



What Went Right For The 'Right' In Assam: Revisiting The Saffron Surge

Mr. Sumit Kr. Sarma (Corresponding Author) Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, H. P. B. Girls' College (Under Dibrugarh University), Assam.

Dr. Tapan Saikia Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, H. P. B. Girls' College, Golaghat (Under Dibrugarh University), Assam.

Abstract: Beginning with 10 seats in 1991 and going down to mere 5 seats in the 2011 assembly elections to forming the Government in 2016 and again winning a second term in 2021, the BJP has come a long way in Assam. A state which for a long time was a Congress bastion with very brief interruptions by the regional party Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1985 and 1996 had never witnessed a consecutive non-congress government before. However, since the Parliamentary election of 2014, BJP has not just challenged but also captured the 'political capital' that the Congress party had built in the state over the years. The series of wins by the party in the state-parliamentary elections, assembly elections along with councils and local body elections have firmly established them as a force to reckon with. The rise of the BJP and its continued political victory has led to a shift in the political dynamics of the state. It has also impacted social alignments leading to new forms of political cleavages in the multi-ethnic landscape of Assam. In the present write-up, we will investigate and analyze a few factors which played a key role in bringing back the party to power in the state for the second term.

Keywords: Elections, BJP, RSS, Assam, Ethnicity.

Introduction:

The rise of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in Assam and the Northeast in general has led to a high level of social and political realignment in the region. A party, which for a long time, was seen as a political organization of the 'Brahmins' and 'Baniyas' could penetrate into a region where the 'Hindutva' ideology has very few followers. Building on the existing ethnic, cultural and religious fissures of the region, the party has slowly evolved in the last three decades. The rise of the saffron brigade in the state must be studied with the party's improving performance all over the country. A good number of causes, ranging from the consolidation of Hindu votes, anti-incumbency towards Congress, ethnic fault lines and promise of 'Parivartan' (Change) were responsible for BJP's rise to power.

Before we look into the probable causes of the emergence let us briefly look into its performance of the party in the elections since 2009. We try to compare the performance of the parties in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections.

Table 1: Lok Sabha Election Result of 2014 in Assam

Parties	Seat Contested (2014)	Seat Won (2014)	% of Votes (2014)	Change in seats (from 2009)	Change in Vote % (from 2009)
Congress	13	3	29.61	-4	-5.27
BJP	13	7	36.51	3	+20.57
AGP	12	0	3.83	-1	-10.77
AIUDF	10	3	14.83	2	-1.27
Others	126	1	12.63	1	-0.16

Source: eci.nic.in

Table 2: Lok Sabha Result of 2019 of Assam

Parties	Seat Contested (2019)	Seat Won (2019)	% of Votes (2019)	Change in seats (from 2014)	Change in Vote % (from 2014)
Congress	14	3	35.44	0	+5.84
BJP	10	9	36.05	+1	-0.45
AGP	03	0	8.23	0	8.23
AIUDF	03	1	7.80	-2	-7
Others	126	1	7.00	1	-5.63

Source: eci.nic.in

The above two tables clearly indicate the gains made by the party in the state during the last two general elections. Table 1.1 clearly indicates the unprecedented rise in the vote share and seats of the party with a thumping +20% increase since 2009 Lok Sabha election. The Congress which was in power most of the time after independence would win only 3 seats out of the 13 seats it contested. The state BJP gained from the prevailing 'Modi Wave' that had swept across the country during the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections. The party would repeat the same performance in terms of vote share during the 2019 election winning 9 seats out of 14 in the state. The BJP, in the meantime, was able to wrestle the power at the state from Congress by forging an alliance with regional parties like AGP and BPF in the 2016 assembly election.

Table 3: Assam Assembly Election 2016 and change since 2011

Parties	Seat Contested (2016)	Seat Won (2016)	% of Votes (2016) in seat contested	Change in seats (from 2011)	Change in Vote % (from 2011)
Congress	122	26	32.06	-52	-7.36
BJP	89	60	42.12	55	+30.03
AGP	24	14	3.83	4	-15.89
AIUDF	741	13	21.34	-5	1.47

Source: eci.nic.in

Table 4: Assam Assembly Election 2021 and change since 2016

Parties	Seat Contested (2021)	Seat Won (2021)	% of Votes (2021) polled in state	Change in seats (from 2016)
Congress	95	29	29.67	3
BJP	93	60	33.21	0
AGP	29	09	7.91	5
AIUDF	20	16	9.29	3

Source: eci.nic.in

Table 5. Performance of BJP in State Assembly Elections since 1991.

