itself (Beteille, 2012). The present picture of the three constituencies is showing differently from that of Andre Beteille's work (Beteille, 2012). From the research sites, it can be argued that caste is indeed alive. While it may have declined as an occupation and ideological system, caste identities persist and, in some ways, have become stronger (Demerath et al., 2006). Candidates are selected not in terms of accomplishments, ability and merit but on the appendages of caste, creed and community. Interestingly caste becomes the deciding factor (Kaur, 2012).

On the contrary in the Lok sabha election, more than caste, religion plays more important and significant role in all the constituencies. Many respondents openly said that no matter whom the candidate is, but it should not go into the hands of the Muslims. From the responses, it can be understood that in the lok sabha election in all the constituencies, more than the caste, religion is a more prominent factor. The caste Hindu Assamese and non-Assamese Hindus only want a Hindu to win from the seat. The identity of religion undermines the caste identity.

One of the respondents of Nalbari said that,

Eyat jihetu Asomiya Hindu voterye besi ase gotike eyat political party bilakeu Asomiya manuhokei diye ticket. Aru jikiou ase teneke. Bohut bartu eyar pora Ramen Deka jikise tetiatu BJP asomot obostha eman bhal nasil. (As caste Hindu Assamese are the majority, so political parties give their party ticket to caste Hindu Assamese people only. And it has been working also. Earlier from the Mangaldoi seat, Ramen Deka of BJP was elected many times even if that time, BJP's situation was not favourable).

On the other hand, one respondent of Tezpur with the title Kalita, age 42 said that,

Tezpur loksabha constituency tea tribe community majority hoi gotike manuhe koi je eyat sob kotha poisar jurote hoi. Agote tea tribe vote bank congressor supportot asil kintu BJP oha pisot aitu shift hol. Aru BJP yeu tea tribe community manuhoke eyat ticket dile. Gotike eyat Pallab lochan Das jikil. (In Tezpur, tea tribe people have a major share in population so people say that here tea tribe votes are managed by money. Earlier, the tea tribe vote bank was in favour of the Congress but now it has shifted to the BJP. Now BJP also gives party ticket to tea tribes people. That is how Pallab Lochan could win).

One respondent from the Nepali community with the title Newar, age 45 said,

Mani Subbatu nepali manuh hoi kintu aami tothapi beya paisilu karon teutu pura poisa jurot jiki asil noh eyar pora. Congress ye bare bare teeukye ticket diye. Teutu lottery mafia buli sobei janisil kintu tothapi teuye ticket paisil aru Tezpuror nisina ata constituency pora bare bare jikiou asil. (Mani Subba was a Nepali, still we didnot like his candidature. Because he was winning with money power. Congress again and again, have given the party ticket to him. Everyone knew that he was the lottery mafia but still he got the ticket and from a constituency like Tezpur he was elected again and again.)

One of the respondents of Jorhat with the title Saikia, age 54 said that,

Eyate tea triber bohut manuh aase, general casteor bohut manuh ase aru Ahomor bhalekhini manuh ase. Ahomor pora candidate diar pressure ata sole aru logote tea tribe community porau candidate bisare. Baki aamar general casteor manuh khinir unity nai. Gotike aamar manuh khini uparor pora ji koi sei motei solibo lage aaru. (Here, a considerable number of tea tribe populations are there. Apart from that, a considerable number of caste Hindu Assamese and Ahom population are also present. The Ahom community demands to give candidature from their community. Tea tribe community also demands candidature from their community. However, we the general people donot have unity, so our people have to follow the instructions of others).

In Nalbari, the caste Hindu Assamese voters want to make a caste Hindu win in Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. For them, Muslims are the real threats. Apart from that, other caste issues do not play much role in the Lok Sabha election. Mostly party

background and issues of national and state matters the most rather than local issues. In Tezpur Lok Sabha, more than other factors, community sentiments played the most important role. Tea tribe community has been the king maker of Tezpur Lok Sabha. Although different communities have their presence in the constituency, but tea tribe community and the Nepali community play the most important role in electing the representative of the constituency. The disappointment is that for the last several terms, no one from the caste Hindu Assamese society could manage to win the prestigious Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency, felt among the caste Hindu Assamese people. For many years, the Congress party was winning this constituency seat because the vote bank of tea tribe community was in their favour. It was alleged that the earlier MP Mani Kumar Subba managed the vote bank of this constituency with his money power. However, from the 2014 Lok Sabha election, they shifted their loyalty towards the BJP party. As a result, the BJP candidate managed to win from the Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency. In the Lok Sabha election of Jorhat, Tea tribe community and the Ahom community has a major role to play. Therefore, there was demand of giving candidature to their own community members. Ahom community has a good representation in the constituency, so political parties take care of the fact that the candidate should come from the Ahom community. Apart from that, other caste groups do not have much say in the selection of candidates for the Lok Sabha. In the Jorhat Lok Sabha, caste Hindu Assamese are the majority. In the Jorhat Lok Sabha, the dominance of the Ahom community is clearly visible. Ahom organizations like Tai Ahom Students Union pushed the political parties to give candidature from their community. As a result, for the last many years, political parties are giving candidature to the Ahom candidate only. However, while making the voting choices in the Lok Sabha election, the Hindu identity of the people undermines other identities like caste or community. From the responses, the consolidation of the Hindu votes in the Lok Sabha election of all the three research sites is clearly visible. The Hindu identity undermines their caste and ethnic-community identity. Although Muslims has, a major chunk of vote share in Tezpur and Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency, but Muslim votes got divided between more than one or two political parties. On the contrary, the consolidation of Hindu votes paved the way for the BJP candidates in the last Lok Sabha election.

4.10 Government Policies, Candidate and Voting Behaviour:

Respondents were asked about their opinion on government policies and their candidate.

One of the caste Hindu respondents who is a retired professor of Nalbari, age 62 said,

BJPyetu bohot kam korile last 5 yearst. Rasta bohot bonale. Aru ata kotha bhal korise ki poisa nuluake APSC sakori dile. Manuhe ajikali free bostu bohot pai. Free saul, Arunudoi. Bridho pension sob pai Gotike BJPk vote diboi na. Saultu free pai kintu baki tel piyazor dam kiman hoi seiburtu nasai manuhe. Free bostu pai pai manuhe kam koribo mon nokora hoise. Hazira manuh pabole nai. ((BJP government has done so many good works in the last five years. Especially they constructed many roads. In addition, they have given so many jobs like APSC and all without taking any money. People avail many beneficiary schemes. They get free rice, Arunudoy, Old Age Pensions. So people will vote for BJP. People get free rice but they donot calculate the price of oil and onion. Because of these free services, people become lazy andthat is why it is becoming more difficult to get people for work).

Many other respondents of Nalbari and Jorhat shared similar opinions. It seems that caste Hindu people are happy with the works of the BJP government and their respective MLAs.

From the responses, it can be said that the majority of the respondents of Nalbari and Jorhat are happy with the beneficiary schemes of the present BJP government. The BJP government has constructed many roads in their first tenure, which is clearly visible in all the constituencies. The construction of roads is more in Jorhat and Nalbari. People who are availing the beneficiary schemes are very happy with the government. As people are getting free rice, they are not serious about the increasing prices of the other commodities. On the other hand, people who depend on the daily wage labour said that now people are reluctant to work due to the beneficiary schemes of the government and it becomes difficult to get people to work.

On the contrary one respondent of Tezpur who is a member of BJP, age 45 said that,

Eyate BJP candidate nuhuar karane kisuman problem hoise. Brindaban Goswami manuhtu bhal bhal sobei koi kintu bhal holei nohobo na kam koribo lagibo. Kamei

nokorile eku. (We are facing some problems due to the absence of a BJP candidate. Everyone says Brindaban Goswami is a good person but that is not enough. He has to work. He did not do anything in his last tenure).

Many other respondents of Tezpur shared similar opinions. Many people blamed the inefficiency of the MLA, Brindaban Goswami who belong to the AGP party, for less developmental works in Tezpur compared to other constituencies. Although people are availing beneficiary schemes, but they are not happy with the handing of the MLA funds. People alleged that except maintaining his good image, Brindaban Goswami couldnot do any significant work in Tezpur. On the contrary, some respondents believe that it happened due to the tussle between AGP and BJP in Tezpur. The BJP members of Tezpur demanded Tezpur vidhan sabha seat to BJP but it was given to AGP candidate, because of which there was a clash between the AGP members with the BJP members of Tezpur.

