

CHAPTER 5

The Manifestation of Politico-Religious Ideologies

5.1 Introduction

This chapter intends to understand the politico-religious ideologies of Bharatiya Janata Party and how these ideologies disseminate at the grassroots. To understand the important ideologies of the Bharatiya Janata Party, we have to understand its historical background and also the contribution of the pioneering figures in the development of their ideological orientation. It is also important to understand the nexus between BJP and its affiliate organizations. In this chapter, the focus has been given on the politico-religious ideologies of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the repercussion of these ideologies in the state and particularly in the research sites. Many of the agendas of the political party as well as its affiliate bodies have created many controversies in the country as well as in the state. Therefore, it is important to understand how the common people perceive those agendas and how it affects the everyday life of the common people. This chapter also intends to understand whether these agendas bring any changes into the interactions between different communities. The Bharatiya Janata Party came to power at the centre in 2014 and they are in their consecutive 2nd term of power. In Assam, BJP came to power in 2016. After coming to power, the BJP Government has taken decisions, which have also created repercussions in the civil society. For instance, the Assam Government has banned the selling and buying of beef within 5 km radius of any Mandir or Namghor. Many people have taken this decision in line with the agenda of Sangh Parivar to stop cow slaughter in the country. Some sections of the Hindu population are happy with this decision while one section has seen it as a violation of constitutional rights. On the contrary, the majority of the Muslim population are not happy with this decision. In fact, many people have seen it as the violation of their right to eat.

The BJP Government has also decided to withdraw the Government status from the madrasas and it also created huge repercussion in the state. The present Chief Minister upholds this decision as a pure intension to stop religious education in the state with the patronage of the Government and opening roads for progressive education for Muslims of the state. On the other hand, majority of the Muslim population have seen this

decision as a discrimination and treat this as Sang Parivar's agenda to interfere in the religious affairs of the Muslims.

The Government has arrested thousands of people who are associated with child marriage activity. Interestingly, the majority of people belongs to one particular religion. Many people look it as harassment from the Government's side; while on the other hand, many have seen it as a progressive step.

Recently, the Government has taken up many evictions drives across the state, which led to a continuous conflict between some people with the government. Allegedly, majority of these illegal occupants belong to one particular community. Different political parties meanwhile also got involved into this issue, which makes it more complex. Some blamed the government for targeting only those areas, which are occupied by Bengal origin Muslims while some are cheering for the government.

Many people are also skeptical about the government's patronage of Namghors and Mandirs over Masjids and Churches. On the contrary, the leaders of the ruling party defend this as their duty to support their own culture and religion.

Again, love jihad is one of the other main issues, which has been creating huge controversy all over the state. The right-wing organizations are trying to mobilize the Hindu youths in the name of love jihad and ghar-wapsi.

Tripple Talaq, and delimitation of the constituencies are some other issues which are continuously creating speculations among people. People belonging to different interest groups and different religions are fighting over these issues in popular media shows and social media platforms.

Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot in their article, "Hindu nationalism and the 'saffronisation of the public sphere': An interview with Christophe Jaffrelot" argued that the Sangh Parivar always attempts to mobilize against love jihad, ghar wapsi, beef ban, triple talaq, in order to foster fear and anger. It is the politics of fear that relies on the Islamic or Pakistani threats that must generate some anger (against Muslims, secularists, and so on). The 'pampering' or even the presence of 'such people' is unbearable, because it is not justiciable to the Hindus (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). In this chapter,

the researcher also tries to understand the implications of these agendas and to see how people perceive these ideas or decisions of the BJP government and the *Sangh Parivar*.

To put on the record, the present study was conducted between the years, 2019 to 2022. Moreover, as already mentioned, for representational purpose, Nalbari (Sadar), Tezpur and Jorhat constituencies have been selected. From these three constituencies, the key respondents were selected from different interest groups sorted out with purposive sampling method.

5.2 Rituals and Festivals

The respondents were asked about the changes in different rituals and religious festivals at the research sites. From the respondents, the researcher learnt that, earlier, Ganesh Puja was only observed in Ganesh Mandir, Nalbari. But, from the year 2015 onwards, Ganesh Puja was observed in Nalbari town as well as on a large scale. Interestingly, people who are associated with organizing Ganesh puja are the leaders of the right-wing organizations. One of the leaders of Hindu Jagaran Mancha, aged 38, talked about the spread of Ganesh puja celebration in Nalbari Town. According to him, before the coming of Modi government at the Centre and Sarbananda Sonowal government in the state, people were reluctant to show their Hindu identity. They were also reluctant to openly celebrate Hindu cultures and rituals, although, Hindutva elements were very much present in society. But now, after the rise of BJP, people are coming out openly to show and celebrate their Hindu identity in the form of rituals and festivals. The huge celebration of Ganesh puja is a part of showing their Hindu identity.

Ashtosh Varshney in his book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, mentioned about a case study based in Hyderabad. He mentioned that earlier Hyderabad did not have any tradition of large celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi. It was only confined to households to neighborhood level. Under the leadership of local Hindu nationalists' massive procession was initiated which spread across the Hyderabad city. Over the past two decades it has been a tradition of several miles long procession on the occasion of Ganesh Chaturthi with thousands of participants. It has been a difficult task for the police to maintain law and order during that procession. The first president of the Ganesh Puja celebration who was a Hindu nationalist openly said that they wanted to show the unity and solidarity of the Hindus to the Muslims. He thought it was essential

to assert the Hindu identity in such massive way because due to economic prosperity of the Muslims, they started asserted their religious identity by undermining Hindus. According to him the prayers of the Muslims became louder as they started using more loudspeakers and the mosques had become shinier. Muslims had to be taught a lesson according to him and the massive celebration of Ganesh festival was the reaction (Varshney, 2002). This case study of Varsney is relatable in the context of the present research sites especially in Nalbari. The rightwing organizations also admit to show their strength to the non-Hindu communities and taking pride in being a Hindu, which has been reflected in studying the journey of Sangh Parivar in Assam.