Year	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
No. of Seat Contested	48	120	46	125	125	89	93
No. of Seat Won	10	04	08	10	05	60	60
% of vote in seat contested	6.55	10.41	9.35	11.98	11.47	42.	

Source: eci.nic.in

The above tables clearly depict how over the year BJP has not just increased its number of seats in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections but also improved their percentage of vote share in the state. The table also indicate the dwindling performance of the regional party AGP along with Congress who vote share can be seen as stagnant. With the second consecutive win the BJP has been able to not just fight anti-incumbency but also firmly consolidated its vote bank in the state.

Electoral Politics in Assam:

Assam is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state with a plethora of cultural, linguistic and religious identities. According to the census of 2011 the Hindus make up 61.47% of the population while Muslims consist 34.2 %. The STs and SCs constitute 12.5% and 7.14% of the population respectively. Linguistically, 48.38 speak Assamese, making it the largest linguistic group followed the Bengali which is a spoken by around 28.29% of the total population. However, it needs to be noted that the 'Assamese' identity is a fluid and overlapping one consisting of a number of non-tribal and tribal groups. It also includes a good number of colonial migrant communities- Tea Garden Workers, East Bengal Muslims, Gorkhas who have been for a long time recording their mother-tongue as Assamese (Baruah, 1999). Nevertheless, in recent decades, owing to identity-based mobilization, division has erupted amongst different ethnic groups. Today, due to

sharpening differences there have developed 'ethnic constituencies' which play a major role in the politics of the state. Even today there is no universally accepted definition of who is an 'Assamese'. Most political commentators agree to the fact that pre-1971 population can be considered as Assamese. This provides for a 'geographical' identity rather than an ethno-linguistic one.

In the politics of the state, the Indian National Congress has played a dominant role since pre-independence period. The party was represented by caste Assamese middle class who was somehow able to unify the hills and the plains and led them in the freedom struggle. With independence and transfer of the Bengali-dominated Sylhet district to East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) the Assamese speakers became the dominant community with 56.7% speaker in 1951 census. There emerged a sense of linguistic chauvinism in the form of Assam Official Language Act, 1960 which demanded Assamese to be the official language throughout the state (Weiner, 1983). This move, however, faced stern opposition from the Barak Valley dominated by Bengali speakers and other linguistic tribal minorities who saw this move as an attempt to impose Assamese language over them. The Congress could hold on to power by garnering the support of various communities like Muslims, Bengalis, Tea-Tribes, Hinduised plain tribes, Rajbhongis etc in their favour. The period also witnessed the rise of nativist and ethnic politics which began to challenge Congress coalition of diverse groups. In the 70s, the caste Assamese groups tried to make Assamese language the medium of instruction in educational institutes of the state. This move further alienated the linguistic minorities, mostly indigenous tribal groups who begun to assert their rights by forming political groups of their own. The Bodos, largest tribal group in the state, gave birth to Plains' Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and moved away from the Congress over a period of time.

It is quite evident from the above discussion that attempts to culturally and linguistically assimilate diverse communities led to fragmentation of the social fabric. We can state that the events of 60s and 70s led to two significant changes in the state politics. Firstly, the Congress slowly lost its 'catch-all' character giving way to the rise of ethnic parties. Secondly, it paved the way for anti-outsider and anti-foreigner movement in the state which ultimately expressed itself in the form of Assam Agitation in the year 1979. In the case of Assam, it is quite evident that historically constructed social fissures were reignited by the rise of ethnic politics and new-era political activist and leaders who relied on their ethnic 'identity' to gain political mileage in a multi-ethnic society. The Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) formed from Assamese leadership drawn out of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) which headed the 6-year long Assam agitation (1979-1985) challenged the single-party dominance of Congress and came to power in 1985. However, most observers and political commentators miss out the point that the party could get only 33% of popular votes in the election in spite of the fact that it had come to power riding on an emotive issue of Assamese identity. The reason was obvious, in a multi-ethnic state like Assam many religious and linguistic minorities found it difficult to support an ideology that prioritised one politically dominant community. The post agitation period witnessed a rise in ethnic politics with a number of parties rushing in to fill the vacuum created by the break-down of the Congress system. Organizations and

parties like United Minorities Front (UMF) representing the religious minorities, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) representing the Hill Tribes along with All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) began to mark their presence in the politics of the state. All these associations and organizations were disgruntled by the outcome of the agitation and demanded more autonomy to the groups they represented.