One respondent of Nalbari who is not directly associated with any political party said,

Ashok Sarma manuhtu alop sidha manuh, agot RSS korisil. Teu kam korise nokora buli nokou kintu jidhoronye koribo lagisil sei dhorone koribo pora nai. (Ashok Sarma is a simple man, and he was an RSS member. He had worked which we donot deny. But he couldnot work as it was expected.)

One of respondents who works at a private school in Jorhat, age 42 said that,

Hitendranath Goswami manuhtuye rasta bonale bohut. Atia Jorhatote sauk kesa rasta nuhuai hol. Teu manuhtu khali kharangkhas. Siddha sidhi kotha koi diye... tar karane manuhtuk kisuman manuhe beyau pai kintu aami aako seitu karaneu bhalpau je manuhtuye poratu paru koi aru nuwaratu nuwaru buli koi. “(Hitendranath Goswami had constructed so many roads. Now in Jorhat, you hardly find any bad road. Hiten Goswami is a straightforward man. Some people donot like him because of this nature. However, we like this nature of him because he directly says what he can do and what he canot do).

From the respondents, it can be drawn that between the BJP MLAs of Nalbari and Jorhat, Hitendra Nath Goswami had done more work in his constituency, which can be understood from the opinion of the caste Hindu respondents. Many people got offended

because of the straightforward nature of Hitendranath Goswami. But, on the other hand, some people also like him because of that.

On the other hand, one Muslim respondent of Nalbari, age 62 said that,

Ashok Sarmai kam korise mane ki korisenu? Namghor Masjid burole donation dile aru seiyai baki aamitu dekha nai kam kora. (What Ashok Sarma has done? He only donated to Namghars and Mandirs, that is it. Apart from that, we didnot see any significant work).

Many other Muslim respondents of Nalbari and Jorhat shared similar opinions. According to them, the MLAs of Nalbari and Jorhat favours people who belongs to the BJP party and development works are concentrated on those areas where Hindu people live. According to most of the Muslim respondents of Nalbari and Jorhat, their respective MLAs couldnot do any significant work except the donations they made to Namghars and Mandirs.

One respondent from the tea tribe community with the title Tasa age 45 said,

BJP ye aamar Baganor manuhor karane kiman scheme dise. Agot congressye disil janu. Seikaraneha BJP support koru aami. (BJP has been doing many good works for our tea tribe community. Earlier Congress didnot give such schemes to tea tribe people that is why we support BJ.).

On the other hand, tea tribe community believes that BJP is in favour of their community's interest. BJP has introduced many welfare schemes for the interest of the community.

While asking about the opinion of the respondents on government schemes and candidates in the lok sabha election, one of the respondents from Nalbari who works at the Nalbari Court, age 46 said,

MP fundor tokare ki ki kam hoise manuhe gomei napai besi. Kiba kibi dui ata auditoriumor aadharshila kora dekhu. Tar pisot nai eku. Aibur bhauna agore porai dekhi asu. Ji jot kam hoi MLA fundor tokare ha hoi. Gotei 5 years MP mukhei nedekhu aami. (People didnot know what is the use of the MP fund. We only came to know about

the foundation stone of some auditoriums and nothing else. We have seen this drama repeatedly. Whatever works we witness is done with the help of the MLA fund. We did not even get to see the face of the MP for 5 years after the election).

Similar findings can be drawn from the respondents in all the constituencies. According to most of the respondents, people even did not get to see the MP after the Lok Sabha election campaign and they do not know what works the MP of the constituency had done in his tenure. It seemed like people are not bothered much about the MP fund. Whatever development has taken place, it has been done through the fund of the MLA and local panchayats. The ex-MPs, Ramen Deka of Mangaldai from BJP, Mani Subba of Tezpur from Congress and Kamakhya Prasad Tasa of Jorhat from BJP also could not do any significant work in the constituency according to most of the respondents. However, they still voted the BJP Lok Sabha candidate because they want Modi as the Prime Minister.

From the responses of the respondents, it can be said that people voted in the Lok Sabha election while keeping national politics in mind. The Modi wave is still relevant among the common people. More than the efficiency of the candidates, the party background of the candidate matters most in all the constituencies. In all the constituencies, Hindus unitedly voted for the BJP candidate because otherwise people have to tolerate Muslim aggression).

Weiner and Kothari suggested that debate over issues of public policy plays a very negligible role in the election campaign. It is less likely to influence the way individuals vote (cited in Omar, 2021). The findings of the study say that although people have frustration about the inefficiency or indifferent nature of their MPs, but it plays a negligible role in affecting the way individual vote in the Lok Sabha election. However, in the Vidhan Sabha election of the select area of study, the responses show that people discuss about the works of the local MLA and the government. Whether these discussions influence their voting choices or not, is difficult to figure out.

One respondent of Tezpur age 35 said,

Pallab Lochan okol baganiya huar karaneha Rangaparar pora aani eyat ticket dile. Aneu manuhbilake candidate sai vote dia nai noholetu Bhanuye jikile hoi. Atia BJP strong ase karaneha jikise. MLA election AGPk vote dia manuhe MP electionot BJPk

vote dise.(Only because of his tea tribe identity, Pallab Lochan was brought from the Rangapara constituency and gave BJP ticket from Tezpur. Anyway, people didnot vote based on the candidate. Otherwise, Bhanu would have won. Pallab Lochan won because BJP was strong. People who voted the AGP candidate in the assembly election voted for the BJP candidate in the Lok Sabh election.

One Ahom respondent of Jorhat age 64 said,

Tapan Gogoik Ahom karane aru agote ex AASU buli support korislu kintu ji dekhilu eku kam nokorile. Okol Modi dhout jikise aru kohtatu hol eyate baganiya vote bohut ase. Atia bagania vote BJPr supportot ase seikaraneha jikise. Ki kam korise buli kobole eku nai. Ji kam hua dekhisu MLA fundor tokarei hoise. (We supported Tapan Gogoi only because he is from Ahom community and he is an ex-AASU. However, he didnot do anything. He only won because of the Modi wave. Again here, the tea tribe community has a large number of vote shares and their support shifted to BJP from AGP. That is why Tapan Gogoi could win. There is no significant work to show from his tenure whatever development takes place it is from the MLA fund).

While voting in the lok sabha election. In all the constituencies, the different identities of the candidates worked in their favour. Political parties also project candidates based on the calculation of the voters and the distinct identities of the candidate. While in Mangaldoi, the Hindu identity has been working in favour of the BJP candidate, while in Tezpur and Jorhat, it is tea tribe and Ahom identities, which has worked in favour of the candidate.

In this context, Amandeep Kaur argued that candidates are selected not in terms to accomplishments, ability and merit but on the appendages of caste, creed and community (Kaur, 2012). The argument of Kaur is reflected in the choices of the political parties while selecting the candidates in Tezpur.

4.11 Religious Programmes, Rituals and Voting Behaviour:

Respondents were asked about the rituals and religious programmes and whether any notice any changes in the practices or not.

From the respondents the researcher came to know that the organization of kirtans, Bhagawat path and other religious programmes among the Hindus have been increased considerably.

One respondernt of Tezpur from the Nepali community with the title Chetry, age 32 said that,

kirtan path agoteu hoisil aamar. BJP oha pisot aamiou kirtan path alop besike pata hoisu. Atiatu Hindur time ahise alop. Agoetu aami Hindu buli koboleu laaj laaj bhoi bhoi nisina lagisil. Ajikali freely kobou pari aru hindur ussab bur patibou bhal loga hoise. Atiatu aami besike pota hoisu je saa aamar kiman bhal sanskriti ase. Sobei dekhabo lage aamar sanskriti. Atia aami sobe hindubuli gourabere kobo pora hoisu. (We used to do kirtan path earlier also but now we organize it more frequently. After the BJP came into power, our Hindu people are feeling free to organize our own Hindu rituals. Now-a-days we organize more such programmes to show other religious people that look how culturally rich we are!).

Respondents of the Nepali community from Tezpur also revealed that they organize kirtans and other religious rituals more frequently after BJP came into power. They believe that under the Modi regime, the Hindutva became stronger and free. Now, people come out spontaneously to show their Hindu identity. Earlier, people were shied away to preach their Hindu rituals publicly. But now the picture has changed. Now, people take pride as Hindus.

