Chapter 5

The Magic of Elections: Polls, Performance and Citizenship

The relation between good governance and democracy is inseparable. Regular elections ensure sustenance of both of them. This chapter focuses attention on the electoral processes in Assam, which have strong bearing on the main arguments of this thesis. The chapter is a product of ethnographic study of three elections in Sonitpur District. I have studied the national Parliamentary Lok Sabha Elections conducted in 2009, State Legislative Assembly Elections, 2011 and local Panchayati Raj elections in 2013. These election studies are conducted to understand the relationship of elections to the larger social processes and the governance system. These election studies have helped in generating data to discuss the participation level of various groups of people along with their main concerns and aspirations.

The chapter tries to link the dynamics of the electoral politics to the social structure of the area where there exists a sizeable number of migrant communities, with varied historical and ethnic background. In Assam, electioneering is crucial as in the charged environment of presence of so called ‘illegal-immigrants’ the electoral participation among the latter becomes a form of ratification of citizenship. This chapter further analyses the entire process of elections as a ritual and performance. It also explores the perceptions and predicaments of poor, marginalized people who are eager to maintain their social and political visibility at the time of elections.

In India and elsewhere, elections have usually been studied by political scientists, psephologists, journalists and pollsters. But, of late, sociologists and anthropologists have started taking interest in studying the process of elections. Election study in India has become a fascinating area of inquiry. But any endeavour to study and understand the politics, choice and the dynamics of electoral process in contemporary India is a challenging task. The regular elections to various Parliamentary, Assembly and Panchayati
Raj bodies have become part and parcel of the people’s lives though they usually come only once in five years’ time. They give us insight into different aspects of the political and social stances as well as consciousness of the voters about contemporary socio-economic issues. The study becomes more fascinating in multicultural and multiethnic scenarios such as northeastern India.

In a country of India’s size, diversity is reflected in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture, caste and so forth. The political behaviour which is reflected in the electoral results undoubtedly affects the entire population and also highlights other political issues confronted by the contemporary society. Under such circumstances, the political activities of the voters and of the political parties assume specific significance given the prevailing complex nature of politics. These issues are particularly important in a state like Assam which is home to diverse ethnic communities. The question of the identity of different ethnic communities is linked with fear of submergence within dominant society. Many ethnic and linguistic–religious groups have diverse demands of autonomy, self-governance, and development, as also indulgence in secessionism. As immigration, encroachment and displacement are vibrant issues in Assam, the agendas of the political parties and behaviour of the voters reflect their attitudes towards such problems. Hence a close examination of the electoral processes helps examine the diverse political orientations of different communities.

**Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency (TPC)**


The politics of Assam as mentioned above is somewhat unique compared to other parts of India because of the changing demographic situation due to in-migration of people from different parts of India and allegedly from countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. People belonging to several communities live side by side in this big constituency. Some of the
major communities inhabiting the area are the Assamese, Nepalis, Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus, tea garden community, Bodos and others. Inter-ethnic rivalry and ethno-nationalist emotions shape the mood of the electorates of Assam. What is seen is that immigrant communities have become dominant factors in the elections in the last two decades. Rise of religious temper and caste-based politics are part of charged scenario. This chapter attempts to understand this emerging socio-political scenario in the context of elections in Assam. The details of community-wise voters in the Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency are given in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1 - Approximate Community-wise break-up of voters in Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial Number</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>No. of voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boro</td>
<td>1,90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tea Community</td>
<td>2, 36000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>1,70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Minority(Muslim)</td>
<td>1,20000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>1,20000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Assamese &amp; Others</td>
<td>3,69,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total No. of voters</td>
<td>12,05, 518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Parliamentary Elections**

This fieldwork was conducted in the Tezpur Parliamentary constituency of Sonitpur District during the fifteenth general election to the Lok Sabha in 2009. The election was held in Assam in two phases. The first phase of the election was held on 16 April 2009 in three constituencies. The first was Diphu which covers the two autonomous hill districts of
central Assam. The other two constituencies are from the Barak valley of south Assam namely, Karimganj and Silchar. The second phase of the election was held on 23 April 2009 in the remaining eleven constituencies of the state.

Right after the declaration of the election date by the Election Commission of India, various political parties started making preparations for the election. They called upon their workers and started holding meetings and making strategies for the election. The village, Block and mandal level meetings were held. The sitting members of all the legislative Assembly Constituencies started detailed planning for the election. MLAs started holding meetings at various levels in their constituencies and tried to mobilize people to cast their valuable votes in favour of their party’s candidate. With the declaration of the election date there were preparations for filing of nominations and till the last date of the nominations altogether fifteen persons filed their nominations as candidates for the ensuing election.

The candidate from All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) was the centre of attraction. The party projected Lakshmi Orang, who was a victim of the Beltola incident. It was a sentimental issue for the tea garden community members. In the violence, Ms. Orang was stripped in broad daylight which was highlighted by both the regional and national media. However, her nomination paper for the Lok Sabha election was cancelled due to the controversy about her age. The AIUDF leaders later projected her father, Deba Orang as their candidate. It is widely perceived that the AIUDF has been formed to protect the interests of the immigrant Muslim minorities. As the constituency is dominated by the tea garden community, the AIUDF projected a candidate from this population to accumulate more votes from the tea garden community. The party thought that with the votes of Muslims and the tea garden community, they would be able to win the seat. A similar tendency was visible in case of the AGP. Traditionally, Congress has been winning TPC seat for a maximum number of times. The influence of the Congress among the minorities, the tea garden community and also among others had helped them to win the seat. The

---

1 On 24 November 2007, at Beltola area in the city of Guwahati, the people from the tea tribe community under the leadership of AASAA (All Adivasi Students Association of Assam) were on a mass rally in support of the demand for the Scheduled Tribe status to the tea tribe. There was a clash between the protesters and some local residents. In the violence that followed, Lakshmi Orang was stripped of her clothes. This incident was widely condemned and Lakshmi was shot into prominence.
sitting MP of the constituency also belonged to the Congress. The rest of the candidates did not have a significant grip in the constituency. Even the names of their parties or names of the candidates were not known to the voters.

**Campaigning and Canvassing**

It is widely agreed that one of the most fascinating periods in the unfolding of Indian democracy is the campaigning period. Since last one decade there have been many new restrictions on how to campaign. Murals and wall paintings used to be the main element of any election campaign. But it got reduced drastically after Election Commission put restrictions on it. Party workers and loyal supporters of particular political parties come out openly during the time of elections. Various promotional materials like stickers, posters, key rings, umbrella and caps are generally distributed carrying the party symbol and candidate’s name.

In Assam, street plays and folk performances like Bhaona and Baul are performed before the day of polling to attract voters. I observed that the performers during their performance appeal the audience to vote for the party from whom they are sponsored to organize the play. Vehicles are decorated with life size cutouts of party leaders and contestants. There are popular political songs composed especially for elections by different parties. AIUDF had maximum number of prerecorded songs accusing Congress and BJP of misrule while Congress had songs on how it has address poor people’s problem in India and particularly in Assam. Due to the mass use of mobile phones, political parties have found another innovative way to convince their voters. They send bulk text messages to appeal to voters to support them. But the best way of campaigning, feel party workers, is individual one to one contact with voters which has a positive impact and chances are that people would get convinced through this method. These are the few ways how different political parties publicize their candidates.

The campaigning for elections by different candidates started with a bang. Meetings, gatherings and rallies were organized by various political parties and candidates in different corners of the constituency. But the most important thing to note here is that people’s participation in the election process was low as compared to earlier elections. When this
question regarding the nature of people’s participation was asked they gave different answers. Many people argued that in the earlier elections many people took active part but the candidate after being elected did not work for the development of the people. The greatest beneficiary was the middleman (Dalal) but not the common people. Another reason that people cited was the festive season of Bihu which came in the same period. So due to these factors, people’s participation was found to be low.

