



Changing trends of electoral politics in Assam: A study of Jorhat district.

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Abstract

This article deals with the changing trends of electoral politics in Assam. Jorhat, one of the most socio politically important districts of the state has been made a reference point in the article. It is observed during the study that Assam electoral politics has some unique features in comparison to the other states. Some of Indian scholars of electoral politics argue that many of Indian states had a significant political upsurge from 1993 to 1996. During this period, people participation in the electoral process was rising substantially with significant growth in regional political forces and parties along with intensive electoral competition and mass mobilization. But such a political development started in Assam from the mid-eighties of the last century. In this article an effort is made to analyse the significant changes that took place during this period in the state. The article is prepared with the help of secondary data available in government and non-government sources.

Keywords: Electoral politics, Democracy, Participation, Mobilization

1. Introduction

Election is a device, which a modern State creates amongst its citizens a sense of involvement and participation in public affairs. It is through popular elections that the authority of government is dressed with legitimacy. Through elections, peaceful transfer of authority is possible to the new leaders. A good electoral system is therefore, the basic principle of genuine representative government¹. Elections have adopted the principle of universal adult franchise in democratic systems. In India, like in the other European countries, election studies are essentially a post-second world war development. Since 1947, the country is having its regular general elections – both for Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies of the States as per the principles of the Constitution, Electoral Laws and System. India had adopted the system of simple majority and single ballot for its major states and national elections under the established electoral process.

Indian electoral democracy has witnessed different stages of development starting from one party dominance during the period from 1952 to 1967. Indian national congress as the single dominant party

was the center of all political activities and contests. This was an era of elitists and limited democracy in India. Though INC secured more than 70 and 60 percentage of seats in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections respectively but voters' turnout was on an average around 50 per cent only.

The second development of electoral politics started in 1967 where party politics became more competitive in nature with the emergence of social cleavages. Many regional political parties and non-elite social groups emerged actively in Indian politics during this period. As a result, congress party could not secure majority in parliamentary elections of 1967 in eight major states like UP, Bihar, West Bengal etc. The growth of political participation by the people has crossed the average of 60 per cent during this phase covering the period from 1967 to 1989.

The third phase was natured by polarization of socio political group and remarkable increase in people's participation in national and more particularly in assembly elections. The election of 1991 was very significant as for the first time after independence a hung parliament was thrown by the electorates.

Over these phases there has been gradual entry

of BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) initially in the form of Hindu Jana Sangha leading to the formation of government under the banner of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to contain United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by congress.

During the 90s with the gradual increase people's participation in the electoral democracy started changing from elitist agenda of politics to pro-people agenda of politics. BJP's gaining power in 2014 election with majority could be attributed to the promises made by the party for change and development. In this present stage there has been an upsurge in political participation in the national as well as states elections in remarkable way.

1.1 Trends of electoral politics in Assam

Assam as a federal unit of Union of India had its first general election in March 1952 in 91 assembly constituencies. Out of 91 constituencies 13 were double member constituencies, the voting percentage in this election was 47.96 that were higher than the national average of 45.67 percentages. Since 1957 Lok Sabha election percentage of voting had been declining compared to national average, but since 1985 the voter's participation in election started increasing and showing much higher percentage compared to national average and it was highest in 2014 Lok Sabha election with 80.12 voting percentage. In this election, the national average was 66.44 percentages. In both Lok Sabha and assembly election in Assam there has been an upsurge in political participation level in terms of voting since 1984-85.

There have some significant changes in states as when newly formed regional party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) come into existence after a six years long Assam agitation. Likewise voter's turnout in the elections prior to the 1985 was at per national level which was around 60 percent but in 1985 assembly election there was a spectacular growth in polling percentages and nearly 80 percent voters casted their votes where male female ratio was almost same. The support base of AGP was formed not only with the ethnic Assamese people but with also all sections of the community. However, lack of experience in terms of both politics and governance the leaders of the party failed to meet the aspirations of the people. Bad governance, rampant corruption and worse performance of the government made supporters of AGP frustrated. The party which was a byproduct of Assam Accord with the prime objective to free Assam from illegal immigrants from neighboring

countries particularly from Bangladesh (migrated after 25th March, 1971) failed to take any practical step to detect, detain or deport any foreigner during this period.