It is evident from many of the respondents that the amount of people's participation in the religious activities have been increased considerably. From the respondents, the researcher came to know that the organization of Akhanda Bhagawat Path has been increasing in the villages of the research sites. Along with that, different kirtans, Paal naam, Hanuman pujas are also organized. In the Assamese speaking dominated areas, organization of Bhagawat path, Paal naam can be seen. On the contrary, in the non-Assamese community dominated areas, different pujas like Hanuman puja, Ganesh pujas are organized. Although, many respondents consider this as a spontaneous devotion of people but many respondents see a connection in the rise of BJP and RSS with the organization of such programmes. One reason of the increase of such programmes can be attributed to the sponsors of such programmes by different BJP and right-wing leaders. Another respondent from the Nepali community revealed that they organize 'kirtans' and other religious rituals more frequently after BJP came into power. Because they felt that under the Modi regime, the Hindutva became stronger and free. Now people come out spontaneously to show their Hindu identity. Earlier, people were more silent or shied away to preach their Hindu rituals publicly. But now, the picture has changed. Now people take pride as Hindu. Ashtosh Varshney in his book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, argued that everyday form of association helps in the mobilization of the masses. RSS has taken the everyday form of association to strengthen its organizational base. Different kirtans, Paal naam, Hanuman pujas were organized through which people are being mobilized. Earlier, for those people who followed new Vaishnavite tradition, pujas were a distant tradition to follow. It has not only inserted one kind of oneness but also mobilized people to be united. It has been instrumental in making the sense of 'we' and 'others. It is being used as a cultural marker (Varshney,

2002).

The circle officer of Jorhat revealed that the officer even got into administrative trouble because of the massive crowd during Durga Puja or Chhath Puja, violating the Covid protocols. The circle officer mentioned about an observation during Durga puja, where he states, before the Durga Puja, all the puja committees had to take prior permission from the administration for their puja mandaps and accordingly administration prepares a list of puja committees of their locality. During the first day of the Durga Puja, they were on duty and roaming around the city to check whether everything was running as per rule or not. During that time, they observed a puja mandap in the Nehru Park area, which was not in the permission list. It was organized in the Nehru Park area, which is located in front of the Vishnu mandir of Jorhat. First, the whole team got surprised to see the big puja mandap in that area because they were not informed about that. They came close to the mandap and witnessed that it was a mandap for *Bharat Mata Pujon*. Many BJP, RSS and right-wing leaders were present in that celebration. Even the MLA and MPs attended that celebration during the night-time. The circle officer and the team did not enter into the mandap premise as it may create unnecessary trouble for them. According to the circle officer, the celebration of *Bharat Mata Pujon* is very recent in Jorhat. It has only started after the winning of the BJP candidate, Hitendra Nath Goswami in the constituency. In fact, it has been only three to four years that the *Bharat Mata Pujon* has been observed in Jorhat. Inside the mandap premise, they kept a statue of *Bharat Mata* and behind that, they kept a map of Bharat or India. Malini Bhattacharjee argued that the ideologues of Hindutva are intelligently making use of the opportunity to construct an identity for the Assamese, the mission being to define a connection between Assam and 'Bharat', since the ancient times. They selectively highlight references to Assam in a variety of Vedic, Puranic and epic texts to impart a strong Hindu identity to Assam. Hindutva activists have therefore, from the very beginning, adopted novel strategies for navigating through the complex particularities of this region to establish itself in the cultural and political imagination of the people (Bhattacharjee, 2016). This observation made by Bhattacharjee is aptly reflected in the research area. The Hindutva organizations are already successful in establishing Hindutva in the cultural and political imagination of the people.

As a counter to these Hindutva activities, there is also an increasing tendency to organize more religious programmes called 'Istema' and 'Jolsa' among the Muslims. In these programmes, they call different religious leaders and maulanas to give lectures on Islam and Islamic way of life. These lectures range from religious practices to everyday do's and do not. They are also asked to be united for the larger interest of Islam. These types of religious meetings were mostly seen in the areas where Bengali-speaking Muslim population is in majority.

One respondent who is a Bengali-speaking Muslim, age 62 said that,

BJP ye aamar dharma nosto koribo bisari ase, aapunalokr Hindu majot kiman hare rama hare Krishna kori thake, gotei rati siyori thake. Aamar notun lora sowalik Islamor kotha aamiou jonabo lagibo. Nohole sihot kafir hoi jabo. BJP RSS ye ji try kore korok. Aamiou nijok mojbut kribo lagibo. (BJP is trying to affect our religion by interfering in our internal matters. How many religious programmes are organized by your Hindu people! The whole night, people sing Hare Rama, Hare Krishna. We also have to teach our young boys and girls about our own religion. Whatever BJP and RSS try, we have to make ourselves strong).

Although according to both Assamese and Bengali-speaking Muslim respondents, the nature of the lectures is not political but the leaders of the right-wing organizations alleged that in those lectures, political guidelines were also given.

Varshney (2002) mentioned about another case study of Hyderabad where as a counter to Hindutva activities the Majlis-e-Ittehadul (MIM) of Hyderabad started a new religious programme called Pankha Procession for Muslims. It was started in honour of a local Sufi shrine. The procession of Ganesh Chaturthi and Pankha clashes with each other which led to the worst communal violence in 1984. Thus, the popular festivals of both the religious parties were instrumental in the polarization of the society in Hyderabad. Mass rivalry and contestation were asserted through religious celebration (Varshney, 2002). Varshney argued that the festivals are often regarded as an important medium of civic engagement in societies. Even individuals with different interest can also be brought into a common civic space through such rituals. As rituals are so central to public culture, thus festivals can also be the source of communal disputes and group assertion. Thus, it becomes a double-edged sword when rituals involve participation of

the people. Thus discrimination, bigotry and violence can also go together with the celebration of the religious ideals and rituals (ibid.).