All the candidates and the leaders of the respective parties tried their level best to organize meetings at Panchayat and village levels but they miserably failed to attract general voters. In a Panchayat level meeting organized by the MP of the constituency at Batiamari under Batiamari Gaon Panchayat, it was observed that the total number of people in the convoy of the MP was much more than the audience present in the meeting. Other political parties faced similar problem in Behali constituency. The total number of participants in the village or Panchayat meetings was not more than 100-120 which proved clearly that enthusiasm among the general voters for the election was almost invisible. At the same time, the Election Commission had imposed restrictions on the use of wall painting, poster pasting and banners as a part of the election campaign. It became a matter of disappointment for some people involved in the campaigning process. Painters were dissatisfied as they were deprived of their work. Another section of people who were interested in such type of work were of the view that the prevailing environment does not indicate that elections are approaching. In earlier elections, promotional materials like party flag, umbrellas were distributed while this time such things were almost absent.

Another reason behind the lower level of participation of people in the election process in this area could be the fact that the incumbent MLA of the Behali Legislative Constituency is from the BJP but the BJP candidate was not contesting from this seat. So, workers of the BJP and their supporters showed negligible interest in these elections. Since last one decade people are not impressed with AGP which has partnered with BJP in Assam. People in this locality thought that the AGP could not do much work as it is not a national party. People seem to prefer national parties to regional parties here. They thought that the national parties could get support from the Centre and bring the welfare to the region.
The AGP and BJP, who entered into an electoral alliance, organized one big joint public meeting in Ketla, located under the Behali Legislative Constituency area on 18th April. In this meeting some senior leaders of both the parties, namely Rajnath Singh, Bijoya Chakrabarty and Chandra Mohan Patowary addressed a huge gathering and the President of the BJP, Rajnath Singh pledged to supply rice at two rupees per kilogram to people belonging to the BPL category. He said that due to bhrastachar (corruption) by the Congress government, prices of all essential commodities had increased while the value of the common people had declined. In this meeting about 4000-5000 people assembled not only from Behali but also from Sootea, Gohpur, Balipara and Jamuguri regions. The proportion of male and female attending the meeting was almost equal. Even Children below the age 18 joined the gathering to eat and make merry with the elders.

A large number of people from some interior villages came only to see the helicopters used by the leaders. As the party had provided vehicles, a section of people came there without having much interest in the meeting. Another section joined the meeting as the leaders of their locality forced them to join and pledged to provide drinking water facility, old age pension, transport facility etc. in return. On the other hand, some people came there to watch the ‘real’ scene of the meeting, that is, how the senior leaders of the party appealed to the gathering, whether they attacked the ruling government, and so on. However, rather than listening to the speeches of the high profile leaders people kept themselves busy in discussing about their own problems, family matters and were waiting eagerly for the closing ceremony of the meeting. It is very interesting to mention here that a large group of young boys collected money by performing husari² in their villages and used that for reserving a bus to join the meeting. Their purpose behind attending the meeting was that some leaders of the area had spread the news that Hema Malini, the famous Hindi film actress, will address the meeting. Such types of rumours were not new in the area. During the last legislative Assembly election the BJP leaders spread the same rumour to attract and convince a section of people to join the election meeting.

² The practice of performing Bihu dance and singing Bihu songs by visiting different households during the Rongali Bihu.
On the contrary, instead of organizing such big public meetings the CPI (ML) tried to mobilize their voters by organizing small and street corner meetings where attendance was very low. Besides local village and Panchayat level meetings an attempt was also made to watch the campaigning in the urban centres. Tezpur city was the locale chosen for this purpose. As elections approached, temporary election offices were set-up by various political parties. Inside Tezpur city, the number of election offices of the Congress was found to be much more than any other party. In these election offices people came in the evening and discussed about the happenings in and around during the whole day. During the daytime the offices remained vacant. Sometimes even the office-in-charge could not be found.

In Tezpur city the people were found to be busy with the Bihu festival but in the outskirts of the city some activities were found in connection with the election campaign. When the candidates came to hold meetings peoples participation was found to be very low. In four of the meetings of the Congress and the AGP-BJP which were held in the city that we attended, it was found that the number of people participating in these meetings was hardly 30 to 40. Sometimes, passersby would stop for some time and listen to the lectures for some time and leave. But in the outskirts of the city the people’s participation was found to be more as compared to the city. In a meeting of the Congress which was held at Panchmille some eight km away from Tezpur, and close to the Napam Panchayat, it was found that around 200 people attended the meetings.

Since the Election Commissioner had put some restrictions on wall and poster campaigning, in this election campaigning there was not much use of posters and banners. Due to these restrictions, though the election was approaching, the atmosphere in various political parties was not found to be equal to previous elections.

There was no unanimity among the different political parties about the apathy of voters and the style of campaigning in these elections. The opinion varied about the response to the door to door campaign. The Congress party leaders and the leaders of the CPI (ML) were of the opinion that door-to-door campaign was not possible in Parliamentary election as it covers quite a huge area. On the day before polling, three political parties, namely, the Congress, the AGP-BJP combine, and the CPI (ML) had distributed letters in every
household requesting voter to cast their valuable votes in favour of respective parties. Unfortunately voters never go through the letters to know the content but use it to collect the serial number of the voters list.

Despite the ruling of moral code of conduct, political parties indulge in ‘money for vote’ drive in a surreptitious manner. It is a very common phenomenon. Here, it will be appropriate to cite one example to prove the point. In a village level public meeting of the Congress party, people of that village called Rangsali demanded a sum of Rs. 4000 from M.K. Subba, the sitting Congress MP, for a cultural programme to be organized on the occasion of Rongali Bihu. Usually Subba does not refuse to donate cash to satisfy voters. Though the amount demanded by the people was not huge for Subba, he refused to donate perhaps because of the imposition of the strict rule by the Election Commission. People became very dissatisfied with his refusal and the MP faced an unexpected situation. A small group of people started throwing stones at him to take revenge. Not only the people of village Rangsali but members of different Bihu Committees usually take the campaigning season of election as a golden opportunity to collect money from different political parties to organize cultural nights.

Out of the fifteen candidates, it was found that Moni Kumar Subba of the Congress, Joseph Toppo from the AGP-BJP alliance, Deba Orang from the AIUDF and Jiten Sundi from the CPI(M) were popular among the people. The Congress candidate M.K. Subba was the MP and Joseph Toppo was the MLA from Dhekiajuli. Toppo was also a Minister in the AGP government in the State and was known to the people as such. Deba Orang, the AIUDF candidate was famous among the people because of his daughter Lakshmi Orang who was involved in the incident of Beltola violence of November 2007. The CPI (M) candidate Jiten Sundi who is an advocate was popular among the Tea garden community due to his legal profession. But the rest of the candidates were not known among the people. Many people had heard their names for the first time in the course of the campaign.

Different people were interviewed on the basis of age and sex, but more than 95% of the people did not know how many candidates were contesting from the Tezpur constituency. When we told them that fifteen candidates were contesting for the Tezpur seat, they were surprised and were hearing most names for the first time. They had not heard the names of
different parties like Bharat Vikash Morcha, National People Party, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, etc. All admitted that Cong (I) and AGP are the dominating parties of Assam and in the Tezpur seat either Moni Kumar Subba or Joseph Tippo will win.