After coming to power AGP had to tone down its virulent posture on the anti-immigrant issue down to electoral compulsion. The Bengali-speaking Muslims had supported the party in the election. At the same time, its frequent aggressive and chauvinistic stand often alienated other ethnic minorities of the state (Saikia, 2018). It could never implement the Assam Accord, the promise on which it was founded. The party suffered from factionalism and rampant charges of corruption distorted its image. The leadership proved to be inefficient and immature and failed to 'govern' the state. The 'agitation born' regional party was losing its political capital in the state. The diminishing fortunes of the party demonstrated the fate of aggressive ethno-nationalism in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state with numerous cross-cutting identities.

Agitation, Anxiety, and the rise of Sangh Politics:

Since the pre-independence era an enduring issue in state politics is the issue of illegal migration from neighbouring Bangladesh. The state, since independence, witnessed violence against migrant communities, especially if not exclusively, towards the Bengali Speaking Muslims. The supposedly large-scale migration was seen as an 'foreign invasion' which would swamp the state. The indigenous community feared that they would lose their land, culture and identity too. Cultural nationalism became dominant ideology to counter the influence of the foreigners. The movement began as an intellectual critique of the Indian state which had failed to address the issue of identity along with its failure to provide proper representation of the 'sons of the soil' in economy and governance of the state. The critique of the state found expression as 'anti-outsider' (bahirogota) agitation wherein almost all migrant communities became a target. The character of the movement was more of an 'indigenous' vs 'outsider' one rather than a religious one. However, over a period of time the narrative was transformed from being anti-outsider to anti-Muslim. Herein, the RSS played a key role in changing the narrative of the movement and installed a fear of the 'Miya' other in the Assamese psyche.

The first shakha of RSS in the northeast was opened at Guwahati in the year 1946. During the devastating earthquake of 1950 in Assam, the organization had provided relief to many aggrieved families (Andersen and Damble, 2018). The interest in the region was to counter the influence of Christian missionaries who had already made inroads into the region during the colonial period (Jaffrelot, 2002). Thakur Ram Singh, a pracharak from Punjab, who was given the charge of the state was instrumental in enrolling local notables like the High Court Judge Kamakhayaram Barua and Giridhar Sarma, principal of Arya College into the organisation (Bhattacharya, 2016). Pracharaks from Maharashtra-Sudhakar Deshpande, Madhukar Limaye and Vinayak Limaye worked hard to firmly set the organization in the region by setting up numerous shakas throughout the state (Jaffrelot, 2002).

During the Assam Movement, the Sangh went a long way in inculcating the idea that Hindu migrants were to be treated as 'Sharnarthis' (asylum seekers) while Muslims must be seen as 'Anupraveskaris' (illegal intruders). An attempt to give a legal and constitutional status to such binary is evident in the Citizenship Amendment Act (2016) which has been a matter of fierce and violent debate in the state as well as the nation. In the hey days of the Assam movement, the RSS was not very comfortable with the overtly secular outlook of the movement leaders. Attacks on Hindu Bengalis and other non-Muslim communities faced flank from top RSS leadership (Kaushik, 2007). The attack at Nellie, 70 kms east of Guwahati, where more than 2000 Muslim peasants were massacred was seen by many as a result of the nefarious RSS propaganda which talked about Hindus becoming minority in the state (Kimura, 2011; Kaushik, 2007).

RSS entrenchment into the movement as well as AASU, which was the harbinger of the agitation is evident from the fact that a number of AASU leaders belonging to minority community walked out of the organisation when their demand to sever links with the organization was given deaf ears. There were allegations that top leaders like Brighu Phukan and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta had close ties with RSS members like Kumud Narayan Sarma, a faculty of Law College, Gauhati University (Bhattacharya, 2016). Most AASU leadership were drawn from the same institute. Thus, the Assam Movement provided the much-required fuel to the growth of a sectarian politics in the state which was waited for long by RSS. During the 80s, Assam witnessed a rapid increase in the number of shakhas throughout the state (Sethi and Subhrashtha, 2017).