5.3 Cultural Appropriation

The researcher observed that the leaders and members of right-wing organizations take a tilak in the forehead to get associated with Hindutva organizations. According to the leaders, they appeal to all the members of their organizations to use saffron tilak in the forehead. By looking at the tilak, they can easily identify them as their members. One of the leaders of right-wing organization with the title Haloi, age 38, reveal that they started a campaign by making Jay Shree Ram compulsory for their members as a form of greetings in Nalbari. As a result, it has already become a slogan in Nalbari according to him. All the people who associate themselves with BJP, RSS and other Hindutva organizations now greet each other by saying Jay Shree Ram. Interestingly, many Muslims who are in good relationship with the leaders and members of right-wing organizations now greet them by saying Jay Shree Ram. The leaders also appeal the members of their organizations to wear saffron colour clothes in any rituals and cultural programmes and the members of their organizations happily follow that.

During Lachit Divas, the right-wing organizations like Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad organize different programmes and processions to commemorate the memory of great Lachit Borphukon. It is specially seen in Nalbari and Jorhat. The intensity to organize such programmes is low in Tezpur compared to the other two constituencies. Under the leadership of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, meetings are being held in all the research sites to collect donations for the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhyain which decisions are taken to collect money to gather a fund for the same purpose. Recently, the celebration of Hanuman Jayanti during Bihu has been creating a lot of buzz in Assam. In Nalbari and Jorhat, big rallies were organized under the leadership of the right-wing organizations to celebrate Hanuman Jayanti. These rallies were organized in the middle of Rongali Bihu. Many critics and regionalist found it as the Hinduization of Assamese culture and according to them, the Sangh Parivar have been trying to hijack Assamese culture and want to replace it with north Indian model of Hindutva, On the contrary, the leaders of the Hindutva Organizations found it as a spontaneous celebration and revival of Hindutva in the state.

In this context, Malini Bhattacharjee argued that moving away from its standard techniques of mobilising support through the invocation of Hindu stereotypes like ‘Ram’ or ‘Ayodhya’, it instead focuses on adapting local cults and symbols such as those associated with Kamakhya and Sankardev or Satra traditions. Coupled with this, it also consolidates support by providing welfare services in the realm of education, health and cultural development, through a range of affiliate bodies (Bhattacharjee, 2016). From the research site, it has been revealed that although Hindutva organizations initially focused on adapting local cults and symbols but with the passing of time, they have aggressively been mobilizing people through the invocation of Hindu stereotypes like ‘Ram’ or ‘Ayodhya’, saffron tilak or Saffron clothes, etc. The Right-wing organizations have been trying to appropriate the local cultural icons like Sankardeva and Lachit Barphukans. By doing that, they try to create a common identity or belongingness for people across different ethnic groups and communities to identify themselves as Hindus.

5.4 Love Jihad and Cow Slaughter

‘Love jihad and Cow protection’ are the two main issues, which have been creating huge controversy all over the state. From the responses of the respondents, it is clear that people have serious problems with love jihad and cow slaughter. The right-wing organizations are successful in mobilizing Hindu boys against these two issues. The intensity is higher in Nalbari but in Tezpur and Jorhat also, it is clearly visible. Although people share good relations with Assamese-speaking Muslims in all the constituencies, but in case of love jihad and cow slaughter they are not ready to tolerate.

In the public discourse, the term ‘love jihad’ was first introduced in September, 2009. It is alleged that Muslim boys try to convert Hindu girls to Islam through love and marriage in a very organized way. It is termed as love jihad. Although it has roots in the partition of 1947 but love jihad issues only came into the national debate during the year 2009-2011 when 41 love jihad or cases were pronounced in public. The first complains came from Karnataka and Kerala. Families of the victims claimed about organized conversions through marriage. Some Hindu and Christian religious organizations placed these allegations against various Muslim groups. (MJ, 2018). Since then, the Hindu nationalist rhetoric demands that there has been a Muslim conspiracy underway. According to the proponents, Muslims in India are conspiring to seduce, marry, forcefully convert, and even traffic young Hindu girls. This conspiracy, which is termed as ‘Love Jihad’ is

supposedly aimed at both reducing the Hindu population in India as well as undermining the Hindu religion (Omar, 2021).

From the late nineteenth century onwards, when for the first time, ideologues of Sangh Parivar tried to organize Hindus against Muslims, they singled out the cow as their main symbol. Protection of '*guu-muta*' (mother cow), an object of religious worship for the Hindus, became one of the most important aspects of incipient Hindu Nationalism between 1880 and 1920 (Snehi, 2003). The movement of 1893 was probably the first instance when a kind of pan-Indian Hindu mobilization using the cow as its symbol was witnessed and the RSS continued to do that in the post-independence era (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). RSS organized the first mass movement in 1952 when a huge petition, gathering thousands of signatures, was taken on bullock carts to Rashtrapati Bhavan. After that, the 1966 movement can be mentioned when, not only the Jana Sangh but the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which had been created two years before, wanted cow slaughter to be banned by the parliament. Protesters attacked government buildings and they also nearly stormed the Lok Sabha. In that incident, seven people were killed by police (ibid.). In 2015 the right-wing organizations started many protection campaigns by symbolizing the "mother cow" or *gau mata* with the "mother of the Hindu nation," After the speeches of Narendra Modi in the election rallies of 2014 parliamentary election, where he mentioned about 'pink revolution' which means India's rising meat exports. He claimed that pink revolution would reduce its rivers of milk and India's cattle population would be finished (MJ, 2018). When Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he accused the UPA government of providing Rs. 50 crores subsidy for setting up slaughter houses and for promoting meat export in the framework of a 'pink revolution', both things being identified as 'Muslim' (Jaffrelot, 2015).

According to many respondents, one major issue in the name of which the right-wing organizations managed to cater maximum support from the youth generation is Love Jihad. The right-wing organizations are trying to mobilize people specially the Hindu youths in the name of love jihad and ghar wapsi. Although, the Assamese people who are caste Hindu have cordial relations with Assamese-speaking Muslims in all the research sites but the opinions of most of the respondents, said that, people are not ready to tolerate the love affairs of Muslim boys with the Hindu girls even if the Muslim boy is Assamese-speaking Muslim. Most of the Hindu people are also not ready to tolerate

beef eating. By realizing this already existed anxiety, BJP and the Hindutva brigade use the Love Jihad and 'cow protection' rhetoric as a narrative to mobilise their men 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 the present Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, who appealed to voters in Assam by promising that, if elected, the government would start a fight against the threat of Love Jihad (Himanta Biswa Sarma speech, 2020, cited in Omar, 2021). In the electoral campaign also, it was requested that Hindus should get united for the larger interest, otherwise Muslims will take over their political right and their identity will be lost and Muslims will rape Hindu women or take away Hindu girls. Repeated examples of the incident of Arnamai Borah, a rape victim from the lower Assam was given in which the victim was allegedly raped by few Bengali-speaking Muslim miscreants.