People generally do not want to disclose their political ideology or stand. All held that they did not support any political party. Candidate is more important than the party. In the meantime I found some young people who candidly expressed their political stand and also told whom they would vote for. One such youth held that Congress could give the best government. He mentioned different plans and programs taken up by the Congress government such as NREGA, Kalpataru, Indira Awas Yojna, etc., and said that he would therefore vote only for Congress. His words were heard by another youth. He said that as he was able to get a house under the Indira Awas Yojna, so he supports Congress (I). Party campaigning or mobilization is not important for them. If no party campaigned, they would still vote. A major section of the interviewed people was frustrated with the political scenario, political culture, etc. and the unexpected hike of essential commodities of daily use like rice, oil, vegetables, dal, etc.

Most of the respondents held that as a citizen of a democratic state it is their primary right, hence they had come for voting. Some claimed that election is like a festival that comes every five years. They have no choice but to select one. The role of the common population becomes important during the time of elections. Once elections are over, no one cares for them. The long experience of their life proves this as they have voted in different elections a number of times but no measurable change has taken place in any aspect of their life. People were not happy with the candidates from different political parties. Though workers from different political parties claimed that the candidate of the respective party is good and pro-people, responses of the common voters was different. They held that all candidates were the same. Their option was to choose not the best candidate among the good rather the least bad one from among the worst. On the other hand, most of the married women were instructed by their husbands and sons regarding whom to cast their vote for. But the educated unmarried women responded that they would cast their vote as per their own wish.
Most of the people interviewed did not participate in the rallies organized by different political parties except the party workers. Some people, however, attended the meetings held in their village but they did not take any interest in them. Most of the people left the meeting before it ended. Almost all voters, including the party workers, did not know clearly how many candidates were contesting in the election. Some of them knew that seven candidates were contesting but were not able to tell the names and their party affiliation. Common voters knew only the candidates of AGP, BJP and Congress while some knew about the Bodoland People’s Front (BPF) candidate too.

Workers of different political parties approach every household requesting the entire family to cast their votes in favour of the respective candidate. People were called for meetings, rallies as well as individual letters were delivered to each household as mentioned earlier. The vision document, agenda, manifesto, etc of all the political parties were quite catchy. All of them talked about development, employment generation, and special programmes for the poor and so forth. Almost all voters felt that these agenda and manifesto are nothing but means to influence the voters. Some of them opined that in reality these will not be fulfilled. Once election is over they will forget everything and then come again after five years. The respondents felt that apart from the promises in pen and paper, special measures should be taken by the representatives for poor people like them as well as for the peasant society. At least rice should be available at cheaper rates. Free seeds, fertilizer should be provided to the farmers. For more production irrigation should be improved. The young generation however primarily talked about opening up of more job opportunities in the public sector. Moreover, almost all people were very much concerned about the price hike of daily essential commodities which gave the common population immense trouble in bearing the heavy expenditure. They felt that whoever wins or forms the government should tackle the issue of price hike.
On the Day of Polling

Parliamentary Election

Panchmile Higher Secondary School Booth

For the Panchmile area, the polling centre was in Panchmile Higher Secondary School. This polling centre is located 8 kms away from Tezpur city. The polling centre had two polling booths 1) Alisinga Uriumguri and 2) Alisinga (North). In both the polling centres the voters belonged mainly to the three communities, namely, Muslim Bengali (who use Mymensingia dialect), Hindu Bengalis and a small number of Nepalis. The most dominant among the three communities are the Muslim Bengalis who constitute almost 60 per cent of the total population in the area. Next come the Hindu Bengalis who constitute 34 percent, followed by the Nepalis who constitute 6 percent. On the day of the election in the Panchmile HS school Centre people came to cast their vote as early as 6 am in the morning. They stood in queue and waited till the polling started.

On the morning of the election Day, it was observed that people started coming in very early, whereas actual voting started only from 7 am. There were less number of voters at the polling centre in the morning, however, after 11 am people started coming in large numbers and there was a huge crowd at both the polling centres. People came with their documents and before going to the polling booths they took their serial numbers from the counters of different political parties which were put up just at the gate of the polling centre. It was observed that many people came alone and some of them came with their families to cast their votes. But the most interesting fact which was observed was that females from the Hindu Bengali families came along with their husbands and their family members while the females from the Muslim families came alone or with their female co-partners. Some Muslim women came even with their new born babies. It was also observed that the handicapped, sick and old persons of the Muslim community also came to cast their votes. The small number of Nepalis who came to cast their votes went away as soon as they were done with the exercise.

Apart from the observations mentioned above, there were also some other interesting observations to be made at the polling booth. Different workers from different political
parties were seen roaming in and around the polling centre trying to mobilize the people to cast their vote for their respective parties. They were seen standing in front of the gate of the polling centre and welcoming the people who came to cast their vote. These people were also seen helping common people to find out their serial numbers. It was also observed that the party workers took the voters to the tea stalls and provided them with refreshments. The party workers involved in these activities were mostly of the three major political parties namely the AGP-BJP alliance, the Congress and the AIUDF. However, though the people were mostly illiterate it was observed that they had a predetermined choice about voting in their mind.

Lastly, it was also observed that within the Congress, there was no satisfaction among the party workers regarding their work. The grassroots level workers were not satisfied with the work of the Panchayat President. It was said that the grassroots level workers came to the polling station by 6 o’clock in the morning while the senior level workers came to the polling centre very late.

Two incidents that occurred during the polling day seem noteworthy. Two persons, one old and physically challenged Md. Didar Ali and the other old and very sick person named Md. Hazarat Ali, came for casting their votes. When questions were asked why they came under in such a situation, they stated that if they do not cast their vote then they would lose their citizenship. But there was also another section of people who came to the polling centre just to see the people voting. But they would not cast their vote because they were fed up with the election process. This section of people basically belongs to the Hindu Bengali community. There were also a few people who were willing to cast their vote if they were paid some money.

On the question of distribution of money, many people said that there was distribution of money by the Congress party. Though there was distribution of money but they did not receive cash. On the issue of money, two students of class 11 from the Panchmile HS School, Md. Atikur Rahman Mazumdar and Md. Taffazzul Haque stated that money was distributed to the people of their village by the Congress party at the eleventh hour and their families also received the money. Since they were young they did not receive the money. People were sceptical about the use of EVMs. But to the surprise of polling officials and
observers, people were comfortable with the use of voting machine in the polling booth. They showed interest and opined that it is better than the use of paper ballot as the chances of votes getting rejected in paper ballot is more that with the machines.

A valid document issued by the government office or by any reputed/ authentic source is necessary for casting vote as per the directive of the Election Commission of India. But the indigenous population is hardly concerned about such documents. Though they have lots of valid documents starting from bank account, ration card, identity card but they do not want to bring such documents. Few angry men said that if they are not allowed to vote without the identification document they will not vote. Meanwhile, the Gaonburha (the headman of the village) identified the voters inside the polling booth who were then allowed to vote. The school field is the only social space available and it is situated in the middle of the village, hence people were seen more interested in gossiping rather than in voting. Different gossip groups were seen across different age and sex groups.

*Behali Tea Estate Branch office Booth*

Most of the voters of this polling booth are from the tea garden labour community. When I talked to a person while coming to the booth he said, ‘we have no value, they try to purchase our votes by giving money like 10 to 50 rupees before the day of the elections but never try to solve our problems to make our miserable life better’. This time also they are casting vote in favour of someone but not in the hope of fulfillment of their need. They are doing it only to exercise the adult franchise.

Despite negligence by the leaders of different political parties, one section of people want to vote in favour of Congress party because they received cash from the party on the eve of election. Congress had gained their faith by promising to supply food products like rice, mustard oil at Rs. 3 per kilogram, Kerosene oil at Rs. 5 per liter, safe drinking water facility and so on. It has been observed that some active workers of the Congress party from the tea garden community were working sincerely in favour of the party for their own gain.