The caste Hindu respondents of Jorhat and Nalbari also shared similar opinions about rituals and religious programmes. In Nalbari and Jorhat, also the organization of Bhagawat path and other religious programmes have been increased considerably. Varshney (2002) demonstrated two different concepts namely everyday form of engagement and associational form of engagement to describe the complexity of communal conflict. He emphasized the importance of associational form of engagement over everyday form of engagement in making constraint on uprise of communal conflict. It can be argued that gradual decrease of the numbers of associational form of engagement across religion and instrumentally design policies to mobilize inter religious activities to create a regular form of everyday engagement through harisabha, akhanda

Harikirtan, etc., are becoming a major cause of religious disharmony in the studied area (Varshney, 2002).

One respondent who is a leader of a right-wing organization of Nalbari, age 38 said that, *Aamar eyar pora jai bohut ajikali jatri kedarnath jai, Haridwar, Vaishno devi aibur jai..aamar sangathanor falor porau ji pora jai alop sohai kora jai. Aru MLA ba jisokol leader dibo pare dui sari toka teulokeu alop solop sohai kore.* (Now people frequently visit prominent pilgrimages of Kedarnath, Haridwar, and Vaishno Devi, etc. From our organizations also, we help in our capacity. Our MLA or other leaders also help in those trips).

Similar opinions are shared by many other respondents in all the constituencies.

From the responses of all the three constituencies, it is visible that the number of people go for religious tours to Hindu religions places of North India and has been increased considerably. Although it is increasing in all the constituencies also, but in Nalbari, it is more prominent. In those tours, the participation of the youths who are associated with the right-wing organizations has been more visible. Frequently they organize tours to religions places of North India. The local MLA and political leaders also contribute in those tours.

Instances of RSS and its allied organizations showing elements of hegemonic masculinity through organization of different rally, march, etc., is very common in Nalbari. Elements of radical Hindutwa ideology in the form of explicit visualization of different rallies, Padayatras, which are performed by different right-wing organization.

One of the members of Hindu Jagran Manch, age 40 said that,

Aamr Rally ulai sob dal, sangathan mili tate sobei gerua kapur pindha hoi aru rongafut lowa hoi. Sobei Jai shree ram, jai Hanuman aneke slogan diye. Eyate Jai shree Ram tutu sobei koi..aami karubak dekhile jai shree ram buliye kou. (In our rallies, all the organizations also participate. All the members wear saffron clothes and also take red tilak in their forehead. We all greet each other by saying 'jai shree ram').

One respondent who is a common citizen of Nalbari, age 56 said that,

Aagote aibur nasile, ajikali rally bur dekhile dharmiya rally ne political rally dhoriboi nuwari. Tate Jai shree ram, jai hanuman sob koi. Majot akou Bajrang dal jindabad, Viswa Hindu parishad jindabad sob koi. Aapuni mane confused hoi jabo dharmiya rally ye hoi ne political rally ye hoi. (Earlier this rally culture was not there. Now it is difficult to identify whether it is a political rally or religious rally because in these rallies Jay Shree, Jay Hanuwan, etc., slogans are shouted. In addition to those slogans, in support of their respective organizations can also be heard).

One Muslim respondent, 35 said,

'Aamar Nalbarit aagote enekoi lathi taruwaal loi kunu xongothon uluwaa naasil. Jodi ulaaiu imaan maanuh ulua naasil. Kintu aaji kaali protti maahote enekuwa rally ulaai. Rally bilaakot aamaaak xunaakoi daangor daangor koi slogan diye. (In Nalbari, such rally culture was not there where lathis and Taruwals are being openly displayed. Even if some rallies came out, but participation of such massive number of people was not there. Now in almost every month, we get to see such rallies).

In Nalbari, the right-wing organizations also bring out rallies in protest of love jihad and cow slaughter. The participants wear saffron clothes and also take a red tilak on the forehead. People sometimes confused them with religious rallies because slogans like Jai Shree ram, Jai Hanuman, etc., are shouted in those rallies and also different slogans in support of their respective organizations can also be heard in those rallies. It is difficult for an outsider to differentiate whether it's a political rally or a religious rally. According to the respondents, the rally culture was not there earlier. People didn't use *lathis* and *Taruwal* in the public rallies. In Tezpur and Jorhat, although the right-wing organizations also occasionally bring out rallies, but in comparison to Nalbari, it is very less.

It is also observed that as a counter to Hindu religious programmes and rituals, religious activities among the Muslims have also increased. People including the Muslim youths religiously go to namaaz and participate in everyday namaaz. Among Muslims, there has been a tendency to organize more religious programmes.

One Muslim respondent from Jorhat who is an employee in irrigation department, age 44 reveal that,

BJP oha pisot apunalukor hindur majot kiman Ki ki pati thoka hoise gotei. Amar notun lora suali burok islamr kotha amiu jonabo lagibo nhole sihati kafir hoi jabo. BJP, RSS ye jiman try kore korok amiu nijok mojboot koribo lagibo. aami maje maje dharmiya anusthan patu, tate aamar Maulana kisuman aahe. (After BJP came to power, we see the increase of various religious programmes among the Hindus. We also need to train our young boys and girls about our Islam and Kuran. Otherwise, they will be kafir. No matter how much BJP tries to demonize us, we need to make our religion strong. So, we organize 'Istemas' where Maulanas from different part of Assam and India come).

Another Muslim respondent of Nalbari, age 62 said that,

Ajikali ata kotha saisu ki aamr lora bur namazot jai timet. Agote Jodi kom goisil ajikali besi jua hoise. Kotha pota xunutu tetia koi kisumane ki aami jodia amr dharma thik narakhu tante sihote hahibo. (We observe that our young boys spontaneously go to Namaaz now. Even if they used to go earlier also, but I have witnessed that, their interest of going for namaz has increased. I heard some conversations among our young boys. They say that if we donot maintain our religion they will laugh at us).

Many other Muslim respondents of all the constituencies share similar opinions.

Muslims believe that after BJP came into power, the celebration of religious programmes have been increased considerably among the Hindus. It created an urge among the Muslims to organize more religious programmes among them. They call maulanans from different places to give lectures. In these lectures, religious practices, to dos and don'ts are instructed. They are also asked to be united for the larger interest of Islam. Although according to some Muslim respondents, the nature of these lectures are not political but some respondents who donot want to reveal their identity confessed that in those lectures political guidelines are also given. These types of religious rituals are seen in the areas where Bengali-speaking Muslims are dominant. It has been witnessed that now people go to Masjid more religiously for namaaz on Fridays and also on regular basis. It is also observed that there is a tendency to revive their culture and keep intact the sanctity of religion among the Assamese Muslims as well.

4.12 The new Members of right-wing organizations

Another significant observation is that in the recent years, the right-wing organizations have recruited young members from different sections of the population. Surprisingly, these newly recruited persons belonged to 18-29 years age group. According to the respondents, these newly recruited members have the history of indulging in street fights and other aggressive activities. They also have expertise in martial arts.

One Muslim respondent of Nalbari, who is also an active member of Congress, age 35 said,

“Aagote ji bilaak loraai okol maar pit kori phure, kunu samaajik kaamot jorito nohoi, tenekuaa gutei lora bilakok xongothon bilaakot xumuaai loise. Notunkoi xumuwaa bilaak sob body builder. Aamaak voi khuaabor baabei eibilaak korise. (Earlier, those boys who were involved in street fights and who were not involved in any social works are recruited by these organizations. Most of the people recruited recently are either bodybuilder or involved with some kind of physical activities. They are recruiting such people to scare us).

Although the political position of the respondent can influence the respondent to exaggerate the reality, but the past life of many members of those organizations supplements the opinion of the respondent. The frustrations of younger people – who could not get a job, nor a married life, pushed them towards a rewarding form of activism, because fighting in the name of Hinduism provides them with some identity and self-esteem (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). This argument of Anderson and Jaffrelot has been observed as true in case of many cadres of the right-wing organizations. Although many join the organizations with clear thought, but in case of many members, it is observed that being associated with the Hindu mobilisation give them a purpose to conduct their life and also to get recognition in society which was not possible earlier.