In Nalbari, right wing organizations bring out rallies against love jihad and cow slaughter, which is not prominent in the other two constituencies. The intensity is higher in Nalbari, but in Tezpur and Jorhat also, it is clearly visible. In the Nalbari constituency, recently, one rally had been called in opposition to love jihad. One leader of Bajrang Dal revealed that many youths spontaneously joined that rally. They sought slogans like, Jai Shree Ram, Bharat Mata Ki Jai, etc. The rally went through the main schools and colleges of Nalbari. According to the leader, the main intention of that rally was to mobilize and sensitize people, especially the young boys and girls against love jihad. In fact, school-going kids also joined those rallies and sought slogans like Jai Shree Ram, while seeing the crowd in joy and excitement. According to the leader, it was a great success. They use saffron clothes in their rallies. According to another leader, they collected donations from the leaders of the ruling party. MLA and Ministers also frequently give donations.

In 2019, the right-wing organizations of Tezpur prepared a list of lovers who belongs to the opposite religion. They claimed it as love jihad and personally threatened them. After the outbreak of the covid 19 pandemic, that issue went under the carpet.

While mentioning about a recent incident, one Bajrang Dal leader of Nalbari with the title Barman claimed that they have recovered around 300 cases, which are directly related to love jihad. He cited an example of how a Muslim guy, named Saidul Islam, successfully eloped with a Hindu girl by using a Hindu name called Biki Kumar. The

story claimed by the leader cannot be trusted blindly but they have successfully managed to mobilize young Hindu boys and girls against love jihad with such narratives. In the commentary, 'Communalizing Assam - AGPs Loss is BJP's Gain', the author, H. Srikanth has identified Muslim fundamentalism as one of the major reasons for which BJP could firm their footing in the politics of Assam (Srikanth, 1999). Although it is difficult to find the truth behind love jihad, but irrespective of their caste or community identity BJP managed to unite Hindus for its political gain. It became possible due to the issues like love jihad or cow slaughter.

The BJP, RSS and other right-wing organizations mobilize people on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan. On that day, all BJP karyakartas or members get rakhis from the female workers and the female members consider them as brothers who will be their protectors. One member of the Congress Party said that they could have done that as household activities. But, they do that in public. By doing that in public with a mass gathering, they send a message that they will protect the female members from all the evils. It can be seen in relation to love jihad where the lives of the Hindu girls are considered to be in threat and the responsibility to give protection to Hindu girls is bestowed upon Hindu males. Right wing organizations such as Bajrang Dal work hand in hand with organizations like Durga Vahini to take action against love jihad.

The Assam government recently introduced a Bill, which penalizes the polygamy and child marriage in Assam. It created huge repercussion not only within the state, but also outside the state. The police arrested many people who were involved in child marriage or polygamy. Many link this decision of the government with the issue of love jihad. Love jihad becomes an umbrella term where child marriage and polygamy are also connected. Love jihad is a pan India concept but the prohibition of love jihad and its reaction after the prohibition is contextual to Assam. No other government seems to be taking such aggressive stands. Even at the institutional level, government is working to stop polygamy and promote monogamy through demonstration of street plays and different programmes. After the arrest of many Muslim people, a strong anti-assertion can be seen among the Muslims.

It has been observed that Cow slaughter and eating of the beef meat is an issue, which creates huge repercussion among the common people. It is an issue based on which the right-wing organizations mobilize people. Eating of beef meat clearly makes the Muslim

‘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 mobilization of people in the name of cow slaughter and beef eating. Because of such mobilizations, BJP has been gaining as people associate themselves with the right-wing politics.

In the year 2016, one incident happened in the old Masjid of Jorhat town when a ward commissioner who belong to the ruling BJP party entered the main premise of the Masjid with shoe to check whether any cow slaughtering activity was going on or not. After that incident, public outrage came out, and he had to apologize to those Muslim people associated with that particular Masjid. After BJP came into power, different incidents have been witnessed, where the members of the right-wing organizations entered Muslim villages in Jorhat to check whether cow slaughtering is going on or not. A few months back, one incident draws the public attention when the cadres of the right-wing organization along with the police entered a house of a Muslim family to check beef meat. During the pandemic, there were different incidents when Muslim people was beaten up, when entering a caste Hindu Assamese village in Jorhat after the Nizamuddin Marcoze case.

According to the respondents, in the premise of Borah Masjid located near the Chowk Bazar of Tezpur, pork meat was thrown into the masjid premise. In another incident, beef meat was recovered from one of the Mandirs of Ganeshghat, Tezpur. These incidents created strong repercussion amongst both the religious communities. Later, after the investigation, it came to light that one mentally ill person had thrown beef meet into the Mandir premise.

According to the local news reporter of the Assamese television channel, *Pratidin Time*, few months back at the Bhugdoi outpost of the Jorhat constituency, the members of Hindu Yuva Chatra Parishad captured a truck full of cows. They informed it to the police and media as illegal cow smuggling case. After the police verification, it came into light that those were legal cows moving as per government rule. They put pressure on the reporter to cover the news as illegal cow smuggling case. When the reporters denied doing so, they argued with the reporters. The members of Tai Ahom Satra Santha also reached that location. The members of Hindu Juba Chatra Parishad, in fact attacked the members of Tai Ahom Satra Santha and the reporter of *Pratidin Time*, by claiming that

they received commission from the cow mafias. After that incident, all local reporters protested that incident.