Most of the tea garden workers regard the day of election as a festival because excluding Sundays the gardens are closed only during some particular festivals. As the day of polling is a holiday and they also get wages for the day, workers were seen to be very happy. They
came to the booth in a very festive mood and in colourful attires. Some workers are busy selling biscuits, boiled eggs, pakora, papad, biscuits and chocolates in front of the polling station.

After pressing the blue button in favour of the candidate of their own choice everyone is busy in buying delicious items. In case of nuclear families, spouses are coming with their small kids. In case of joint families, male head accompanied by his wife came to the booth early in the morning, after exercising franchise they went quickly because they had to send their children and in-laws to vote. Some women came in a group to cast their vote and most of the voters brought the serial number of the ration card instead of the voter’s list serial number, then they asked the help of the volunteers of different parties to find out the number.

On the other hand, for few voters voting is a burden. Most of the people did not bring any identity documents in the morning session and the officer in-charge of the polling booth did not allow such persons to vote. As a result, such voters were disappointed and started complaining against the Presiding Officer. They said ‘we are the indigenous people of Assam; why should we need the voter identity card?’ Some said that, ‘we are not Bangladeshis’\(^3\). More interestingly one person told the Polling Officer with a satirical tone that he had kept his identity document in Bangladesh. In such a situation in the morning session those who could not cast their vote for want of identity cards did not return again with any valid document to vote. The larger section of the voters of the village came quite late to the booth. Moreover, different party offices were set-up to give the voters identity numbers so that they need not have to wait inside the booth to search for their names.

Outside the booth we saw different gossiping-groups discussing different topics. Groups were mainly constituted of young people. They discussed about the elections, Bihu, sports, etc. All agreed that the election had reduced the charm of Bihu, the most popular festival of Assam. Some of them were workers of different political parties but were talking to each other quite friendly. A major section of the younger generation was not happy with

---

\(^3\) People of speak Mymensingha in Assam are from erstwhile East Bengal. In popular discourse, the foreigner is a Bangladeshi who has come without legal documents. So when ever issue arises people refer to an illegal immigrant as Bangladeshi.
contemporary politics and did not have any faith in the present political system, parties and the representatives. They came to vote not in the hope of any revolutionary change but only because they have got the chance to vote and it was their right. They were gossiping since morning but did not cast their votes till around 1o’clock. In some cases the party workers were seen cutting jokes and making humorous remarks against the young members and workers of other parties. But the relationship was on the whole cordial and good.

**The Assembly Elections**

The 14th Assam legislative Assembly elections were held in two phases on the 4th of April and 11th of April, 2011 to elect members from 126 constituencies in Assam. The result was announced on 13th may. The election process of Sonitpur District began with its announcement by the Election Commission. During the initial stage, the probable candidates and their respective parties started the election process by organizing meetings of their cadres, supporters and workers at block and Panchayat levels.

After the declaration of the election dates in the state, various political parties started contacting their local cadres to initiate the campaigning process. It looked like the beginning of a festive season. Strategy of the elections is formed in the meetings. Party workers were put on alert. Meetings were held at various levels such as Panchayat and block. Especially Panchayat members were asked to cover their respective areas and convince people to vote for their political parties and candidates.

**Politics of Candidature before election**

*Tezpur Assembly Constituency*

Rajen Borthakur of Congress was an AASU leader in his youth along with being a grass root member of AGP. His candidature through Congress in these elections has surprised a lot of people along with the Congress party workers themselves. Though almost every party worker we met vehemently denied any confusion or clash arising from Rajen Borthakur’s candidature ignoring the old hand Bijit Saikia, one woman party worker Begum Hanifa admitted that they were facing some problems. She said- ‘a lot of people do not know Rajen Borthakur... while Bijit da was so well known… now it is a decision coming from
upper level… nothing is in our hand’. However, it was clear that, Congress was a strong party.

Ritu Baran Sarmah of BJP, the youngest and most qualified of them all could have projected a dynamic, energetic fresh image to lure the voters. However, being a design engineer by profession and former member of RSS, he lacked the touch of familiarity with the sub-urban areas and not surprisingly he was a total stranger to most of the people of Tezpur. Price hike along with Bangladeshi immigration were the BJP’s main agendas and like all the other party workers, they were also very vocal about the inactivity and corruption of other candidates. Sophistication, youth, vision and blessings of the party high command, were all there with Ritu Baran, except the common man’s recognition. One party worker of Congress opined that elections are not about campaigning for one month and polling on one day. It is a preparation over 30 days, 12 months and one year. One needs the skill and ability to constantly remain in public consciousness. Ritu Baran does not know how to do that, neither does the BJP party core in Tezpur. Among the independent candidates, Sri Santanu Mahanta fought with the symbol of a gas cylinder. He was an offshoot of the AGP, a dissatisfied former AGP worker; he lacked both man power and financial back-up to fight squarely.

Ticket distribution among the contenders increased tension among the party workers and also among the common man. The two contenders for the ticket of Indian National Congress party were Bijit Saikia and Rajen Borthakur. When the Congress ticket was proposed in favour of Rajen Borthakur, Bijit Saikia decided to contest elections from the Trinamool Congress, a fairly new party, originated from West Bengal and with Mamta Bannerjee as its supreme leader. This divided the Congress followers into two groups. Although the probability of Bijit Saikia winning the election was diminished with half of Congress supporters and handful of Bengali Hindu shifted to Congress side, his objective was to create erosion of vote in the Congress vote bank in Tezpur. With this equation, the chances of Mr. Brindaban Goswami of AGP winning the elections got brighter as Mr. Saikia definitely took away a considerable number of voters from the Congress camp. Another twist in the tale was AIUDF, the new party for the uplift of the immigrant Muslim community with Badaruddin Ajmal as chief. AIUDF too played the card well with Mr.
Manik Gogoi as their contender in Tezpur Constituency. Even though the possibility of AIUDF winning the election was extremely bleak, still it was supposed to dig into the Congress vote bank considerably by taking away the votes of the immigrant Muslims. This also brightened the chance of Mr. Brindaban Goswami’s win, even if marginal, in the election. At least, this was the prediction of the experts.

Massive cash flow from the candidates to the party workers and through them to the potential voters took place during the elections. Vote-buying was very common, along with other types of campaigning. Not only the poor but even the middle class take the campaigning season as a golden opportunity to collect money from different political parties, either for personal gains or to celebrate cultural functions. Progress is made synonymous with making a personal road or giving donations to the local Namghar. All the contesting political parties opened temporary election offices in every ward for campaigning purposes. Since the beginning of the field work, it was observed that all party workers would be working seriously in their offices. These party workers were the crux of the entire election process. They provided the posters, flags, handbills and pamphlets used in the campaigning process. The serious attitude of the party workers clearly suggested that, the victory of their particular party would surely provide them with personal benefits. The youth were engaged in campaigning through bike rallies and cycle rallies to show their loyalty to their party as well as to earn some money, lunch, dinner and drinks provided by the party workers. Interestingly, the temporary election office of BJP at Tezpur town had three Muslim youth as party workers. When they were asked for a photograph, they hide their faces. When asked about supporting the BJP, they replied that BJP provided them with money to work for the party. Campaigning for BJP was therefore a temporary arrangement for them to earn some money. As far as voting was concerned, they did not reveal which party they would vote for. This showed that, these youths were only concerned with money, rather than party loyalty or loyalty for the candidate.