The congress party who had lost its credential and confidence of the people before and during Assam agitation gradually started took the opportunity of every failure of the regional party government. As a result, AGP suffered a humiliating defeat in Assembly and Lok Sabha election in 1991. Conflict and misunderstanding griped the top leaders of the party which culminated in the split and formation of a new party called NAGP (Natun Asom Gana Parishad)

Another problem that pushed AGP into difficult situation was the emergence of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), as an insurgent group in the state. AGP neither could have controlled nor suppressed the terrorist activities of the ULFA. On the other hand, congress with the election promises for stability and peace came to the power.

In 1996 elections for the both Lok Sabha and Assembly were held simultaneously in the state. AGP as a regional party had go to poll in alliance with national and local level parties including left. With the merger of NAGP and AGP rebuilt its sagging image. After 1996 there was a changing voting pattern in the electoral politics. There was a massive voting turn out in the various parts of Assam for example in Kokrajhar LAC. The Lok Sabha election in 1998 was significant in Assam as militant organization ULFA and National Bodo Democratic Front of Bodoland had given calls to boycott the elections. It had helped congress as the people from different minority pockets supported congress party in large. The mainstream population which was considered being in favour of the regional parties also backed the congress on this occasion.

An important fact, which influenced the state politics, was the ULFA's support to AGP, which had a counter effect and the supporters of AGP left no alternative but to vote for congress. In this election congress won 10 seats with 38.9 per cent of the vote share. Another important development that had taken place during this period in Assam politics was the inroad of BJP as a political force. BJP's emergence created a sense of insecurity among the minority people in the constituencies of Dhubri, Nagaon and Barpeta. The leaders of the minority tried to convince their people that if BJP come to power than it would repeal Illegal Migrants Determination Tribunal (IMDT), and which could be a cause of trouble for

all the immigrant people and doubtful voters. There was a shift of minority voters in favor of congress. Under this political circumstances congress could remain in power for three consecutive terms in 2001, 2006 and 2011. It retained power sometimes on the issue of peace and development, sometimes on the basis of their traditional votes bank of minority and sometimes in the name of good governance and transparency.

Towards the later part of congress regime in its

3rd term the political scenario of the state became very interesting. The responsible factors of these phenomenal changes in the state politics of Assam is being explained in the concluding paragraph of this article.

A general trend of political participation and its consequent effects on electoral politics in Assam as well as Jorhat district is explained in the following tables and analysis:

Table-1.1 : Voter Turnouts in Lok Sabha Election in Assam 1951–2014

Year of Election	Constituency Details			Total seats	Voting Percentage %
	GEN*	SC*	ST*		
1951	N/A*	N/A	N/A	10	47.96
1957	N/A	N/A	N/A	12	46.14
1962	9	1	2	12	52.75
1967	11	1	2	14	54.00
1971	11	1	2	14	50.69
1977	11	1	2	14	54.88
1980	11	1	2	14	44.68
1985	11	1	2	14	77.40
1991	11	1	2	14	75.25
1996	11	1	2	14	61.06
1999	11	1	2	14	71.26
2004	11	1	2	14	69.11
2009	11	1	2	14	69.49
2014	11	1	2	14	80.12

Source: Election Commission of India, statistical report of General Election in Assam, 1951-2014. (URL: http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx.)

Table no 1.1 shows the voting percentage in the Lok Sabha election in the state of Assam 1951 to 2014. In the first general election, the voting percentage was 47.96, which were higher than the national average of 45.67 per cent. Since 1957 Lok Sabha election percentage of voting had been declining the compared to national average, but from 1985 the voter's participation in elections

started increasing and showing much higher percentage compared to national average. It was highest in 2014 Lok Sabha election with 80.12 voting percentage. In this election, the national average was 66.44 percentages. In both Lok Sabha and assembly election in Assam there has been an upsurge in political participation level in terms of voting from 1984-85.