4.13 Love Jihad, Cow Slaughter and Voting Behaviour:

Respondents were asked about their opinion on Love jihad and cow slaughter

One member of the Hindu Jagran Manch of Tezpur, age 39 said,

Muslim lorabure je Hindu sowali faki mari bhalpabo jai seitut matha beya hoi aamar. Seitut sihotor agendai hoi. Aare baba Jodi bhalpabo ase sosa kotha koi bhal paa. Agotetu congressor timet Tezpur townt Muslim loraburor ki utpat. Atiaha alop thanda hoise. Aibur kothar karaneu BJP thokatu dorkar. (We cannot tolerate when Muslim boys trapped Hindu girls with fooling them with Hindu identity. That is their agenda. If they really love then why don't they do it with truth? Earlier during the Congress government, Muslim boys were very aggressive. Now it has tamed down. That is why bringing BJP into power is important).

One member of Bajrang Dal of Nalbari, age 32 said that,

Governmentye Mondir ba namghoror 5 KM radiut goru mangso besa kina khua bondho korise. Aami Jodi gom pau je kunubai gom nupuake Goru mangso bikri korise ba khaise toh aami seitut action lou. Aamar maje maje Rally ulai sob Hindutwabadi dal sanggathan mili. Mainly Love jihad, Guu hatya aibur issue loiye aamar protibad hoi. (Government has banned the selling and buying of beef within 5 km radius of Mandirs and Namghars. If we come to know about such buying and selling then we take action. Sometimes we bring out rallies with other Hindu organizations against love jihad and cow slaughter).

Many other respondents of all the constituencies who are associated with BJP and right-wing organizations share similar opinions.

Although Caste Hindu Assamese people has a cordial relation with Assamese speaking Muslims, but in case of love jihad and cow slaughter, they are not ready to tolerate. They are very vocal against these two issues. The right-wing organizations bring out rallies and sought slogans against love jihad and cow slaughter. If they found any one's involvement in those issues then they immediately take quick action against them even if it's Assamese speaking Muslims. Although the rally culture is more prominent in Nalbari but in Tezpur and Jorhat also the right-wing organizations mobilize people against love jihad and cow slaughter. Many caste-Hindu respondents, who are not associated with BJP and right wing organizations also showed their anger against the love affairs of Muslim boys with Hindu girls. Almost all the caste Hindu respondents believe that Muslims should stay away from the Hindu girls. There are many instances when right wing organizations of all the constituencies rescued Hindu girls from the Muslim boys

and they beaten up the Muslim boy and hand over the boy to the police. Although the right-wing organizations have been conducting rescue drives in all the constituencies, but in Nalbari, it is more visible. In those drive against love jihad, they receive huge response from the common people especially from the youths. One of the important reasons of joining Bajrang Dal and other right wing organizations is the growing anger towards love jihad. This led to the hatred for the community in general. Love jihad is an issue, which has been instrumental in the mobilization of the people, especially youths of all the constituencies. In the electoral campaign also, it was requested that Hindus should be united for the larger interest, otherwise Muslims will take over their political rights and their identity will be lost. They also claim that if Hindus are not united, then Muslims will take away Hindu girls and they will slaughter *gau mata*.

On the other hand, cow slaughter and eating of the beef meat is an issue, which creates huge repercussion among the common people. Eating of beef meat clearly makes the Muslims 'other' to the common Hindu people. Because of cow slaughter, an anxiety is already there between the common Hindu people and the common Muslim people. Right wing organizations are successful in the mobilisation of people in the name of cow slaughter and beef eating. Because of such mobilisations, BJP has been gaining, as people associate themselves with right wing politics.

Edward Anderson & Christophe Jaffrelot in the article, 'Hindu nationalism and the "saffronisation of the public sphere": An interview with Christophe Jaffrelot' argued that a narrative of victimization and being 'under siege' is part of the model of Hindu nationalism. It is not as necessary as it used to be, but still: it is easier to mobilize masses by claiming that they are victims of some injustice – especially when the mobilization needs to take a radical turn. The Sangh Parivar always needs a new cause like love jihad, ghar wapsi, beef ban, triple talaq etc. to maintain a semi-permanent state of mobilization. This argument of Edward Anderson & Christophe Jaffrelot can be aptly reflected in the research sites, where right wing organizations find love jihad and cow slaughter as two key issues to mobilize people against Muslims (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). Although the intensity is higher in Nalbari, but this has been seen in Tezpur and Jorhat also, where mobilization in the name of love jihad and cow slaughter get maximum response from the people. From the narratives of the field, we can clearly see the elements of fear and anger as already present among the Hindu people, which makes it easy for BJP and other

right-wing organizations to mobilize people. By realizing the fear and anxiety of Caste Hindu Assamese people towards love jihad and cow slaughter, the BJP and the Hindutva brigade use the Love Jihad and ‘cow protection’ rhetoric as a narrative to mobilize people against the supposed Muslim ‘threat’. For election propaganda, leaders overtly use rhetoric in speeches, interviews, and election campaigns. In this context, example can be given of present Chief Minister of Assam HimantaSarma who appealed to voters in Assam by promising that, if elected, the government would start a fight against the threat of Love Jihad (HimantaSarma speech 2020, cited in Omar, 2021).

4.14 National Interest and Voting Behaviour

One of the respondents of Nalbari who is a businessman by profession, age 38 said,

Lok sabha electionot aami deshor kotha sinta koriha vote diu. Atia Modi ase. Modi thakile Pakistanye bhoi kori thake. Aru aamar eyat Muslim bilak alop controлот thake. Gotike aami agore porai BJP support koru. (In lok sabha election, we think about the larger country. Now Modi is there at the centre, Pakistan is scared of him. Even Muslim aggression is also under control. That is why we support BJP).

One Bengali respondent from Tezpur, age 34 said,

“Aamitu BJPk vote disu. Candidate kun hoi seitu matter nokore aamar karane. Modiye bharator karane bhal kam kori ase gotike Modik prime minister bonabo lage. (We voted for BJP. For us whomever the candidate is, that doesnot matter. Modi is doing well for the country, so it is important to make Modi Prime Minister again).

The opinions of the respondents across the three constituencies are more or less the same regarding national interest. In all the constituencies, people who voted for the BJP believe that after BJP came to power in 2014, the country’s position in the global platform has risen. People voted for BJP because they believe that it is a nationalist party and they support Hindus. People have the opinion that under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India has been taking firm stand against Pakistan and after BJP came to power, Pakistan is afraid of India. They think that the earlier government was very soft while dealing with Pakistan. In the lok sabha election, more than the candidate, people voted for BJP because of its pro-Hindu and nationalist image. From the responses, it is

observed that the intensity to be concerned about the national issues is more among the non-Assamese communities in comparison to the caste Hindu Assamese communities. On the contrary, most of the Muslim respondents said that this country is no more a secular country now and the present government has only worked for the interest of the Hindu voters. They claim that BJP is doing communal politics and also, they repeatedly bring the issue of Pakistan to get political mileage during election.

Anderson and Jaffrelot claimed that mobilization of the people by fostering fear and anger on the Islamic or Pakistani threats is part of the model of Hindu nationalism. It is not as necessary as it used to be. But Anderson and Jaffrelot believe that, it is easier to mobilise masses by projecting them as the victims of some injustice (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). From the research sites, it is observed that the issue of national interest and the threats from Pakistan or other Islamic terrorist organizations undermines other important issues like unemployment or price rise.

4.15 New Hindus and New Muslims and Voting Behaviour

From the responses of all the constituencies, it is observed that in the entire constituencies caste Hindu Assamese people share a good relation with Assamese speaking Muslims of their locality. Although the interaction of the people is normal in the day-to-day lives, but people avoid the discussion of politics and religion earlier, which was very normal between them.

One Muslim respondent of Jorhat who works in a lower primary school, age 46 said that,

Aami aajikali nijor kam sup sap kori thokai bhal dekhisu. Aamar ane sobore logote bhal. Kintu kisuman notunke hindu hua manuhor utpattu besi seitu dekhile bhal nalage aru. Aagote Hindu musulman eibilaak kotha imaan openly kobo maanuhe beya paisil. Jikeitai koisil xehotoku maanuhe beya he paaisil. Etia enekuaa hoi gol eibilaak nokole leaderei hobo nuwaari. Aagote chup chaap centerot carrom Kheli thokaa lora kisumanorou aajikaali muslanmanr kotha beyake nokole din aaromvo nohoi. (Now we find it better to work silently. We have good relation with everyone but some people who newly joined Hindutva organizations show themselves as more Hindus. Their behaviour is irritating. Earlier people were hesitant to talk about Hindu-Muslim conversations. Whomever

talked communal conversations, people didnot like them. Now situation is like you can't be a leader without talking communal conversations).