4 Namghar is a kind of prayer hall for neo-Vaishnavite. The followers of Sankardev offer prayer in a hall which is generally located in the central place of a village.
Behali Assembly Constituency

The above election scenario was also very common in Behali legislative constituency. The Congress, the BJP and the CPI (ML) organized meetings in this legislative Assembly segment. There was greater enthusiasm among the people compared to the Parliamentary elections. This became very clear from the participation of the people in the meetings organized by different political parties. Here, some probable candidates were even busy in discussing different ongoing problems of the area with the influential persons of the locality, perhaps to create a positive impression on the people. The total number of candidates for Behali legislative constituency was 5, one each from the Congress, BJP, CPI (ML) and AIUDF, besides these, the AGP leader, Biswajeet Goswami contested independently as he could not get a ticket from the party to fight the ally BJP. He formed his own independent party named Sanmilita Gana Morcha as a rebel candidate.

During the second phase of the election campaign, all the contesting candidates and their respective parties and party cadres left no stone unturned to organize meetings at the village and Panchayat levels. But at the same time, dissatisfaction among the leaders of different parties in general and Congress in particular was visible. This needs to be mentioned. Some senior leaders of the Congress party were not satisfied with the candidature of Pallab Lochan Das as he was very junior to most of them. These leaders did not take active part in the election campaign. Apart from them, the other leaders of almost all the parties had given their full effort to convince the people to cast their votes in favour of their respective party own candidate. The common people of the area also took an active part by attending public meetings of different political parties. There were discussions among the people about the elections at street corners, tea shops and in the market areas. The election fever could be seen among almost every strata of society. In comparison to Parliamentary elections, the greater participation of common people is really visible. Perhaps people are more conscious in this case as the Assembly elections are a more local affair than Parliamentary elections. Some common people of the area said, ‘this time we will not cast our vote in favour of the BJP candidate as he has been an MLA for last 10 years and has become very rich. Why should we give this opportunity to the same person again?’ From this, it can be inferred that people feel that becoming an MP or an MLA is a way to
generate wealth. At the same time, it should be mentioned that during the time of Parliamentary elections, the number of participants in the public meetings of different political party was less. But, this time, participation of people was appreciably more, especially in the case of public meetings organized by CPI(ML) and Congress. A group of youths felt that the development of the region suffered a lot during the tenure of the present MLA and it was very important to select a better representative.

In the Indian context, election campaigns are incomplete without the organization of huge gatherings, frequent visits of high profile senior leaders, their addressing of the gatherings, cycle rallies, bike rallies, poster pasting, etc. These are the best ways to draw the attention of the voters. In this constituency too, the above mentioned tactics were used very commonly. Almost all the well known parties, like the Congress and BJP organized such meets. Congress organized one big public meeting on 24 March 2011 in Behali Rangamancha where health minister Himanta Biswa Sarma came to address the gathering. As the minister was about to come on 24 March, local leaders were very busy arranging the meeting. Police personnel were busy in tightening security. As he was supposed to come by helicopter, there was excitement among the people especially among the children to witness the scene. Though he was about to come by 11 am, people gathered there from 9 am. Interestingly, the gathering at the helipad, near Behali police station, was greater than at the Behali Rangamancha, where the meeting had been organized. People from almost every section of society were present in the meeting, but the number of women exceeded that of men. Some came to see the helicopter; some people came to listen to the health minister’s speech as he is considered to be an expert in delivering speech. Some aged persons also came to fulfill the demand of their grandchildren. As a health Minister, Sarma is very popular among the people for his different health policies like majoni and mamoni. As the Congress party had provided vehicles to bring people from different villages of the constituency, people came from various nearby places to attend the meeting.

In the meeting, Sarma requested the people to vote for Pallab Lochan Das and pointed out to the inefficiency of the present MLA. In his speech, he talked about several wrong deeds done by the BJP like attracting people to the meetings by inviting stars like Hema Malini, Smriti Irani, Satrughan Sinha, etc. Just after the declaration of the contesting candidates’
names, the local MLA (candidate of BJP), Ranjit Dutta, had arranged for lunch and dinner at his residence for all the people of his constituency. Everyone could attend the party. Even vehicles had been provided to go for dinner. This was perhaps one new technique to woo the poor voters. In the meeting, Himanta Biswa Sarma asked people to visit the MLA’s place and have lunch and dinner because Dutta has invested public money in this arrangement. He appealed to the people to cast their vote in favour of the Congress candidate for the proper development of the region. Commenting with a satirical tone, he said, ‘today I have realized that our Assamese girls are more beautiful than Hema Malini, they are not only beautiful but also experts at cooking and weaving. So it is unnecessary on the part of BJP to invite film stars. Instead, they should pay attention to solving the burning problems of the area.’ He had appreciated girls perhaps to impress the large number of women present in the meeting and after listening to his speech I recalled one of his interviews in the news channel News Live, in which he had told that he delivers public speech according to the situation and context. He said, he prepares it on the spot, first he observes the gathering and tries to find out whether the number of men is more or that of women, whether people are educated or uneducated and accordingly delivers his speech.

Himanta Biswa Sarma, candidate of Congress and the party cadres finished their meeting within 45 minutes. Just after his departure, but before the dispersal of the crowd, a cycle rally reached the venue which was organized by the CPI (ML). The rally was quite long, approximately 2000 bicycles, and all the participants were men as it is not suitable for women to come for a bicycle rally. When the rally crossed the venue of the meeting and the Congress office, a group of young supporters of Congress started shouting slogans like ‘CPI (ML) go back!’ and ‘Bibek Das murdabad!’ After listening to Himanta Biswa Sarma’s speech people became busy in counting the numbers of cycles in the rally. The whole scenario indicated that election campaigning was at its zenith and people were taking an active part in the process. Chief minister Tarun Gogoi also visited Behali constituency in order to campaign for his candidate. It was learnt from some elder persons that the Chief Minister’s coming to campaign happened for the first time in the history of Behali. So one section of people were very happy, they thought that Ministers are giving importance to this place and have therefore supported the Congress party.
There was competition among the parties in conducting election campaign. Great importance was given to organizing cycle processions and motor bike processions. With these types of rallies, they tried to attract common voters as well as tried to show the common voters how strong they were. Leaders of almost all the parties were of the opinion that a large section of voters cast their vote to the party which seems to be stronger during the period of campaign. These leaders feel that mass participation of people in public meets, motorbike processions, cycle processions of any political party are a good sign and that party has more chances of winning the elections. Sometimes, the political parties are bound to follow different tactics to woo their voters. For example, CPI (ML) and BJP also organized a cycle rally on 1st April but unfortunately participation of people was very less and only 200 cycles gathered in front of their main office at Borgang. The candidate of the BJP i.e. the sitting MLA, Ranjit Dutta, got very offended as the local leaders could not meet the target of arranging near about 2000 cycles. So they again arranged one motorbike rally on 2 April with near about 103 motorbikes. Congress party also organized a motorbike rally on the same day with around 125 motorbikes. It was seen that a group of young boys who are members of the Behali Youth Club also joined the rally. It was reported by some people that these youths were very offended with some active Congress leaders until 31 March. They were offended because some well-known leaders of the Congress party refused to give them donation for organizing a cultural program on Rongali Bihu. Perhaps the leaders had managed to appease them by fulfilling their demand. Fortunately, every time the Election Commission declares elections during the festive season it helps Bihu committees to collect money from different candidates as well as from different political parties. On the 27th of March when the first village level meeting of CPI(ML) was going on, at that time also a group of youths came and were sitting in the 1st row. Most of the people in that meeting were common people so the presence of this group raised some questions. However they attended the whole meeting and when the candidate was about to leave the place, this group of youths encircled him. They handed over a money receipt to the candidate and collected money for organizing cultural program in Bihu.