In recent years, attempts have been made to bring about a unity of the Hindutva element with the local religious and cultural symbols of the Assamese society. By highlighting the glory of ancient Kamrupa and Pragjyotishpura during ancient time, ranging from Mahabharata period, the RSS is showing how the umbilical cord of the region is linked with 'Bharat Mata'. The sangh has also attempted to appropriate Srimanata Sankardeva, a sixteenth century vaishnavite socio-religious reformer who tried to build a monistic sect open for all people including the outcaste (Saikia, 2018). Sankardeva established 'Sattras' as a centre for social and religious reforms. He denounced the caste hierarchy, rigid rituals requiring priest along with idol worship which is an inherent character of the Hindu-fold. The RSS, today, has numerous schools all over the state bearing the name 'Sankardev Sishu Niketan' to make the organization look more 'local'. The Sangh Parivar has made inroads into the Shastras too. Controversy erupted in 2016 when few Sattradhikars (Heads of Sattras) came out in open support of BJP just before the elections, which was against the tradition of the politically neutral Shattras (Kalita, 2018). Many Sattradhikars have begun attending Hindu Sammelans organised by VHP outside the state (Bhattacharya, 2016). The inclination towards RSS by the Shattras should be read in the light of growing anxiety of illegal migration and encroachment of Shastra lands by the 'infiltrators' (sic).

In the last 50 years RSS has worked with extremely high level of dedication and sincerity to make its ideology of Hindu- nationalist a factor in Assam politics. To a great extent it has successfully build a grand narrative of 'Hindu Unity' cutting across caste, class and ethnic cleavages in a multi-ethnic state like Assam. The RSS, thus, prepared the

ideological ground for the BJP to not just make in-road into the state but also form government in 2016 and again in 2021.

The rise to power: BJP and the electoral politics in Assam

Modi Wave and Hindu Consolidation- The 2014 Lok Sabha Election and beyond

The Lok Sabha election of 2014 proved to a turning point for the BJP's fortune in the state. Riding high on anti-incumbency against and centre accompanied by weak central leadership of Congress, it had enough scope to capitalise. The state unit of BJP took the issue of illegal migration and promised 'deportation' of all illegal migrants once BJP comes to power. The issue has remained an emotive one since independence with almost all parties promising something or other. During this election, BJP had made a conscious decision to go alone since the alliance with AGP in the last election had cost them the votes of Bengali Hindus in the Barak Valley (The Hindu, 2009). Due to a history of linguistic struggle, the Bengalis Hindus have favoured and voted for BJP to counter the Assamese votes for AGP. However, in 2014 there was a clear consolidation of Hindu votes, both Assamese and Bengali Hindu voted for BJP which was clear and consistent on illegal (Muslim) migrants from Bangladesh. Between 2011 and 2014, a post poll survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti shows almost 53% increase in the support to BJP by Assamese Hindus (Table 6).

Table 6: Consolidation of Assamese Hindu Vote (%)

	2011	2014	2016
Congress	38	19	21
BJP	10	63	43
BJP-AGP-BPF	42	73	67

Source: Loksniti-CSDS Post Poll Survey in Assam (Sardesai and Sharma, 2016).

The above table clearly shift of Assamese Hindu voters towards BJP in 2014 which combined with the Hindu Bengali votes proved to a winning combination. Since then, BJP has been able to retain the Hindu constituency and perform well in all elections since 2014. In the Hindu Assamese dominated seats of upper Assam BJP has performed extremely well both in 2016 and 2021 Assembly elections.

Table 7: Performance in Hindu Assamese dominated upper Assam (Total: 33 seats)

	2011	2016	2021
Congress	30	07	05
BJP-AGP	03 (2 BJP, 01 AGP)	25 (19 BJP, 6 AGP)	28 (23 BJP, 5 AGP)

Source: www.eic.nin.in

There is a consistent improvement in the performance of BJP amongst the Hindu dominated seats of upper Assam. In the Barak Valley, BJP has made its presence quite visible since early 90s. In 1991 Assembly election BJP won 9 seats out of 10 Hindu-Bengali dominated seats in the Barak valley. In the Lok Sabha Election of 2019, it won all the three Lok Sabha seats in the valley retaining its hold over the Hindu voters.