Matiur Rahman who is currently a state spokesperson of Congress from Nalbari, age 30 said that,

“Last keibosor manor pora eyate hinduwadi dal sanggathan bur pura active. Memberburor bohute aagot NSUI korisil. Kisuman ane bekar asil. Atia pura dangor leader. Hindu Muslim nokole kothai nokoi. Aamar logot ane bhal baru personally. Kintu poribeshtu kiba beya hoi goise. Aamitu Asomiyai hoi na. Aaamkou Jodi miya buli koi tetia bohut khong uthe.” (For last few years, the Hindu organizations are very active here. The members were earlier in NSUI, some were jobless and now they become big leaders. They can not even talk without saying communal lines. I have good personal relation with them but the social environment has become polluted. We are also Assamese. It makes us angry when people call us *miyas*).

One respondent namely Nazir Ahmed who is a Goriya Muslim (age 35) of Tezpur said that,

“BJP ohar pisot Bengali, Nepali aru bihari manuh buror besi utpat hoise. Besi hindu hindu kori thake. Aapunalokr Asomiya manuhor majotou kisumanor hoise kintu sihotr nisina hua nai. (After BJP came to power, the Benagali, Nepali and Hindi-speaking people has become more aggressive and showing themselves as more Hindus. Among some of your Assamese people also, these communal elements have increased but compared to them, it is very less).

From the responses of the Assamese-speaking Muslim respondents, it is easily ubderstood that they become silent on political issues and rather prefer to focus on their work silently. They are irritated with the behaviour of some of the newly joined members of the right-wing organizations who are trying hard to portray themselves as radical Hindus than others. Earlier people were hesitant to have communal conversations in public, but now people started openly talking about communal conversations. Either most of the members of the right-wing organizations, were in NSUI or jobless before BJP came into power. After BJP came into power, they started openly saying communal lines. Anderson and Jaffrelot argued that a large number of Indians in each community

are turning their backs to multiculturalism and are embracing ethno-religious nationalism. Words and ideas which were used marginally, have received a new legitimacy, and at the expense of others. ‘Secularism’ has acquired a bad name – its proponents are readily branded as ‘anti-national’ or ‘sickular’ (ibid.). The present situations in the research sites supplement the argument of Anderson and Jaffrelot where the leaders of the political parties and organizations are not hesitant to have communal conversations in public.

4.16 Reaction among Muslims

One Assamese-speaking Muslim respondent of Jorhat with the title Ali (age 46), who is a teacher in a lower primary school said that,

agote aamar manuhe politicsr kothat mat matisil kintu ajikali sup saap nijor kam kori thake. Misa misi jhamelat xumabo nibisare. Aamiou jiman paru rajnitir pora atori thakiboi bisaru. (Earlier our people were more politically active but now they have become silent. People say that it is better to do our own work silently. Now, people want to stay away from politics. They donot want to get into unnecessary trouble. We also maintain distance from politics).

Similar opinions were shared by many other Assamese-speaking Muslim respondents in all the research sites.

One Bengali-speaking Muslim respondent of Tezpur with the title Haque, age 45 said that,

Ajikali govenrmentr againstot kiba kobole bhoiye loga hoiye. Kot ketia ki caseot fosai encounter kori diye thik nai. Ajikali kiba holei policeye aamar manuhoke target kore. (Now we are afraid to speak against the government. You donot know when you will be encountered by the police! Now in every issue, police only target our people.

From the respondents of most of the Assamese-speaking Muslims, the researcher came to know that earlier Assamese-speaking Muslims were very much opinionated about religion, politics, and other institutions of the state but now they generally avoid giving political remarks in public. They feel insecure whenever issues like beef ban, CAA, NRC, Love Jihad, etc., are being discussed in the public domain (Jha, 2003). Even when

some people speak out of frustration, other family members scold that person in private. In private, they criticize the BJP government. People generally avoid political discussions with the people who belong to different organizations although they try to maintain personal equation with them. Although they believe that after BJP came into power, many Assamese people have also become communal, but according to them, Bengali, Nepali and Hindi-speaking communities become Hindus that are more radical.

More than the Assamese speaking Muslims, Bengali-speaking Muslims are afraid of BJP and this Government. Many of the Bengali respondents claim that under the BJP government, police have been targeting Bengali-speaking Muslims. They have that fear that if they speak against the government, then the government will target them. According to the Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking respondents, this government interferes in their religious matters, be it triple talaq, cattle preservation bill, Madrasa ban, etc. It is observed that a sense of being exploited by the BJP government is prominent in the opinions of most of the Muslim respondents. They feel victims of polarization politics. People believe that the state machinery including the police has been used to suppress their religious activities. Although they have a strong feeling of anger and frustration, but they have chosen silence over protests because they have the fear of further getting into problems. They are also very afraid of the aggressions of the right-wing organizations in all the studied areas, which is more prominent in Nalbari. It can be observed that the attempts to create radical mobilisation by the right-wing organizations has created an environment of fear psychosis among the Muslims (Omar, 2021). This fear is more prominent among the Bengali-speaking Muslims. Anderson and Jaffrelot mentioned that there are many Muslims behind bars. About 21% of the jail inmates are Muslims, but convicts are only 15%. According to them, the gap between the two figures reflects the anti-Muslim bias of the police who arrest Muslim young men after an incident without valid proofs. They are free again, sometimes after many years, when their trial finally takes place (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). The claim made by Anderson and Jaffrelot raised serious question on the law and order of the state. The responses of some Bengali-speaking Muslim respondents supplement the argument made by Anderson and Jaffrelot.

4.17 Muslim support to AGP

Some of Assamese-speaking Muslim voters voted for the Congress party and some of them voted for the Raizor Dol and AJP as an anti-incumbency vote. On the other hand, majority of the Bengali-speaking Muslim community voted for the AIUDF candidate. It divided the Muslim votes, which help the AGP candidate to win the election.

It is observed that when the Muslims are a numerical minority in an electoral district, they do not express their best choice in voting but, instead, vote for the winning party. Muslims felt it increasingly imperative to vote as Muslims for their own protection. Besides, since the Muslims have the fear of dominant Hindu parties, they have turned to the Congress among the national parties (Jha, 2003). From the research sites also, it can be realised that Bengali-speaking Muslims tend to vote for AIUDF and on the otherhand, Assamese-speaking Muslims support the Congress

It is interesting to observe a new trend where some of the educated Muslims from both Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking Muslims started supporting AGP to be part of the government from which both BJP and AGP gained politically.

Two respondents from Muslim community namely, Altaf and Azhar, age 29 and 36 respectively, pointed out one important dimension. Altaf said,

Congress ba AIUDF k vote dile aamar labh nai eku. karon sihot nijike atia. Aami BJPk vote dibo nuwaru karon BJP anti muslim party hoi. Seikarane AGP korisu. Karon AGPt thoka manue sorkarot thoka. (We will not get anything if we vote the Congress or AIUDF because they will not win. We cannt vote BJP either. That is why we vote for AGP because being in AGP means being in government).

Azhar agreed with Altaf. He also added,

AGP Party tut aagor pora aamar nijor maanuh aasil. Etia aenekua hoise sorkaaror pora aamaak xubidhaa logaat koi sorkaaror pora, police r poraa safe thokatu besii dorkaari hoi goise. Aami eta kotha bujisu AGP korile aami ontoto safe thakim. (Earlier also, our relatives were in AGP. However, that time situation was different. Now we decided to vote for AGP, not to get anything but just to be safe).