It is well known that money for vote is a national phenomenon that spreads across rural and urban areas, among the rich and the poor. Most of the political parties try to win the electoral battle by distributing money. Is it possible to win the election by distributing
money and liquor? This question became very clear after declaration of election results. In the Behali legislative constituency, most people are dissatisfied with the present MLA as he remained very inactive during his tenure and had not utilized the resources of the MLA fund. People lamented that instead of bringing proper development schemes to the region, he enriched his own treasury. So, when the question was discussed with different sections of people regarding elections, they viewed that it is very important that the BJP must not win from Behali. Even the independent candidate Biswajit Goswami appealed to people saying, ‘Please vote for me, if you want to end Ranjit Dutta’s corruption and monopoly’.

Cadres of other parties felt that ‘we do not know about our chance and position but during our door to door campaign, it become very clear that people were totally dissatisfied with the activities of the former MLA. They were in favour of a change but were afraid that he might have some other way of pleasing the common people to win the election’. Despite all these, if he again won the election it would prove that the power of money could change the public’s decision and people select their representatives based on money power.

On the other hand, it is very important to mention that the ethnic composition of the people play a very important role in electoral decisions. In this constituency, about 50 percent voters belong to the tea garden community and then come the population of Nepalis; the Assamese are on the third position according to the population size. The Congress party has therefore given its ticket to Pallab Lochan Das, former secretary of All Assam Tea Tribe Student Association (AATTSU). In one of the public meetings, Pallab Lochan Das said that ‘I am sure that I will win the election because in this area 51000 thousand voters belong to the tea community, they will definitely cast their vote in my favour’. But his speech was against the sentiments of some other communities of the region. Large sections of the Nepali community were against the candidature of Pallab Lochan Das as Congress party had not given candidature to some eligible Congress leaders of their community. It can therefore be said that the support of the tea garden community to any candidate is a deciding factor in winning the elections. From the above fact, it becomes clear that community always plays an important role in elections in India. Like Rajni Kothari argues, to have a concrete support base for a political party is always a boon in the Indian context. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar make good examples of this. At the same time, it is a tricky situation for the political party to choose their candidates without disturbing the sentiment
of the other communities. But such a sentiment was not seen among the Assamese people, especially among the youths. They have supported the Congress candidate but not the Assamese candidate of CPI (ML). This may be because of several reasons. First, they have realized the need for a proper representative, irrespective of caste and creed. Second, as Congress is the ruling party, they assumed that their chance to win the election was strong. Third, as Congress was economically very strong and their budget for election campaigning was big they supported the Congress party perhaps expecting material benefits. They were well aware of the fact that if they joined hands with CPI (ML), they would not be able to get any material benefit.

Interestingly, the AIUDF candidate was Malay Das who belongs to the Assamese community but the people of the area named him Mohammad Malay Das in a jocular vein. It is perceived among the people that AIUDF is a party of the immigrant Muslim community. He was not bothered about conducting election campaign. Instead of spending his time in conducting campaign, he went to his own small tea garden with his security person. On his way to the garden he asks some people to cast their vote in his favour. One of the workers informed that one day he was joking with Malay and asked for some money to cast vote in favour of AIUDF. Then Malay Das replied ‘I have doubt regarding my mother’s vote and who are you to ask money and cast vote for me?’ Why did he contest then? Perhaps the leaders of AIUDF have offered him the ticket in order to make people aware of the existence of the party and he accordingly accepted it for getting some amount of money to conduct the campaign. On the other hand, Biswajit Goswami has contested because his party, i.e. AGP had not given him a ticket, for which he resigned from the party and contested individually. He opened an office at Borgang and invested some money in printing posters. A group of young boys had taken some vehicles and were making announcements to vote in favour of Goswami.

On 31st of March BJP organized a big public meet in Ketla field. They also provided vehicles to the people of each village of the constituency to join the meeting. People were also very excited to join the meeting as they had heard that the location of the helipad and the venue of the meeting were the same. Near about 7000 people gathered there, where most of the people were from the tea garden community; a large number of children also
gathered in the field. The popular BJP leader Arjun Munda was about to come at 1:30 pm but the common people were eagerly waiting for his arrival from 11am. As it was a rainy day some people of the nearby areas started selling some delicious items like omelets, boiled egg, pokora, potato chips, etc.

However, it was a misfortune for both the party and their candidate as because of the bad weather the landing of the helicopter became impossible. As a result, Arjun Munda could not arrive on time. Still the common people were waiting there and the party leaders rescheduled the meeting at 2pm. But heavy rain began because of which 80 percent of the people shifted to the nearby shops, and to the vehicles to protect themselves from heavy rain. At the same time, they also become very angry. It was quite natural; despite the bad weather, they had come to attend the meeting and spent the whole day but their hope of observing the helicopter could not be realized. Some people of the tea garden community were of the opinion that “leader gela Hemamalini ale bollek nai aile, Satrughan Sinha aile bollek nai aile, aita k meeting? Nai dibo Ranjit Duttake vote” (leaders said that Hema Malini and Saturghan Sinha will come to the meeting but they did not come. What kind of a meeting is this? We will not cast our vote for Ranjit Dutta).

But on the other hand, some other people were of the opinion that they had come to the meeting because the MLA has provided them IAY houses. It is their duty to come in his support. Some others said that the Panchayat president has sanctioned one house in their name but they had not yet received the cheque, if they did not attend the meeting the MLA might cut their names from the list. A very small section said that they had come to attend the meeting as they were supporter of the BJP. One retired school teacher said that instead of making the common people politically aware, political leaders are busy in attracting people by talking about heroes and heroines of Bollywood. It is very important on the part of the political parties and their leaders that instead of such acts they should try to make the common people knowledgeable about the party politics and democracy.

On 1st April CPI (ML) also organized a big public meeting in the Ketla field. Like other parties, they have also provided vehicles for people to join in the meeting. But the difference is that while other major parties provided bus, because of lack of resources CPI(ML) could only provide some mini trucks, wingers and Tata magic for transporting
people. As the weather was not good, some women refused to come in open trucks and accordingly they used the vans, Tata magic, winger etc for women. All the people gathered in the new Ketla field and from there they organized a procession to the Ketla field. Dipankar Bhattacharya, the central leader of CPI (ML), some of their state level leaders and the candidate also joined the procession and walked from new Ketla field to Ketla field.

People were very happy and they were busy giving slogan, two groups also brought dhol (drum) with them and played them throughout the procession, some of them were dancing in the rally. People were very happy in taking part in such a huge rally of about 9000 people. Most of the people belonged to the tea garden community, men and women were almost equal in numbers. The number of non-voters was negligible perhaps because of the fact that the leaders of CPI (ML) had not used helicopter for the campaign which attracts the voters and more so the non-voters. The meeting began at 11am, first of all the District secretary of CPI(ML) addressed the gathering and criticized the BJP candidate, secondly he narrated the incident before the crowd about how their candidate had protested against the lockout of some tea gardens of the area and fought against the exploitation by the management. As the large number of voters belonged to the tea garden community, all the parties have given importance to convincing them in their favour. Lastly the District secretary has appealed to the unemployed youth that ‘you please cast your vote for our candidate instead of Pallab Lochan Das, though he has promised in a meeting to provide you jobs it is not possible, he is a liar, and the tea garden community people should not support him as he has done nothing for the people of the tea garden community as a secretary of ATTSSA’. Some leaders of CPI (ML) delivered their speeches in the vernacular language that is Sadri. Dipankar Bhattacharya, a central leader said that ‘election koi khel nehi hei, ye chunav hei, isko seriously lekar proper MLA chunna janata ke liye jaruri hei’. (Election is not a play. It is important that one takes it seriously and elects a proper MLA). The candidate of CPI (ML) was the last speaker of the meeting. He requested the gathering to cast their vote for him and did not criticize the other candidates.