One of the leaders of right-wing organization reveal that whenever the members of the right-wing organizations face any troubles from the police, the leaders of the ruling party came into their rescue. According to them, after BJP came to power, they are getting freehand for doing Hindutva activities, as a result of, which Hindutva has been spreading to every nook and corner of the country and according to them, as a result of Hindutva, BJP gains the most. In this context, MJ (2018) alleged that in general, Hindutva groups are rarely punished for any act of vandalism or even outright violence (MJ, 2018). The claim of Vijayan MJ is reflected in the opinion of the right-wing organization leader.

In Nalbari Sadar, recently one incident draws the public attention when an ex-contestant of Nalbari Sadar from Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) was physically assaulted by a mob, constituting members of the right-wing organizations who shouted slogans like Jai shree Ram while assaulting him. It created huge repercussion within and outside Nalbari. The leaders of right-wing organizations claimed that he was associated with cow mafias and has been encouraging cow slaughtering activities in Nalbari area. However, interestingly, he himself is a Brahmin with the title Sarma. The members of right-wing organizations later protested in front of his home as well against him. According to the other narrative, in the main town area, some mutton selling shops were located, which according to the right-wing leaders were selling beef. They threatened the vendors to stop selling the meat. The ex-contestant of AJP is also a member of the civil society, which centered on Hari Mandir of Nalbari. Against the threatening of vendors, the person raised his voice. His stand on the issue offended the members of the right-wing organizations.

Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot in the article, 'Hindu nationalism and the "saffronisation of the public sphere": An interview with Christophe Jaffrelot' argued that, the Sangh Parivar always needs a new cause, like beef ban, love jihad, ghar wapsi, triple talaq in order to maintain a semi-permanent state of mobilization (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). A narrative of victimization and being 'under siege' is a part of the model of Hindu nationalism. Even after years of Hindu majoritarianism, the idea that Muslims are 'pampered' by 'pseudo-secularists' continues to prevail in the Hindutva discourse. The 'pampering' or even the presence of 'such people' is unbearable to the Hindus (ibid.). This intolerance and unbearableness against anybody, who according to

them pampers Muslims, can be clearly understood from this incident of Nalbari where the ex-AJP candidate was assaulted physically even though he himself was a Hindu. From the narratives of the field, it can be demonstrated that the elements of fear and anger was already present regarding love jihad and cow slaughter among the Hindu people which makes it easy for BJP and other right-wing organizations to mobilize people. The right-wing organizations find cow slaughter or beef ban as a cause to mobilize people against the Muslims. This has been seen in all the studied areas, where mobilization in the name of love jihad and cow slaughter get maximum response from the people.

5.5 RSS Pada Sanchalana

According to the respondents belonging to All Assam Student Union, after BJP came into power, the non-Assamese community's social behaviour has changed. The non-Assamese communities like Marwari, Bengali, etc. supported Citizenship Amendment Act openly. They joined different right-wing organizations right after BJP came to power in 2014. From the respondents of Jorhat, the researcher came to know about an incident which can be mentioned in this context.

In the middle of Jorhat Town, the historical Rajmao Pukhuri is located. In the backside of Rajmao Pukhuri, one Masjid is also there. Near this place, Jaya Bhawan was established by the leaders of Tai Ahom Organizations. In 2018, some people from the Marwari community started RSS Pada Sanchalana programme near Rajmao Pukhuri. Allegedly those people belonged to the RSS. The Civil Society opposed that activity by saying that any kind of communal activities will not be tolerated in Jorhat, and they cannot let the historical ground of Rajmao Pukhuri to become the place of communal activities. Some of the Tai Ahom members who came forward to stop those activities were allegedly attacked by the RSS members. The news was brought to light as Assamese people were being attacked by people belonging to non-Assamese community. Various protests were observed by different organizations. Eventually the district administration had to intervene in that issue. One meeting was held in Jorhat Sahitya Bhawan. Although other issues were also addressed in that meeting, but 'Rajmao Pukhuri Suraksha Samiti' was constituted to protect the integrity of this historical site.

In Nalbari and in Jorhat, the RSS Pada Sanchalana programmes are organized frequently. It can be observed as a spontaneous hegemonic form of nationalism. From the respondents, it is observed that the non-Assamese communities actively participated in those Sanchalanas. On the contrary, the Muslim community especially, the Bengali-speaking Muslims were not very comfortable with such programmes. It is interesting to observe that the active participants of these activities are mostly related to physical activities. Many respondents alleged that in Nalbari, the right-wing organizations recruited many people who are directly related to the practice of muscle power. They might be related to gym or other sports activities, but somehow or the other they are related to physical activities. One leader of the Bajrang Dal told that it is not that they intentionally recruited such people with muscle power, people spontaneously joined hands for larger cause. They don't want to fight with anyone. But the leader openly said that it is important to create a possible fear psychosis, so that people avoid love jihad or cow slaughter in the area. Some of the respondents have the opinion that although the right-wing organizations are trying to mobilize people in the communal line, but they have not succeeded till now. In this context, Mishra (2017) admired the secular beliefs and social harmony of Assamese society and therefore, he believed that it will be difficult for the right-wing organizations to distance Assamese people from their secular beliefs and religious tolerance by using Hindu versus Muslim or nation versus regional identities (Mishra, 2017). This belief of Mishra is relatable in the context. But, on the other hand, according to many respondents, the educated middle class want to maintain their secular and progressive image in public, so they do not want to come out openly although they also become radical Hindus or radical Muslims.

5.6 The new conflict of interest in Society

From the respondents, the researcher learnt about an incident centered on the Eidgah Field of Tezpur town. That field has been known as the Eidgah Field since many years. But, after the BJP came into power, they changed its name to Chitraban Bakori as the earlier name was named after Islamic practice. Earlier, that field was under the authority of Eidgah Namaz Committee. In the year 2016, the Eidgah Namaz Committee did not allow to host the flag of Bihu Committee in the Eidgah Field. For last several years, Bihu Committee had been hosting the flag during Bihu in the same Eidgah field. It hurts the sentiment of the Assamese people associated with the Bihu committee. According to

many respondents, the RSS and other right-wing organizations took the initiative to protest against the Eidgah Namaz although other Assamese people also participated in that protest. The protest eventually turned into a Hindu-Muslim conflict. The administration had to deploy CRPF to control the mob. The district administration had to intervene in this matter and took the custody of the Eidgah Field from the Eidgah Namaz Committee. Now there are two committees who are directly involved with the Chitranban Bakori. One is Eidgah Namaz Committee and another one is Bihu Committee. Since that time, different major and minor conflicts have been reported between the two committees and also between the two religious communities. One police check post was established to handle the situation of Eidgah field.