Interestingly many Assamese-speaking Muslims of Tezpur had chosen to support AGP as a strategic move. More than getting benefit from AGP, they want to become a part of the government as AGP and BJP are in alliance. This shows the rising insecurity among the Assamese-speaking Muslims of the state. From the voting choices of many Assamese-speaking Muslims, it can be demonstrated that AGP gave the BJP a much-needed secular flavour from which it benefited (Mishra, 2016). The same Muslim People who criticize BJP as a communal party supported and voted for the AGP candidate despite knowing that AGP-BJP are in pre-poll alliance. The Muslim voters had chosen to support AGP as a strategic move out of which BJP was benefitted. Muslims often vote strategically, wherever Muslims feel themselves a distinct and vulnerable minority, they avoid antagonizing or seek the protection of mainstream parties by voting as the general electorate does; they support the likely winner and governing party to be (Jha, 2003).

4.18 Pre-Poll alliance of Congress-AIUDF and voting behavior:

In the last Vidhan Sabha election, Congress had pre-poll alliance with AIUDF, which is known for their support to Bengali-speaking Muslims of Assam as it was established by opposing the revoke of IMDT Act. The pre-poll alliance with AIUDF cost Congress largely especially in upper Assam. The message that Congress in pre-poll alliance with a Muslim party was largely circulated among the caste Hindu Assamese community, which was clearly visible in the polarization of vote bank. In the Vidhan Sabha election, the electoral politics of the state has a huge influence. The Hindu versus Muslim binary was the major issue throughout the state during Vidhan Sabha election. The politics of the constituency are also centered on that.

The pre-poll alliance with the AIUDF party hugely affected the vote bank of the Congress party, whereby the caste Hindu Assamese vote bank of the Congress party shifted to the BJP party.

One of the respondents of Nalbari with the title Sharma, who was earlier a Congress worker, age 38, said that,

moi congress erilu karon congress AIUDF log lagil jitu party nki Asomot Bangladeshir karane start kora party. Congressye Asomor khilonjiya manuhor aabeg onubhuti ketiabai baad dile. seikarane BJP ye bhal houk beya houk atleast Khilonjiya hindu

manuh khinir karanetu maat matise. (I left Congress because it joined hands with AIUDF whose primary goal was to protect the immigrant Muslims of Assam. Congress has been undermining the interest of the mainstream Assamese people. BJP at least work in favour of indigenous Assamese people).

One respondent, who is a clerk in a government high school of Jorhat, age 35 said that,

Ane Rana Goswami sabole gole Hitendranath Goswamitke kamor manuh. Kintu atia congress jitu party bonise nohoi atia congressok vote dibo nuwari mane. Aibar Badruddinor log lagil congress. Gotike Rana Goswamik jikua manetu Badruddinok jikuaha hobo. (If we say honestly, say then Rana Goswami is more efficient than Hitendranath Goswami, but the Congress has turned into a party which cannot be supported. Now Congress joined hands with Badruddin, so making Rana Goswami win eventually means the winning of Badruddin).

One of the Nepali respondents of Tezpur with the title Devi who is a homemaker (age 46) said that,

Aamitu AGP pura support korisu. Karon AGP BJP bhai bhai na. gotike support kribolage. Muthote congress- AIUDF jikibo nalage. Aami hindu sob ek hobo lage nohole beleg aamar uparat raja hobo. Himanta Siryetu koisei ki Congress jikua mane Badruddin jikua. Tetia ki labh hobo kouk. Sara miya rajya bonibo. Aibur paanchmile gutei miya rajya hoi gol. (We supported AGP wholeheartedly because AGP and BJP are brothers. We donot want Congress or AIUDF to win. Himanta Sir also said winning of Congress ultimately means winning of AIUDF. Who will gain after that? The state will become a *miya* land).

In Nalbari, one respondent who was earlier a Congress leader, age 55 said that,

Agot aami congress asilu kintu jetia congress Badruddinr party log lagile aru aami keneke seitu party support korim kouk.? Mamaitu koiye thake je congressor photo khonor pisfale aru akhon photo dekhibo seikhon hol aajmalor photo. Kothatutu misa nohoi. Rana Goswami kamor manuh Hiten Goswamitke kintu Atia Rana Goswamik jikua mane aajmalok jikuaha hobo. (Earlier, we were Congress, but the time when it did alliance with AIUDF we left Congress. Tell me how can we support Congress after that?)

Mama always says that in the backside of Congress, you will see another picture which is of Aazmal. That is not wrong. Rana Goswami is a better candidate than Hiten Goswami, but now making Rana Goswami win means winning of Aazmal).

The responses of the respondents clearly states that the pre-poll alliance with AIUDF cost Congress in all the constituencies. Caste Hindu Assamese People consider the alliance as Congress's total surrender to Bengali-speaking Muslims. The insecurity of immigrant Muslims were already existed in society and people blamed Congress for the rapid demographic change of the state. However, the pre-poll alliance with AIUDF made Congress as the godfather of *miyas*. The leaders like Himanta Biswa Sarma were successful in creating a narrative in which Azmal become the poster boy of illegal migrants and as Congress share a pre-poll alliance, so Congress also become synonyms of AIUDF for the caste Hindu Assamese voters. The insecurity for the *Miyas* of the caste Hindu Assamese voters made the last election a totally polarized one and out of that polarization, BJP gained politically in the electoral politics of the three constituencies as well the state.

Many of the educated Assamese-speaking Muslim people in all the research sites, believe that AIUDF is the main reason behind the polarization in the constituency. Therefore, AIUDF is also equally dangerous to them.

One Assamese-speaking Muslim respondent of Jorhat, who works as a reporter in a reputed News portal, age 32 said that,

Aamar karane aasolote BJPt keu besi khoti kora party hoise AIUDF. AIUDFr karanei Asomot BJP ye anekua politics koribo chance pale. (I think AIUDF is more harmful for us than the BJP. Because of AIUDF, only BJP could do such politics).

From the opinions of the Assamese-speaking Muslims, inference can be drawn that they supported the Congress party in both lok sabha and vidhan sabha elections. Bengali-speaking Muslims are directly supporting either Congress or AIUDF. They are very vocal about their political opinions compared to Assamese Muslims. They believe that BJP has ruined the country so it should lose the election. Many of them openly said that Muslims should be united against BJP, otherwise they have to pay the price.

Sandhya Goswami has analyzed how politics of Assam has been polarized in communal and linguistic dimensions. She has showed, while Muslims shifted their loyalty to AIUDF, the Assamese-speaking Muslims remain with the Congress (Goswami, 2009). It is observed that Muslims felt it increasingly imperative to vote as Muslims for the sake of their own protection. Besides, since the Muslims have the fear of dominant Hindu parties, they have turned to Congress among the national parties (Jha, 2003). From the research sites also, it can be said that while Bengali-speaking Muslims tend to vote for AIUDF, Assamese-speaking Muslims support Congress.

The electoral campaigns of all the political parties clearly show that, they tried to mobilize people in the name of religion. Leaders like Himanta Biswa Sharma of BJP started the whole campaign against Bengali-speaking Muslims by making Badaruddin Azam the face of Bengali-speaking Muslim community. He clearly showed the threat of Bengali-speaking Muslim population upon the indigenous Assamese people and caste Hindu Assamese voters and in all the constituencies, he brought this campaign message, which reflected in the clear polarization of Hindu votes.

Nani Gopal Mahanta 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). There are some reasons that enabled a party like BJP representing Hindu nationalism to become a dominant political force in Assam. These reasons assume centre stage because, rather than religion, traditionally ethnicity and identity politics had been the dominant axis of political mobilization in Assam (Sharma et al., 2019).

4.19 Anti CAA movement, regional sentiments and voting behavior:

In the recent times, the passing of citizenship amendment Act in the parliament created huge repercussion among the common people. Respondents were asked about their take on the anti-CAA movement.

One respondent from the caste Hindu Assamese community from Nalbari, age 38 said,

Atia sauk aamiou CAA protest korisilu, CAA aami aajiu support nokoru. kintu CAA CAA Kori jodi aami BJP k Vote nidiu tetia hole akou congresssei Jikibo. Congress Jika mane eibaaar miyaaar utpaatot aami thakibo nuwarim. Congressyr karanei Asomot eman miya hobole pale. BJPyetu Hindu bangladeshik anibo khujise kintu congressye Muslim Bangladeshi aani Asom khon dhongso korile. (We also participated in the anti-CAA protests, but in the name of CAA, if we donot vote BJP, then Congress will return to power. Moreover, if Congress come to power again, then it will be difficult to live because of *miya* aggression. Because of Congress only, so much immigration of Muslim was possible. BJP wants to bring Hindu Bangladeshi but Congress destroyed the demography of the state by brining immigrant Muslims).