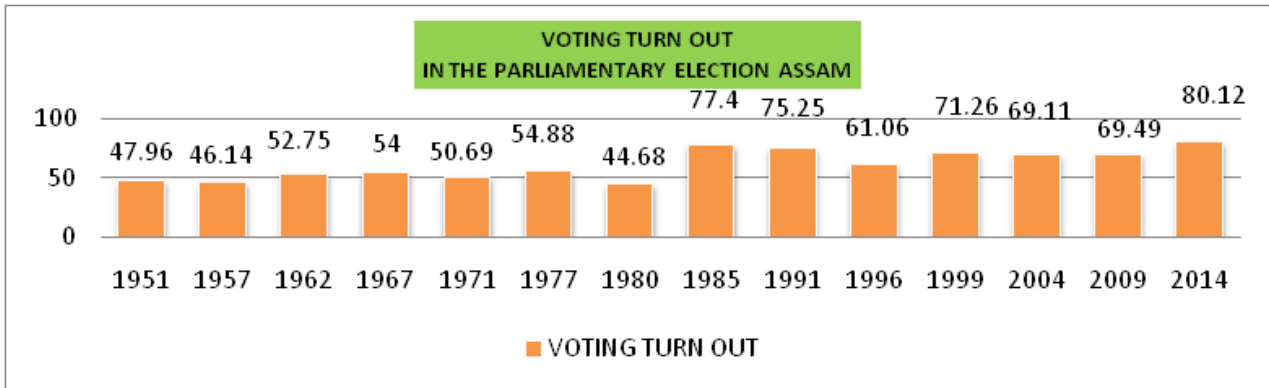


Fig. 1.1 : Electoral participation in parliamentary election Assam 1951-2014

Source: Election Commission of India, statistical report of General Election in Assam, 1951-2014. (URL: http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx.)

Table : 1.2 Voter Turnouts in Assembly Election in Assam 1951–2016

Year of Election	Constituency Details			Total seats	Voting Percentage %
	GEN*	SC*	ST*		
1951	91	N/A	N/A	91	49.42
1957	63	5	26	94	45.44
1962	77	5	25	105	58.39
1967	93	9	24	126	61.83
1972	92	8	14	114	60.85
1978	102	8	16	126	66.86
1983	87	7	15	109	32.74
1985	102	8	16	126	79.02
1991	102	8	16	126	74.67
1996	99	7	16	122	78.92
2001	102	8	16	126	75.05
2006	102	8	16	126	75.77
2011	102	8	16	126	75.92
2016	102	8	16	126	84.49

Table 1.2 the breakup of constituencies in the categories of reserved and unreserved with the total voting percentage in assembly election since 1951 to 2016. It has been seen that the polling percentage in assembly elections of Assam somewhat around 55

to 65 percentage up to 1978. In 1983, it recorded the lowest of 32.74 per cent. But from 1985, the polling percentage has increased up to 75 to 85 percentages. In 1985, the percentage was 79.2 and in 2016, the highest percentage of 84.49 per cent has been record

in the state.

2.1 Trends of electoral politics in Jorhat district

There are five legislative assembly constituencies in Jorhat District out of which only Titabor and Teok

were created in 1951. Among rest of the constituencies Majuli and Jorhat were created in 1962 and Majuli was created in 1967. The trends of political participation of all these five constituencies are shown below.

Table-2.1 : Polling percentages of all constituencies under Jorhat district 1951-2016

Year	Teok	Wining Party	Mariani	Wining Party	Jorhat	Wining Party	Majuli	Wining Party	Titabor	Wining Party
Polling Percentages										
1951	48.37	INC	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	60.08	APP
1957	48.37	INC	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	48.39	INC
1962	48.18	INC	N/A	N/A	43.17	IND	52.67	INC	57.51	INC
1967	55.92	INC	54.3	INC	49.65	INC	57.94	INC	64.72	INC
1972	57	CPI	55.3	INC	52.77	INC	56.09	INC	57.05	INC
1978	62.97	JNP	67.33	INC	72.62	JNP	64.21	JNP	59.79	CPI
1983	2.01	IN	13.76	INC	N/A	INC	1.84	INC	2.49	INC
1985	76.2	IND	69.46	IND	81.84	IND	72.78	IND	70.16	INC
1991	64.66	AGP	69.26	INC	73.98	AGP	60	AGP	66.33	AGP
1996	72.18	AGP	71.02	INC	78.83	AGP	66.78	AGP	70.75	AGP
2001	72.19	INC	69.69	INC	77.83	AGP	63.52	INC	73.7	INC
2006	76.00	INC	73.91	INC	82.37	INC	70.11	INC	70.82	INC
2011	70.92	INC	73.05	INC	79.33	INC	68.17	INC	71.45	INC
2016	80.6	AGP	84.88	INC	85.33	BJP	79.86	BJP	83.4	INC

Source: Election Commission of India, statistical report of Legislative Election in Assam, 1951-2016. (URL: http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx.)