---

5 Sadri is spoken in Chot Nagpur Plateau and many tea gardens in Assam. Tea garden community members have developed a different version than the original one. Various communities from different parts interact with each other. So language has also been changing.
One of the speakers also composed a song in Sadri. While he was singing it in the meeting, two three people of their community were happily dancing in the field. The song was about the life of the tribal people, especially from the Chotanagpur Plateau, from where the tea garden community came to Assam. It also described how development plans have deteriorated their living conditions, displaced them from their homes, and how food and fire wood became inaccessible for them. The last two lines carried the meaning that ‘we will fight for our resources and we will not leave our tea gardens’. The meeting finished at 4pm. and the leaders again became very busy in sending the people to their homes by the vehicles. In this meeting, some people were also selling tea, beetle nuts, sweets, etc. in the field. It was observed that at public meetings people found those speeches interesting which carried criticisms against someone. Common people kept themselves ready for clapping when a speaker criticizes political parties and their leaders. At most of the meetings, it was observed that a section of people remained busy in talking about some other issues, and women got worried about whether they would reach their homes before evening or not. The Election Commission had imposed a strict rule regarding the participation of government servants in elections. Despite this, one section of government service holders came to the meeting just before it ended. It becomes impossible on one’s part to stay away from the election process, when one was a strong supporter of a party or candidate. This is what makes elections interesting in India.

In these elections almost all the parties conducted door to door campaigns. CPI (ML) had engaged some women and a group of young girls in this work. The young girls were very excited and they gave their full effort in convincing the people. They asserted that most of the people of the area were against the BJP candidate. While sharing their experience of the campaign, they highlighted the cross section of views held by women and men. In one household, a woman replied that she felt like vomiting when she heard of elections. A group of small children in a van were campaigning in favour of BJP, they were announcing on the microphone, ‘vote diyok, vote diyok, Ranjit Duttak vote diyak’. (Vote for Ranjit Dutta). During elections even children could be found playing with posters used by poll parties and giving slogans in favour of different parties. Various political parties opened temporary party offices before the elections at different places for campaigning and mobilizing their workers. However, like during the Parliamentary elections, most of the
offices were laying vacant. Sometimes the office in-charge sat there with his friends and gossiped, and sometimes children of the area could be seen using it as play house. Temporary party office of the Congress party at Borgang arranged tea and pan for almost all visitors to the party office.

The distribution of letters by political parties in every household requesting the voters to cast valuable vote in favour of their own party just before the day of the election was very common and people used it for collecting the serial numbers of the voters list. But this time no one did this. Some government officials had distributed the serial number of voter’s lists long before the polling day.

Issues in the Assembly elections were different from those in the Parliamentary elections. The approach of the candidates and party workers towards the voters as well as the response of the voters was also different. As the constituency is much smaller in an Assembly election than in Parliamentary elections, the political parties and their workers tried to touch all individual voters rather than addressing a cluster or a village as a whole. Apart from the particular party agendas, local level problems got much emphasis. One respondent said that people were concerned about their individual and family interest. The issues and interests of the village came after that. Some poor people claimed Indira Awas Yojna houses, BPL ration cards, and government jobs for their children. Apart from the personal demands, people asked for the development of village roads and good school buildings.

Meanwhile, the contesting candidates in the Assembly elections were very much familiar to the voters. Some candidates were personally known to them. As such, their social background, social image, relation with the grass roots, character, and so on also played an important role in the decision making of the voters. Some people claimed a particular candidate to be the prospective suitable representative for their constituency, but they expressed their grief about the associates who were campaigning for him. According to them, his associates, who belonged to their locality do not have a good impression among the people, though they are very rich. They felt that if that particular candidate wins his associates will rule and common people will not benefit.
On the Day of Polling

Behali legislative Constituency

In Assam, tea garden community members have always been a deciding factor in the elections. This is the reason why all most all political parties try to convince them to vote for their party. Behali tea estate branch office is one of the polling stations of the Behali legislative constituency where most of the voters belong to the tea garden community except some officers. The voters include both permanent as well as temporary workers of the tea garden. One woman opined that ‘aji utsav lekhia lagse’ (today it feels is like a festival). A few of them responded that the election would not bring any change to their life, being labourers, they were bound to work. The company was providing everything to them like rice, flour, drinking water etc, so the elections were not important to them. When I asked them about the names and numbers of the contesting candidates, then one woman replied ‘we do not know because during the day time we work in the garden because of which even attending public meetings becomes impossible for us. How can we know all these things?’ At this polling station, most of the voters had casted their votes in favour of the Congress party perhaps because of their community sentiment. Some of the voters were of the opinion that as Pallab Lochan Das belonged to their community, they would definitely cast their vote in his favour and they were very hopeful about the fulfilment of their needs if he got elected.

Though the people looked innocent, they never disclosed secrets like the distribution of money and liquor by political parties. But one of the voters at the polling station informed me about the distribution of jaggery among some people by the BJP leaders for the preparation of liquor. It has already been mentioned that the tea garden workers take the polling day as a festival as they are free from their duty on that day. They came in their best clothes in a festive mood. As photographs were being clicked they became very happy and one group of women asked for more photographs. Some voters were also inquisitive to know whether these photographs were for any newspaper.

After casting their vote, they became very busy in talking and eating some or the other food items from the temporary shops which had been opened by some nearby people basically
from the tea garden community. This time some small children were also engaged in this business. The opening of shops on the day of election in front of the polling station in the tea garden was a very common phenomenon. But this time, the shops were more numerous than earlier. Besides stalls of delicious snacks, one could also find a beetle nut stall in front of most of the polling stations. In Behali tea estate branch office polling station, voters came from early in the morning, 70 percent of the voters cast their vote before 12 am. The polling officers could seal the machine on time.

Party workers are generally engaged at the polling station as polling agents. They are selected from the local area to cross check whether bogus voters have come to cast votes and whether free and fair polling is happening or not. In the polling booth under discussion, around 3 pm, a few young girls came to cast vote in others’ names. It seems they were brought by the Congress supporters. It was objected from the AGP polling agents and when they were barred from casting their vote they became furious and but left the booth subsequently. They were also afraid when the polling officer told them that he would inform the police.

**The Panchayat Elections**

As scheduled by the Congress government in Assam, Panchayat elections were held on January 30, February 6 and February 12, 2013. Polling was conducted for representatives for the Panchayat, Zila Parishad and Anchalik Panchayat Samiti as part of the regular Panchayati Raj elections to the three tiers, that is, the Zila parishad (at the District level), the Anchalik Panchayat Samiti (at the block level) and the Gram Panchayat (at the village level).

The Napam Panchayat comes under Balipara Development Block. Its office is located at Ghoramari. One of the major landmarks of Napam Panchayat is that the Tezpur University (Central) is located in the area of this Panchayat. It is therefore quite well known in the District as well as across Assam. Napam Panchayat consists of fifteen villages, which constitute 10 administrative wards with a total voter population of 19800. In Assam, under the Rural Panchayat Act 1948, two tiers of Panchayats – Primary Panchayats at the village level and Rural Panchayats at the Mouza level were created. After that, under the Assam
Panchayati Raj Act 1959, a three-tier system was introduced such as Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mahkuma Parishad. But the new three-tier system was introduced under the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 with the Zila Parishad added along with the existing Gaon Panchayat and Anchalik Panchayat.

The Panchayati Raj System in Assam operates through Gaon Panchayats with a President, directly elected by the people and a Vice-President, elected from among the ward members of the Gaon Panchayat and ten ward members directly elected by the people. The members of Zila Parishad and the councilors of Anchalik Panchayat are directly elected by the people. The Presidents of these two bodies are elected from among the members of the Parishad and Council respectively. In an election, therefore, one person has to cast four votes for a ZP member, a AP councilor, a GP president and a GP ward member.