Many other caste Hindu respondents of all the constituencies shared similar opinions.

One respondent from Jorhat, who is a clerk in a government high school, age 45 said that,

“BJPr kisuman kotha aamar bhal nalage. Asomor eman manuhe protibad kora pisotou CAAtu aanilei. Kintu aamar atia BJPr bade upainai. Congressstu pura musulmanor dal hoi goise. Tar uparat aibar akou AIUDFr log lagise. Agot Rana Goswamik aami vote disilu kintu aibar dibo nuwari aaru. (We donot like many things about BJP. Even after so much protest, they brought CAA. However, right now, we donot have any other option. Congress turns into a *Miya* party. In additaion, this time, they are with AIUDF. Earlier, we voted for Rana Goswami, but this time we cannot give vote to him).

Apart from the members of BJP and right-wing organizations and the respondents belonging to the Bengali community, other respondents oppose the Citizenship Amendment Act. Many of them also participated in the anti-CAA protest. Respondents belonging to the right-wing organizations and Bharatiya Janata Party asserted that the CAA would be helpful for the Hindus. Many caste-Hindu respondents of Nalbari also agree by saying that people living in upper Assam will not understand the rapid demographic change happening due to the illegal migration of Bengali-speaking Muslims from Bangladesh. They believe that the CAA is necessary to keep the political rights with the Hindus. On the contrary, majority of the respondents consider CAA as a communal act, which may affect the interest of indigenous Assamese people.

Majority of the caste Hindu respondents in all the constituencies who are not members of BJP and right-wing organizations believe that after BJP came to power, the Hindi speaking communities and other non-Assamese communities have become more aggressive in their respective constituencies. From the respondents, it is clear that most of them are radical supporters of BJP. According to many respondents of the Bengali community, they support BJP because it is a nationalist party and they support Bengali Hindus. BJP even passed CAA, which is in favour of Hindu Bengalis. However, majority of the respondents of Nalbari and Jorhat who protested against CAA and who are not happy with the activities of non-Assamese people voted for the BJP candidate. They believe that the threat of the Muslims is more dangerous and scarier than the threat of the other non-Assamese Hindus.

In Tezpur, one AASU leader, Debanjan Pathak who is now the president of Tezpur AASU was asked why the anti-CAA votes did not translate into votes, to which, he replied that,

Atia sauk manuhor majot definitely atat khong asil CAA loi. Aru aapuni janei ki Tezpuror AASUr rallyt kiman manuh hoisil. Kintu opposition party ye seitu capitalize koribo nuwarile. AJP party tu AASU logot association asil jodiou ajir dateot election khelibor porake resource nasil. AASUye back korisil Tezपुरot kintu election emotionot nohoi. Aru ajir dateot election khelatu bohot calculationor kotha aahi jai. (You know how much public were gathered in the anti-CAA protest rallies of AASU, that anger in public was still there. However, opposition parties couldnot capitalize that anger. AJP was backed by AASU in Tezpur, but you know in today's time, election cannot be run on emotion. There are many calculations involved in election).

From the majority of the respondents, it can be understood that people who participated in the anti-CAA protest did not vote for Congress in the last election, because it had pre-poll alliance with AIUDF. Some of the respondents in all the constituencies supported AJP and Raizor Dal because of the anti-CAA stand of these two parties but they believe that the Congress and other regional parties or organizations couldnot capitalize the anti-CAA sentiment which was against BJP. It needs to mention that compared to Nalbari, Tezpur and Jorhat witnessed strong mobilization of people in the name of anti-CAA protest. So many people thought that it might affect the voting trend of Tezpur and Jorhat. It was expected that the candidates of Raizor Dol and AJP would get anti-CAA

votes in Tezpur. However, after coming out of the election result, it was seen that the anti-CAA votes did not translate into votes as it was expected to be. During the anti CAA movement, a huge public outrage was observed against the AGP party. However, in the last assembly election, Prithviraj Rabha of AGP won from Tezpur with a clear margin. Many Caste Hindu Assamese respondents believe that the national parties like Congress or BJP cannot fulfill the regional interests of the people. Although they want a strong regional party but according to them it is not possible with the help of existing regional parties like AGP, AJP or Raizor Dal. It needs to mention that Tezpur has been a bastion of regional party AGP from the days of the Assam Movement. In Nalbari and Jorhat also, once AGP candidates were in power. However, according to majority of the respondents, the nature of AGP has changed in the recent times. Many people believe that AGP compromised their ideologies for the political interest of its leaders. In Tezpur, AGP could only win the election because it was in alliance with BJP. H. Srikanth argued that BJP benefitted more from AGP's loss rather than any other political parties (Srikanth, 2009). This argument of Srikanth is aptly reflected in the studied area where AGP who was earlier the leading political party of Assam, had to rely on the BJP and become a 'B' team of BJP.

The responses of the respondents clearly states that although people have frustration and anger regarding the Citizenship Amendment Act, but that anger and frustration didnot translate into votes against BJP. Caste Hindu Assamese people are insecure of both Bengali-speaking Muslims and Bengali-speaking Hindus. But the insecurity of *Miyas* undermines the insecurity of Bengali-speaking Hindus. It is clearly observed that issues of identity and question of indigeneity followed by imaginary thereat from the Muslim community is clearly manifested in many of the interviews of the respondents. Most of the Hindu voters consider Muslim aggression, as the major issue in the election, rather than the issues likes CAA, development, corruption, etc. Therefore, it can be demonstrated that they have practiced their voting rights based on their comparative understanding of the threats from the outsiders. The Hindutva movement has crystallised in reaction to the 'existential' threats from the Muslim 'other'. They need these others for flourishing politically and that is why, they keep 'othering' Muslims (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). From the responses of the respondents, it can be argued that the pre-existed threat of the 'Muslim other' made it easy for BJP to flourish politically in the studied areas.

4.20 Who is *Miya* and who is *Asomiya*?

In the Jorhat and Nalbari constituency, majority of the Muslim population is Assamese-speaking Muslim. In Tezpur, both Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking Muslim population are there.

One respondent of Nalbari who is a member of BJP, age 54 said,

Aamar eyattu sob Asomiya muslim manuhe ase noh. aamar problemtu teulokok loi nai. Teulok toh khilonjiya manuh. Aamar problemtu ase Bengali musalman khinik loi karon tahat jot thake tate crimetu bohut bahi jai. Atia ata kotha sauk borkhetri somostit kiman manuh bahi gol. Tar pora manuh aahi eyat gandagul kore. (We do not have problem with Assamese-speaking Muslims because they are very much part of Assamese society. We have problem with *miya* Muslims. You can see high crime rates wherever they live. The increase of population in Borkhetri is problematic. People even come from Borkhetri here and do crimes).

The respondent again said,

Asomiya Muslim khini bhalke thakok eyat aami bhai bhai nisina asu. Khali aamar Hindu sowali uparat soku nidilei hol. Kunubai hindu sowali bhal pale goru piton khabo siddha kotha. Aami generally love jihadr birudhita koru. Seitu lagile Asomiya muslimye houk ba Bengali muslimye houk. (We want to live peacefully with the Assamese Muslims here. Just that Muslims should stay away from the Hindu girls, otherwise, they will get beaten. We oppose love jihad, be it Assamese Muslims or Bengali-speaking Muslims).

One respondent of Jorhat, age 54, said that,

“Aapuni tvtu khulibo sob beya kam buror logot jorito manuh bur sabo, besike miyai thake. Asomiya muslimbur aamar nisina Asomiya. Sihotor pora siman problem eku nai. Kintu miyar kothatu tenekua nohoi. Sihotr manuh bahi goiye ase. Aamr Jodi ata ba duta puwali hoi sihotr 10 ta 20 ta puwali hoi. Miyak kibake control nokorile problem ase. Seikaranei BJP lage Asomot.” (You open the TV; you will see the involvement of *miyas* in all the crimes. Assamese-speaking Muslims are very much like us, but *miyas* are different. If we give birth to one or two children, they will produce 10 to 20 children. If we cannot control them, then it will create problem. That is why we need BJP in Assam).

Many other Respondents also share similar opinion about Assamese speaking Muslims of Jorhat.