In the Harijan Colony of Tezpur Town, around 200 families voluntarily converted to Christian religion. In that colony itself, 600 to 700 families live there. There were no such disputes witnessed among them until that time. In 2018, Bajrang Dal opened its branch in that area. People mostly youths, who became Christian did not agree to join Bajrang Dal. Now in that Harijan Colony, more than two or three quarrels have been reported. Allegedly, the Christian families do not get the support of administration. Even they are debarred from the government-funded work. Earlier, all of them together organized and celebrate Durga Puja but now Christians are not allowed to participate in that Durga Puja. They do not even collect money from them. Interestingly, in the location, where the Puja is celebrated, it has the Christian population too. As a result, the Harijan Colony becomes a hotspot of conflict between the Christians and the Bajrang Dal members.

Again, according to some of the Muslim respondents, Nalbari town is the inhabitation of Muslim population. Most of the business areas of Nalbari Town is occupied by the Assamese Muslim community. As a result, of which BJP and other right-wing leaders including the local MLA have been pushing to shift the town near the highway. However, the leaders of the ruling party denied this allegation. According to them, it has been proceeding through a natural process.

Varshney (2002) in his book, further mentioned about how the ethnic conflict is sometimes instrumental, sometimes essential or primordial. When it is instrumental, it has been used by the elites for their own interest. On the contrary, when it is primordial or essential, then it means it is already inherent in society (Varshney, 2002). The field

narratives clearly highlighted that some element of conflict of interest was pre-existed in society, which has been used by BJP, RSS and other right-wing organizations to mobilize people. In Assam, it is partly instrumental and partly primordial, because BJP, RSS and right-wing organizations instrumentally revive the primordially existed elements.

5.7 RSS camps: Insights from the field

Malini Bhattacharjee argued that, over the past decades, the journey of BJP's political experiment in Assam already got so much attention. Bhattacharjee emphasized on the contribution of the social and cultural wings of its *parivar* in deepening the roots of Hindutva in Assam (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Many scholars argue that BJP could manage to get an entry in this region only because of the determined and silent hard work of the RSS cadres (Sharma et. al, 2019). So, the role of RSS is undeniable in bringing BJP into power in a region where its language and culture are very different. This region of the country was relatively unaffected by the mainland issues like Hindu-Muslim binaries. So it was a challenge for the RSS to expand its presence in this region of the country. The RSS, believed in creating a dedicated network of activists in the long run in order to create a fertile ground for its ideology of Hindu majoritarianism (Jaffrelot, 2019). The expansion and growth of RSS and its affiliate organizations have been helping BJP to expand its political dominance in Assam and the Northeast.

Many respondents were interviewed who had the experience of joining RSS camps. Many of them are currently members of RSS and while many has distanced themselves from the organization due to different reasons. One of the respondents, who is now working in a college, participated in two RSS camps in Tezpur and Dhekiajuli before joining his job. Initially, he was very inclined towards Hindutva ideology and RSS. But, after joining the camp, he gave up his thought of joining RSS. He revealed that in those camps, lectures were given on Muslim aggression. Different examples were given to validate their lectures. They give examples like changing demography of Kalitakuchi of Hajo where no Kalitas are left to represent their place's name, which has eventually become a minority area now. They also give examples of Medhi Suburi of Dhekiajuli, which has become a minority area now and no Medhis are left to represent their place's name. In those RSS camps, examples were also given on Radhakuchi from lower Assam, which is presently occupied by the Muslims now. The respondent also agreed to the

examples given in those camps, although he thought that in those camps, people are manipulated through the Hindu versus Muslim binaries. According to the respondent, the aggression of Muslims is real. He believed that the aggression of Muslims on the land and the Hindu women is a ground reality. First, they get a settlement and then start to expand their territory from there. Lectures were given against love jihad. Different examples were given to validate their lectures. In Tezpur, they were given examples of the inter-religious marriage of the daughter of one of the ex-MLA of Tezpur, Rabin Bhuyan who has eloped and got married to a Muslim guy. In those camps, it was said that the Muslims would first target big influential people in the love jihad so that it can have large influence among other common people. Again, one of the members of AASU talked about his experience of going to RSS camp for the first time. He claimed that the members were manipulated to an extent to realize the insecurity of the Assamese people and to hate Muslims.

5.8 Exclusivist nature of buying and Selling of Land

Prior to the upsurge of Hindutva forces in Assam, instance of exclusivist nature of buying and selling of land was not prominent in Assam unlike the other states of north India. Bajrang Dal has been accused of not allowing Muslims to buy and sell land in some parts of Gujarat. They attacked traders who sell to Muslims and also attacked Muslim houses and forced the sale of houses or flats. This created a ghetto in the big cities of Gujarat like Ahmedabad and Vadodara (Herbar, 2023). Longkumer (2022) argued that Northeast has become the 'Hindutva laboratory' not only for Hindutva's ability to re-fashion itself in new spaces, but also to re-form their core ideologies, such as Savarkar's notion of religious belonging through ties to land, in new ways (Longkumer, 2022). An increasingly exclusivist nature of buying and selling of lands can also be observed in all the research sites where Hindus try to restrict the land ownership among the community members itself. Earlier it was not prominent in the context of Assam. In the recent times, there are many instances where the right-wing organizations get involved in matters of buying and selling of lands. Their main motive is to restrict the selling of land to non-Hindu customers and keep the land ownership among the Hindus itself.