Table 8: Consolidation of Bengali Hindu Votes (%).

	2011	2014	2016
Congress	31	27	28
BJP	42	62	54
BJP-AGP-BPF	51	68	65

Source: Loksniti-CSDS Post Poll Survey in Assam (Sardesai and Sharma, 2016).

The Hindu Bengalis for long have supported BJP due to several factors. Firstly, the experience of Assam agitation, where Bengali speakers were subjected to harassment and hatred, at times violence too, found little comfort in Congress. Secondly, the newly formed regional party, AGP, which came to power riding the emotional wave of Assamese cultural nationalism made no difference between ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ Bengali speakers. The Hindu Bengalis feared being hunted and treated as Bangladeshis. Since the days of language movement in 60s there had developed a serious crack in the Assamese – Bengali relationship. Thirdly, BJP’s and RSS commitment to bring amendment in the Citizenship Act of 1955 to provide citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. A large number of Hindu Bengalis (but not all) would benefit from this amendment. The Sangh Parivaar has always viewed the Hindu Bengalis in Assam and ‘Sarnarthis’ (asylum seekers) and not ‘Anuprabekhhkaris’ (intruders). Thus, Hindu Bengalis all over the state and not just Barak Valley have supported BJP in recent elections.

Another important cause of religious polarization in the state in the rise of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) led by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, a perfume baron who claims to represent the interest of all minorities in the state. The rise of AIUDF in the political scene of the state have penetrated the Muslim constituencies which were earlier Congress strongholds. The minority voters form a majority in 11 districts of the state (Census, 2011) along with being a deciding factor in almost 40 assembly seats of Barak, Lower and Middle Assam (Mahanta, 2014). The rise of AIUDF’s popularity in Muslim-majority, especially amongst the Bengali Muslims is seen as a threat to ‘Assamese’ culture by many. This has led to a split in the Muslim vote- Bengali Muslim vote to AIUDF and Assamese Muslim (indigenous Muslims) to Congress or AGP (Table 9). It needs to be noted that most indigenous communities in Assam do not make distinction between ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ infiltrator from Bangladesh. The BJP, however, seems to have gained from the rise of AIUDF as it has provided with an opportunity to spread a propaganda of ‘Muslim’ take-over of the state.

Table 9: Muslim Vote in Assam (%)

	2011	2014	2016
Assamese Muslim			
Congress	59	69	65
AIUDF	15	17	12
BJP-AGP-BPF	14	04	07
Bengali Muslim			
Congress	32	36	38
AIUDF	54	45	39
BJP-AGP-BPF	07	04	05

Source: Loksniti-CSDS Post Poll Survey in Assam (Sardesai and Sharma, 2016).

During the Assembly election of 2016, BJP rode on the slogan of saving 'Jati, Mati, Bheti' (Nation, Land and Home) from 'foreign invasion' (read Muslim invasion). The election was described as 'Last Battle of Sariaghat', a battle between the Ahom commander Lachit Borphukan and the Mughal army chief Ram Singh in the year 1671. The Ahom army registered a decisive victory over the Mughals and pushed them back. The BJP used the symbol of 'Sariaghat' an emotive battle to win over the Assamese heart and mind. The Muslim population of the state was described as 'Neo-Mughals' who were trying to 'invade' the state politically. The party projected itself as the saviour of the Assamese nation. A virulent campaign and tactical alliance with regional parties like AGP and BPF brought benefiting results to BJP. It won 60 seats out of the 89 it contested with 29.51 percent of the total vote share in the state and 42.59 percent of vote in the seat it contested. Along with its alliance partners it won a total of 86 seats out of 126 seats in the state assembly. The Congress witnessed a dramatic fall with only 26 seats out of 122 it contested. For BJP which had to its credit only 37 seats since 1991 it was a remarkable win by any standard.