Many of them do not have problem with Assamese-speaking Muslims, because they believe that they are the part of same Assamese society. But they are reluctant to accept Bengali-speaking Muslims as a part of larger Assamese community. They have the view that Bengali-speaking Muslims are involved with many crimes and socially prohibited activities. In all the constituencies, religion-based polarization of votes is clearly visible. Although in Nalbari and Jorhat, the presence of Bengali-speaking Muslim is negligible but a fear psychosis is created in the name of *Miyas*, which has been helping the right-wing organizations and BJP to mobilize people in support of them. People are genuinely afraid of increasing population of the Muslim community in the state and also the increasing crime rate. They believe that it is important to bring BJP into power to control *Miyas*. People believe that the illegal infiltration is the most serious problem in the state. Bringing BJP government into power is necessary to control the immigrant Muslim population in the state. Although the interaction of caste Hindu Assamese people with the Assamese-speaking Muslim people is very normal, but religion-based polarization of votes is clearly visible in Jorhat constituency. They used to go to each other's house during festivals and other occasions as well. Many people share family bonding with each other. If anyone sees, the interactions of the caste Hindu Assamese people and Assamese Muslims, people hardly can find any difference in the society.

One Assamese-speaking Muslim respondent from Nalbari, age 38 said that,

Aapunalo kr Asomiya manuhe aamak miya kole beya lage karon aami Goriya, Moriya bilaketu asomiya kou Aami asomiya Muslim bilakor miya bilakor karane bodnaam hoi goise. (When your Assamese people call us *miyas*, it hurts our sentiment because we Goriyas and Moriyas are not *miyas*. Because of them, we have a bad impression among people).

In Tezpur, one respondent namely Akhter (age 29), who is a carpenter by profession said that,

“miya bilakor karane aami misate bodnaam hoi thaku. Aamitu Asomiya hoi naa! Tvtu khulibo miya bilakor murder, sur, decoit, mar pit aibur thakiboi. Aammar Asomiya

muslimor dekhise janu? Seikaronei moi miya beya pau, miya mistri nologau mor logot. (Because of *miyas* we face humiliation. We are Assamese but your Assamese people called us also *miya*. You switch on the TV, you will see the involvement of *miyas* in every crime, be it theft, decoit, murder or any kind of crimes. That is why I donot like *miyas* and I donot bring *miya* carpenters with me).

Many Assamese-speaking Muslims of all the constituencies gave similar opinions.

One Assamese speaking Muslim respondent of Jorhat, age 52 said that,

Ai miya bilakor karane aamarou bodnaam hoi thake. Aamitu eyare khilonjiya asomiya manuh. Sob duniar beya kam bur miya bilake koribo aamr misate bodnaam hoi. Aasolote ki jane ai bahiror manuh buror karane aamar bhai bhai majot besi nafrat hoise. Bihari, Bengali, maruwari aibur manuh ha besi hindutwadi hoi dekhai. Aare bhai tohot ki aamatke besi asomiya nki! (For these *miya* people we faced bad impression in society. We are indigenous people of this place. All the evil works are done by *miyas* and we had to face backlash for their evil deeds).

The responses of the Assamese-speaking Muslims state that they are not happy with their shared identity with the *Miyas* based on religion. They have been trying to segregate themselves from *Miyas*. They consciously use terms like “*Miyas*” and “we *Asomiya*” to separate themselves from Bengali-speaking Muslims. They believe that culturally they are superior to *Miya*. The Assamese-speaking Muslims of all the constituencies restrict themselves from marrying Bengali-speaking Muslims calling them *miyas*. Because some of them believe that, it will break their racial purity.

Arshad Alamin in his article, “The Enemy Within: Madrasa and Muslim Identity in North India” argued that while scholarship has shown how the Hindu Right creates the Muslim as the ‘other’, processes of ‘othering’ within the Muslim community itself have hardly received any attention (Alam,2008). In the studied area, it is interesting to observe that Assamese-speaking Muslims have been trying to make Bengali speaking Muslims as the ‘other’ within the Muslim community itself.

One interesting observation is that Assamese-speaking Muslims point out Bengali-speaking Muslims as *Miyas*. On the contrary, most of the time, they are also being called

as *Miyas* by caste Hindu Assamese people for any unwanted incident in society. Leaders of the BJP and right-wing organizations selectively and conveniently use the term '*Miya*' sometimes to separate the Assamese-speaking Muslims from Bengali-speaking Muslims and sometimes as a rhetoric. This has been used as a strategy. By focusing on the Muslim and the Hindu identity, the differences between Bengali-speaking and Assamese-speaking Muslims have been abolished (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

On the contrary, majority of the Assamese-speaking Muslims blamed non-Assamese people living in Assam for Hindu-Muslim divide and radicalization of the society. In this process, they try to create an identity of Assamese community only comprising Assamese-speaking Hindus and Assamese-speaking Muslims. In this newly created identity, common identity is created based on shared identity of language but not based on religion. In this identity, Bengali-speaking Muslims and non-Assamese people are restrained. As a counter to create a common identity based on religion, Assamese-speaking Muslims have been trying to create an identity based on language.

4.21 Otherisation of Miyas

In the Nalbari Sadar and Jorhat, the presence of Bengali-speaking Muslims are very less. The Bengali-speaking Muslims are migrant workers. They donot have voting rights in the constituency. They are not being treated well by both caste Hindu Assamese people and Assamese-speaking Muslims. Both Hindus and Assamese-speaking Muslims treat them as 'others.' In Nalbari and Jorhat, although the presence of Bengali-speaking is negligible but a fear of increasing Muslim population and the crimes rates is predominant among the Hindu people. This fear is instrumental in the polarization of votes and also radicalization of society in these two constituencies. On the contrary, in Tezpur, Bengali-speaking Muslims are mostly concentrated in the Panchmile area. People of Tezpur give reference to the Paanchmile area to talk about *Miyas*. During electoral campaign, the BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sharma clearly said that they did not want the votes of Pachmile area. Basically, he tried to mean the votes of Bengali-speaking Muslims. It created huge repercussion amongst the people. Although the statement offended people who resides in the Panchmile area, but it seemed that, caste Hindu Assamese voters and other non-Assamese Hindus were very much happy with that radical statement.

Moinuddin who is a teacher, age 42 said that,

“Himanta Biswai aahikine eyat koise ki Paanchmile vote aamak nalage. aare bhai tohoti developmentor kotha kona ki hindu muslim kori thako. aamitu Tezpurot aaji more than thirty years thakilu sob hindu muslim ekeloge thakilu atia aibur paanchmiler vote nalage kobo aahise (Himanta Biswa said that they don’t want the votes of Paanchmile people. They should run the election based on development agenda but they are doing communal politics. We have been living peacefully here for more than thirty years and now how can they say that they don’t want the votes of Paanchmile).

From the responses of the respondents, a clear polarization is seen in Tezpur based on religion. Instead of using terms like *miya*, the whole Paanchmile area was projected as a derogatory place where *Miyas* are living. The Paanchmile area has been used as an example of *Miya* aggression and how over the period of time, *Miyas* expand their settlements with their rapid population growth.

As in case of Jorhat and Nalbari, such Muslim dominated area does not exist to give a veiled reference to *Miyas*, which has been drawn to polarize the society on religious lines.

The ultimate success of the BJP and the right-wing organizations 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 et. al., 2019).

Omar has 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, 2021). In the Nalbari and Jorhat, the creation of Muslim ‘other’ helps BJP and right-wing organizations to mobilize people. In the context of Tezpur vidhan sabha constituency, instead of projecting Muslims as ‘other’, the whole paanchmile area was projected as the ‘other’ with many political connotations. Anderson and Jaffrelot stated in their article, that The Hindutva movement needs the ‘others’ which includes Muslims and Christians for flourishing politically (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). In all the constituencies, efforts have been made to polarize the Hindu votes against the ‘Muslim other’ In the context of Tezpur, the whole Paanchmile area became the ‘other’ for the rest of caste Hindu Assamese voters and the leaders of BJP tried to capitalize it during electoral campaigns.

After witnessing the election result, it can be demonstrated that the AGP-BJP alliance gained politically because of that narrative. The efforts to polarize votes in the name of 'Muslim other' were translated into polarized Hindu votes.

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