One respondent, who belongs to the Nepali community, said that earlier, there were many instances where Hindus used to sale land and Muslims used to buy from them. The

buying and selling of lands between Hindus and Muslims were very normal. Mostly, it was Muslims who used to buy lands and it was Hindus who used to sell. That has been a common trend in his locality. In these land related matters, he didn't witness the involvement of RSS or any other right-wing organizations in the past. But now the RSS has been working at the grass roots under the banner of '*Bhumi Sangrookshan Samiti*' to protect the lands of Hindus by prohibiting Muslims to buy lands in the Hindu dominated area. A recent incident draws the public attention when the *Bhumi Sangrookshan Samitee* got directly involved in land related matters. According to the respondent, few days back in his locality, one Koch family with the title Das sold some amount of land to the Muslims. Half of the payment was done and the land was handed over to the buyer with an agreement. But, later, the *Bhumi Sangrookshan Samitee* got involved in this matter and organized a meeting to stop selling of that land. The Muslim person who bought the land had to return the land to the Koch family. The matter is not resolved yet and meetings are being called to discuss the matter. Interestingly, some non-Muslim family had the interest of buying that land and to fulfill their goal, they informed the cadres of the *Bhumi Sangrookshan Samitee* about the selling. From the above narratives, it can be argued that even if some primordial elements of conflict were existed in the society, but mostly an instrumental type of ethnic conflict as advocated by Varshney (2002) can be witnessed in the research sites, where the right-wing organizations are instrumental in restricting the buying and selling of lands to Muslims in the Hindu dominated areas. Although Bengali Muslim bashing element was already there in society but the right-wing organizations revive the primordially existed elements (Varshney, 2002).

5.9 Ban on Madrasas

It has been observed that the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), all alleged madrasas as responsible for spreading hatred towards the Hindu community. They also claimed that Madrasas are engaged with anti-national activities. Even the VHP declared in 1995, that it would not tolerate the nefarious designs of madrasas as they were teaching 'anti-Hindu' ideas to their students. The Hindu Right Wing termed the madrasas as 'dens of terror', which is instrumental in the training of jihadis to massacre Hindus and turn India into an Islamic state. During the BJP rule, a ministerial committee report of 2001 stated that madrasas were engaged in systematic training of Muslims in fundamentalist ideology,

which was against communal harmony. The Report suggested that 'modern education' be implemented in madrasas in order to bring them into the national mainstream (Alam,2008).

In Assam, the BJP government has decided to withdraw government patronage from the Madrasas, which created huge repercussion in the state. The BJP government had introduced a controversial law in Assam in 2020, which planned to convert all state-run madrassas into 'regular schools' that impart general education. In a speech given at Balagavi, Karnataka, Himanta Biswa Sarma, the then chief minister of the BJP government, Assam claimed that he has closed 600 madrasas and intends to close all madrasas because he wants schools, colleges and universities (*Outlook news* ,17 March, 2023). The then Chief Minister upholds this decision as a pure intension to stop religious education in the state with the patronage of the Government and opening roads for progressive education for Muslims of the state. On the other hand, majority of the Muslim population have seen this decision as the discrimination and Sang Parivar's agenda to interfere in the religious affairs of the Muslims. In all the research sites, various instances related to Madrasa ban can be observed. Among all the instances, one interesting incident of Jorhat can be mentioned.

In the middle of Jorhat town, one government Madrasa was located namely, 'Jorhat Muktab School', which is now converted to a normal school, because of the government's changing policy to withdraw all government madrasas and converting them into normal government schools. In this school, majority of the students and faculty members are Muslims. The school was established many years back with the efforts of some Muslim people. Earlier, the school was not provincialized but the government took the madrasa under it and made it a government madrasa. In the school itself, some of the Hindu faculty members are also working who came from other schools through transfer when the school got the provincialized status. After BJP came to power, the government withdraw the madrasas and made them normal schools where normal education would be provided. Earlier, in that madrasa, Arabic was taught. After the government's withdrawal of madrasas, Arabic was also withdrawn as a subject. Interestingly, earlier in the morning prayers of the school, Islamic religious prayers were chanted by the students and faculty members, which was in Arabic. During that time, most of the Hindu faculties were either absent or were being silent. After the withdrawal of the madrasa status for

some days, Islamic religious prayers were practiced like before. But, some of the Hindu teachers objected that. They demanded to have Hindu religious songs as well if they want to continue Islamic prayers. The headmaster who is a Muslim and some other Muslim faculty members rejected that request by saying that they will continue the earlier tradition. This created repercussions among the Hindu faculty members. One of the faculty members who was associated with a right-wing organization, draw attention of the right-wing organizations into the matter. After that, organizations like Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Jagran Mancha got involved in the matter. Because of this incident, some conflict of interest arises between the Hindu and Muslim faculty members. A public meeting was called to resolve this issue. Finally, in presence of government officials and civil society organizations, it was decided that no religious prayers will be practiced in the school campus as it is no more a madrasa now. Therefore, they decided to keep "*O mur aapunar desh*"- the national anthem of Assam as the Morning Prayer. Now although the issue was resolved, yet it has affected the relations of Hindu and Muslim faculty members.

5.10 Eviction, Encounter and the Communal Angle to it

The state government has been taking an aggressive stand in the so-called illegal settlements of the reserved areas. Eviction drives were conducted in many areas by taking the help of the state machinery. It is alleged by many respondents that the BJP government has been taking a firm stand against the illegal settlers as they belong to one particular community. In addition, the encounters of the drug mafias and drug peddlers also created huge repercussions in the state as people from one particular religion have been killed in those police encounters. After these activities a strong anti-assertion from the Muslim community has been seen in many parts of the state. According to many respondents, the BJP government has been patronizing false encounters of the Muslims in the state. Muslims alleged that the present CM encourages such fake encounters just to be in the good book of the RSS. Although the opinions of the Muslim respondents and the data provided by Anderson and Jaffrelot needs to be looked at critically but it raised serious questions on the law and order of the state.



Image 5.1 With the former MLA of Nalbari

5.11 The Dichotomy within BJP-RSS

Sarah Joseph and Gurpreet Mahajan in their article, ‘Elections and Democratic Process in India’ talked about the multiple identities of the people. They may be simultaneously members of different groups with different overlapping interests. As a member of such putative groups, their interests may at some level coincide with those of an ideal-prototype. However, according to Joseph and Mahajan, which of these identities comes to the foreground depends upon a host of factors. Also, there may be contradictions internal to an identity or clashes between identities.