Two remarkable aspect of the elections needs to be highlighted here. Firstly, BJP projected itself as a viable regional alternative to Congress which held reins of power in the state uninterrupted since 2001. It would mobilize public opinion to its support by taking on the issue of rampant corruption and development without having to rely on hard-line Hindutva stand on beef-eating, love-jihad or cow-vigilantism. It was able to reignite the issue of illegal migration by talking about 'Jati-Mati-Bheti' of the Assamese nation. Secondly, BJP was able to attract prominent defectors from both Congress and AGP and build on a non-RSS leadership who had substantial clout over the local population. The Chief Ministerial candidate, Sarbananda Sonowal, a schedule tribe from upper Assam, was earlier in AGP. Another prominent figure was Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, who was second in command after the Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi had joined BJP and played a key role in bringing many other ex-Congressman into the BJP fold. The dwindling influence of AGP as an effective regional player provided ample scope to BJP to present itself as a viable regional alternative.

Assam and many 'Assamese': BJP's Social Engineering:

Apart from consolidating Hindu votes via virulent religious polarization, the BJP has also built up a solid support base amongst the various linguistic and cultural minorities of the state. Anyone who is aware of the multi-cultural identity of the state is familiar with the fact that 'Assamese' is not a homogenous identity. It is composed of numerous distinct groups-culturally, linguistically, and religiously. The identity encompasses both pre-colonial indigenous groups as well as colonial migrant communities. The relation between and amongst these groups has not been always very cordial. The tribal communities have many a times accused the non-tribal caste Assamese as being dominant and discriminatory. The migrants' communities have long been seen as a threat to 'Assamese' identity and at times they have been a target of chauvinist nationalism. Since the Assam Agitation a number of ethnic groups have formed political groups and have begun to assert their independent identity. The largest tribal group of Assam- The Bodos have long been demanding autonomy from the state of Assam. Other major tribes like Karbi and Dimasas have their own autonomous councils. Amongst the migrant groups, apart from Bengali- speaking Hindus and Muslims, the Tea-Tribes and the Gorkhas constitute a sizeable part of the population of the state and can decide the fate of a party in the electoral politics where number matters the most.

The BJP has been successful in breaking the umbrella coalition of the Congress by bringing into its fold various linguistic minorities. Most of these communities find it comfortable to stick to a larger 'Hindu' identity which provides them with a sense of security in a region where 'identity' can decide one's life chances. The BJP has been able to draw the support of Tea-Tribes who form a sizeable voter in almost all seats of upper Assam. It has tactical alliance with the Mishings, Karbi, Dimasas, Rabhas, Tiwas and Bodo groups who are given preference during ticket as well as portfolio distribution. The table below depicts how BJP's social engineering paved the way to victory during the recently held 2021 assembly election.

It should be kept in mind that during the recent election, BJP was not just facing a strong opposition which was an alliance of 8 political parties led by Congress, but also a civil society which was vehemently opposed to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. Beginning from December, 2019 there were protests all over the state against the bill which intended to settle non-Muslim refugees in India. The Assamese society feared that such an act will encourage more migration into the state making Assamese a minority in their own state. It was seen as fundamentally against the spirit of the Assam Accord which did not make religious distinction amongst illegal migrants. To oppose the CAA and defeat BJP and its pan-Hindutva agenda two new regional parties were formed. The Congress alliance too opposed the new act calling it a dictatorial move. It was expected that the issue of CAA would have serious implications for the BJP and could cost it severely. However, the result of the suggest that the issue could hardly make any impact in the elections.

The BJP could once again effectively polarise the state on religious lines by suggesting that 'Maulana' Ajmal would be the next Chief Minister if the Congress comes to power in the state. This was not acceptable to most Hindu voters (if not all) who saw in Ajmal a 'foreign intruder'. BJP once again turned election into a 'Shabyatar Jug' (Battle of

Cultures) (read Hindu vs Muslim) where the Congress led ‘Mahajhut’ (grand alliance) was projected as the invading ‘Mughal’ army. The BJP alliance won almost all Hindu-dominated seats (except four in upper Assam) in the state. Religious polarisation combined with effective social engineering and seat sharing arrangements with regional partners proved to be a successful strategy.

Table 10: Distribution of Dominant Linguistic Communities and seats won by NDA, UPA and Others in 2021 Assembly election.