Mariani: It has been notice that since the creation of the Mariani constituency in 1967 there has been continuous growth of electoral participation in different assembly election up to 2016. In 1983, there was unusual decline of participation to 13.76 per cent due to socio economic condition of that time. However, it has observed that this percentage is much higher than the percentage of participation in other LACs of the district in that particular year. It was 2.01 percentages in Teok, 2.49 percentages in Titabor and 1.84 percent in Jorhat.

The results of the election of Mariani LAC have been very significant. Except once the Congress party won all elections. It is observed that most of the voters of this constituency are from Tea Tribe community which is considered as the vote bank of congress party.

Teok: Teok is one of the original constituency is which was created when election have been held since 1951 along with Titabor LAC. In this constituency, also there has been steady growth in participation of voters in election except 1983 election

when the participation comes down to 2.01 percentages. From 1985, this participation had been gradually increasing and highest being 80.60 percentages in 2016 assembly election.

This constituency of Assam has shown a mixed trend of election results. Congress party won this LAC for several times. But AGP is also a dominant party in this constituency followed by CPI, Janata Party and Independent candidates.

Majuli: This constituency for the first time had its elections in 1962 and subsequently it has brought under ST reserved category. Since the first election in the constituency in 1962 there has been gradual increase in voting percentage up to the election in 1972 but from 1978, there has been a massive growth in participation of voters in election with minimum of 72.62 percentage and highest being 85.33-percentage in 2016 assembly election. From the results it is seen that Majuli backed Congress in most of the occasions.

Titabor: The trend of participation of this constituency has been fluctuating since the first assembly election held in 1951. In 1983 like other

constituencies of Assam Titabor also recorded lowest percent of voters turn out which was nearly 2.49 percent under special socio-political circumstances otherwise the lowest percentage being the 48.39 per cent in 1957 assembly election and the highest being 83.40 percent in 2016 assembly election. It is remarkable that this constituency is original constituency of the district where election held since 1951. In this constituency except four elections Congress party won all the elections. TarunGogoi, the last Chief Minister of Assam returned from this constituency for four consecutive terms till 2016 election.

Jorhat: The trends of polling percentage in Jorhat LAC have it with the other LACs of the district. Although during the Assam agitation, election was withdraw in the district but in 1985, more than 80 per cent votes polled in the district, which shows the serious impact of Assam agitation and people's attitude towards the movement. In the last assembly, election 85.33 per cent vote's poll, in Jorhat LAC which change the political battle in the district and people participation in the electoral process. This constituency there a mixed trend of result. In many occasion the people of Jorhat had supported AGP and other non-Congress candidates.

2. Conclusion

Towards the end of third consecutive terms of congress rule in Assam some historical development

took place in the state politics. Firstly, the power tussle between the then Chief Minister Mr. TarunGogoi and one of his powerful cabinet minister Dr. HimantaBiswaSerma which could not be well settle by the congress high command resulted in laterjoin in BJP along with a group of congress MLA and party supporters. This incident gave a very interesting twist to the electoral politics in Assam strengthening BJP hands in power politics.

Secondly, BJP's achievement in making a Rainbow alliance with major regional parties like AGP BPF, ASDC etc., helped the party to fight in the elections with seat sharing and adjustment.

Thirdly, BJP's wining with majority in pursuant of the party's commitment of foreigner free Assam, safe gourds of indigenious communities, special land policy and over and above the all-round development for change made the state politics more spectacular.

Fourthly, there has been an important role of social movements started during the mid-nineties in the state politics to a large extent

During the study of elections of the state of Assam it is observed that the higher participation of people in the electoral process makes the politics more complex, diverse and vibrant. In this way a new political culture has emerged in the state with politics of polarization and adjustment. Under this circumstances the politics of Assam will defiantly be more interesting in the days to come.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Bhalla "Election Mechanism" *Elections in India* 1, (1973).