In their article, the authors highlighted the fact that political parties are continuously trying to identify groups, which may be mobilised for political support and to do this, they may have to construct new identities by redefining the boundaries of existing ones. However, for Joseph and Mahajan, the success of this enterprise depends in the last instance upon the perceptions of agents (Joseph & Mahajan, 1991). This observation of Joseph and Mahajan can be observed in the functioning of BJP and RSS in Assam too. It

needs to remember that RSS and BJP are very new in this region and most of the members of BJP, RSS and other right-wing organizations are the ex-members of different organizations which had contradictory ideological positions.

Some of the members of the ruling BJP party alleged that the newly joined members of BJP and RSS tried very hard to show their loyalty towards the party. The newly joined BJP members who come from the Congress party have the pressure to prove themselves as radical Hindus. To prove them as radical Hindus or the more loyal supporters of the BJP or right-wing organizations, they try to be a part of more radical activities. Many of the old RSS members are disappointed with the way the new members are functioning within the party or organization. The dichotomy of some people who belong to other organizations earlier is clearly visible. Earlier, they used to say *Joi Aai Asom* and now it becomes Bharat '*Mata Ki Jai*'. Many newly joined BJP respondents revealed that they are not very comfortable with the way '*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*' is being shouted in the party forums.

From the activities and works of some of the members, it is clearly visible that the functioning of the different organizations of the Sangh Parivar has many contradictions. Many of the members were part of different organizations whose goal and orientation were different. However, suddenly, they shifted to RSS and BJP, which makes it confusing for them to adapt to new ideologies. In Nalbari, Tezpur and Jorhat, the already existed Assamese nationalism responded to newly emerging Hindu nationalism. Conflict of role arises between people who earlier were in AASU and suddenly joined RSS or any right-wing organizations. Although BJP, RSS and its affiliate organizations have been working at the ground level, but sometimes it is difficult to demarcate their roles, whether it is coming from the BJP or it is coming from the RSS. Many respondents alleged that after BJP came to power, many people joined RSS. According to them, most of the people who recently joined RSS have political interest. Thus, contrasting behaviour of many members can be observed where political interest of the members and the interest of the organizations like RSS contradict each other.

5.12 Muslim and other Non-Assamese Community's Reaction

It has been observed that a large number of Indians in each community are turning their backs to multi-culturalism and are embracing ethno-religious nationalism. It is now

becoming the dominant identity. Words and ideas, which were used marginally have received a new legitimacy, and at the cost of others. In these new dynamics, 'secularism' has acquired a bad name as its proponents are readily branded as 'anti-national' or 'sickular' (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). This new ethno-religious nationalism as mentioned by Anderson and Jaffrelot is the reality in all the research sites where both Hindus and Muslims are turning their backs to multiculturalism. People are trying to create identities only based on religion. Now, the political leaders and members of the right-wing organizations are not hesitant to have communal conversations in public, which was not seen earlier. The aggressive activities of the right-wing organizations created questions among the Muslim community, whether this may bring threat to their lives. According to a Muslim respondent of Jorhat, who is also a member of AASU and who has been actively participating in the last assembly election told that, after the BJP came into power, Muslims are in fear, although they do not come out together to protest against the government. Because of the activities of the right-wing organizations, a fear psychosis is created among the Muslims (Omar, 2021).

One congress leader of Tezpur, who belongs to the Muslim community, revealed that the fear among the Muslims about the government agendas is prominent. During the time of election, it was difficult for them to even arrange polling agents for their party. As per the government rule, all the polling agents were supposed to take vaccine before the election and Muslim people were very skeptical about the vaccine as a rumour was spread, that it will reduce their fertility because the government is planning to control Muslim population through vaccines. Muslim respondents believe that this government is working against their interest. Bengali-speaking Muslims are more afraid of some of the activities of the Government. They are also afraid of the aggression of right-wing organizations. Bengali-speaking Muslims have the fear of being targeted by the government, that if they speak against the government. They claim that government is trying to interfere in their religious matters by trying to change laws on different matters like that of triple talaq, cattle preservation, Madrasa ban, child marriage, etc. They believe that the government has been using state machineries including the police to intimidate them.

Further, according to the respondents belonging to caste Hindu Assamese people, after BJP came into power, the behaviour of non-Assamese communities like Bihari, Bengali

and Marwaris changed towards the Assamese people. Earlier, people belonging to these communities were not very active in the politics of the constituency and public discourse. They preferred to work silently rather than being involved in the political as well as other social matters. However, after the BJP came to power, they were recruited in different right-wing organizations and become very active in the societal matters. It has started from 2015-16, when they were enrolled into different right-wing organizations. They started organizing different religious rituals related to Hindu religion, which was not seen earlier in Assam. Majority of the Hindu respondents, irrespective of the caste, community or language, believe that the government should adopt a strong population policy to control Muslim population. On the other hand, most of the respondents of Nepali and Bengali community, strongly assert the necessity to vote as Hindus. From the above findings, it can be said that the strategy of Sangh Parivar to abolish the difference between Bengali-speaking Muslims and Assamese-speaking Muslims has been successful in Assam. They are also successful in abolishing the difference between Bengali-speaking Hindus and Assamese-speaking Hindus by only focusing on their Hindu identities. Now, it is evident that a large number of Hindus, irrespective of their community identities, are thinking of voting BJP together (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

Mishra (2017) showed his trust in the yearlong social harmony and secular beliefs of Assamese society. He, therefore, strongly believes that even the Vaishnava Satras or monasteries, many of which are with the VHP, would think twice before jumping into the bandwagon of militant Hindutva because their very ethos is extremely difficult for it to wean the Assamese people away from their secular beliefs and religious tolerance by trying to impose simple equations of Hindu versus Muslim or nation versus regional identities (Mishra, 2017). Findings from the research sites, has revealed that the trust of Mishra on the Assamese society has somehow broken already. Assam has become a fertile ground for the rise of Hindutva activities in the line of north Indian Politics.

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