Name of the District	Dominant Communities	Total Seats	Seat won
Barpeta, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, South Salmara, Goalpara	East Bengal Origin Muslims, Koch Rajbhongis (Bongaigaon seat)	21	NDA- 01, UPA- 19 (Congress- 13, AIUDF- 07)
Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksha, Udalguri	Bodos, Koch Rajbhongsis, Bengali Hindus & Gorkhas	11	NDA- 0, UPA- 03
Nalbari, Bajali, Kamrup (R), Kamrup (Metro), Darrang	Assamese Hindus (Koch Rajbhongsis, Brahmins, Kalitas) & Bengali Muslims	19	NDA- 12, UPA- 07
Morigaon, Nagoan, Hojai	Assamese Hindus, Bengali Hindus and Muslims	14	NDA-07, UPA- 07
Sonitpur, Biswanath, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji.	Assamese Hindus, Gorkhas, Mishings, Bodos	14	NDA- 13, UPA-01
Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Majuli, Golaghat.	Assamese Hindus (Ahoms, Chutiyas, Moran, Motaks) Tea-Tribes, Gorkhas	28	NDA-23, UPA- 4, IND-01
East Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong& Dima Hasao	Karbi and Dimasa Tribes	05	NDA-05, UPA-0
Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi	Bengali Hindus and Muslims	15	NDA-06. UPA-09

	Total	126	NDA- 75, UPA-50, IND-01
--	-------	-----	-------------------------

Conclusion:

The present paper is an attempt to analyze the rise and expansion of BJP in the long-term political, social and cultural scene of Assam. The rise of BJP brought to an end to the three decade of Congress dominance over the state. The Congress had managed to create and retain an umbrella coalition of various ethnic and linguistic communities till the late 70s. The single party dominance was challenged by the rise of ethnic-linguistic politics and formations of a number of ethno-linguistic political formations. This led to a fracturing in the support base of the Congress. The language movement led by middle class Assamese elite paved the way for ethnic fragmentation of the state. Beginning with late 70s, the state witnessed a virulent and violent protest against government apathy towards the issue of illegal migrants. A new regional political formation emerged in the scene, under the guidance of All Assam students' Union (AASU). The Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), evolving from an emotional movement, captured power twice in the state. During the same period, the RSS worked silently to build up an atmosphere where it's ideology would find supporters. It saw an opportunity in the issue of 'illegal migrants' and gave it a religious color of Hindus vs Muslims. With its tactical strategy of combining Hindutva ideology with local religious and cultural symbol, the RSS could easily penetrate into the imagination of the local Hindu population as a voluntary organization.

Building on the solid foundation laid by RSS and riding on the Modi wave, the party performed extremely well in the Lok Sabha elections of 2015 winning 07 out of 13 seats it contested in the state. The party gained from consolidation of Hindu votes irrespective of ethnic cleavages that had always existed in the multi-cultural state like Assam. The strategy of religious polarization by branding Muslims as 'intruders' who would take over the state paid benefiting dividends to the party. It is also important to note that, unlike the Sangh's claim of 'silent invasion' by illegal Muslim migrants, the recent election have clearly demonstrated that minority votes can influence only 30-32 assembly seats.

References:

- Andersen, W. K., & Damle, S. (2018). *RSS: A view to the inside*. Penguin Random House India.
- Baruah, S. (1999). *India against itself: Assam and politics of nationality*. Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharjee, M. (2016). Tracing the emergence and consolidation of Hindutva in Assam. *Economic & Political Weekly*, LI(16), 80–87.
- Jaffrelot, C. (2002). A specific party-building strategy: The Jana Sangha and the RSS network.
- In Z. Hasan (Ed.), *Parties and party politics in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Kalita, K. (2018, 22 April). *Asom Sattrā Mahasabha expels official for proposal on citizenship*

for immigrants. The Times of India.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/asom-sattra-mahasabha-expels-official-for-proposal-on-citizenship-for-immigrants/articleshow/63866127.cms>

Kaushal, D. (2007). RSS resolves: 1950–2007. Suruchi Prakashan.

Kimura, M. (2011). Agency of rioters: A Study of decision-making in the Nellie Massacre Assam 1983. In S. Baruah (Ed.), Beyond counter-insurgency – Breaking the impasse in Northeast India. Oxford University Press

Saikia, B. (2018). An introduction to the Sattrra culture of Assam: Belief, change in tradition

and current entanglement. Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics, 12(2), 2.

Sethi, R., & Shubhrastha. (2017). The last battle of Saraighat. Penguin.

Weiner, M. (1983). The political demography of Assam's anti-immigrant movement. Population and Development Review, 9(2), 279–292.