In Sonitpur District, polling occurred on February 6, 2013. People in this area often complain that Napam Panchayat is the largest Panchayat in Assam. Voters are more than 18000 in number, whereas in many other Panchayats there are less than 10,000 voters. A major challenge therefore is that whatever schemes come for the poor, it is difficult to satisfy the people. So in many wards, the Presidents get changed due to anti-incumbency factors.

**Pre-Election times**

Supporters of a particular party, besides factors like religion, also take into account the past benefits that they receive from the party or the government. Some Nepali people supported the Congress party as they received different benefits from the government such as BPL cards, housing facilities, and fair price ration provisions. However, some other people of the same community did not receive any benefits from the Congress party. They said that although the government provided certain schemes, they could only get access to these schemes by paying money to the middle man or to the elected leaders. Most of the time, they complained about corruption. According to them, those who were already more well-off received the benefits as they had the money to pay the middle man.

Party workers gave full energy and effort to make meetings a success. Congress party leader and Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was considered to be the star campaigner for his
party while Badruddin Ajmal was leading from the front for AIUDF. Mostly perceived as a party of the Muslim community, AIUDF tried every possible means to convince people across caste, class and religious community to come and listen to Ajmal in many of their public announcements. The huge gathering at the meeting ground stands testimony to the fact that the party workers succeeded in bringing people to the ground in the name of Ajmal.

In almost all the immigrant Muslim areas of Assam, including Napam, people perceived Badruddin Ajmal as a spiritual healer. He has been accorded an almost godly status by the people here. Once die hard supporters of Congress were seen shifting their camps to AIUDF and thereby the party gained enormous popularity. The reasons for this shift could be attributed to people’s disappointment towards the ruling Congress party, religious factors and community sentiments. People regarded Ajmal to be the child of 'Allah' who would work for their welfare and development.

However among the Muslims, the educated and relatively well-off supported the Congress party. According to them, this party introduced development in terms of health and medical facilities such as ASHA, 108 ambulance service, Majoni and Mamoni schemes, etc. which has also generated employment. Apart from this, development in the field of education like establishing new schools and classrooms with proper teachers, introduction of mid-day meals is credited to the Congress. These developments were not taken into account by the poor sections as for them development entails a different meaning, i.e., access to basic needs. Thus, it can be seen that development here was not universal; rather it was benefitting only one section of society.

The most important reason for the majority of Muslims going against the Congress was the violence in Bodoland, an autonomous region created for the Bodos under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Many AAMSU (All Assam Minority Student Union) members were taken into custody by the police in the aftermath of the violence. The Bodoland People’s Front (BPF), the ruling party in the Bodoland area was an ally of the Congress. This was the time when AIUDF took the opportunity to motivate the people to support their party by saying that the Congress does not protect minorities. People also argued that Congress leaders had betrayed them. They only worked for themselves and
neglected the people and their needs. They have only widened the gap between the rich and the poor and pushed the poor into an ocean of poverty, hunger and grief. It is the middle class who secured all benefits from the Congress because whatever welfare schemes were available were not freely distributed among people and benefited only the class of people who had money and necessary networks. People blamed party workers and members of the Panchayats for the poor condition of the people as the former were corrupt and did not implement government policies and schemes efficiently. So people were gradually losing trust in the party as it became a party for the well off people. But the poor were not benefited by the welfare schemes, even the flood affected were not compensated. They would often talk about *dalals*, the middlemen, who ruined them by not letting them have access to resources meant for them. They were indeed very disappointed because the government turned a deaf ear towards them.

**Panchayat Elections**

On the day of the election people came to the place in festive a mood. They thought that it was their duty to cast their vote. Therefore, they took a day off from their routine work. People said that even if it meant the loss of a day’s wage, if they miss this chance they would not get it again for another 5 years. It was their day. Many said that they would make up their loss in the afternoon session or on the next day. Women voters were more excited to cast their vote. As they must do their household work regularly, therefore they came in the morning session to cast their vote as their work load was not as heavy in the morning time. The women who were not able to come in the morning session, opined that voting and household work both were important. Therefore they came and joined the queue to cast their vote after finishing their household work.

Despite the instructions given by party workers, people made mistakes during the time of polling. During Parliamentary and Assembly elections, Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) were used whereas in the Panchayat elections ballot papers were used. Most of the old people believed that Congress (symbol of hand) was a better party. One old woman said that she had cast her vote for the Congress last time and this time also she would cast her vote for Congress. But last time she did not get anything from the government. But she hoped that this time the government would fulfill her requirement. When she was asked
why she would cast vote for Congress even though she had not benefited by it she said that the government was not the ultimate ruler; there was another ruler which is God. If God would favour her she would automatically get her subsistence to live.

The voting session started at 7 am. The presiding officers and other members in-charge including the police man came one day before and made the necessary arrangement. Men, women, the young and old all came in large numbers early in the morning to stand in the queue and cast their votes. There were separate queues for both men and women. Women with their veils drawn were properly maintaining the line waiting patiently for their turn. Some of the women who were engaged as cooks, cleaner, etc in various households took leave from their work for the election. The male, however, were making themselves comfortable by squatting on the ground, having tobacco and talking with their fellow mates.

There were factions among people regarding their support to a particular party and the importance of Panchayat elections. Different factors like community feeling, class division, education, etc played a significant role in shaping the views of the people. The poorer Muslim people supported the AIUDF as they believed that the party would work for the welfare of the people. They were against the Congress party as the earlier Congress President had not helped them, they argued that a majority of the people did not have BPL cards because of which they lacked access to other facilities like fees for their children's education, free cycles, etc. They said that to get the BPL card one needed to pay a certain amount of money to some middle man. Apart from access to BPL card, they also had to pay the middle man to get free housing and electricity connection etc. The middleman here could therefore be seen as acting as an obstacle in the way of their development.

On the day of polling, many temporary food stalls, tea shops, fruit shop were established for the day in the hope of some good business. These food stalls were established by petty shopkeepers and some of them were sponsored by political parties. Party workers and supporters gathered there to have tea and pan. This is a common phenomenon in many rural areas of Assam during election times. It happens both during the campaign and in a big way on the day of polling. It gives the event the colour of a festival. On many occasions
therefore, elections in India is said to be a festival of democracy. It has both a symbolic and a concrete meaning.

On the day of polling, while one party was serving khichdi\(^6\) as lunch, another party was serving rice and dal. The whole day was spent in a festive mood. The children were playing around in the field. That day the schools were closed, so they did enjoy a lot. All categories of peoples had come to vote. Some men said that this time the public turn-out was less than the previous years. But as the election this time was for the Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik council and Zila Parishad, the role of the villager was very important. But they do not understand the importance of the election. Elections are becoming useless to many people because they think of it as a tedious process to come and cast their vote.

While standing in the queue, I interacted with some women. Their husbands were signaling to them to not interact with me. They thought I might influence them to vote for somebody else other than their own candidate. Some of them also said that they preferred to vote for the people of their own community, otherwise they would not be benefited. One woman from the Nepali community said the same thing. She said that it was not worth voting for a person from a different community because they only work for their own people.

There were also a few people who said that the religion of the candidate does not matter, but his qualities to work efficiently for the area is important. An old Nepali woman also said that she had been voting for Congress for a long time and she and her family still support it. Thus sometimes choosing a party also becomes a tradition in the family. Some people give preference to the party and some to the candidates.

One of the interesting things that I noticed was that there were some people who were trying to peep inside the polling room to get some idea about the situation inside. In fact, these were employed by the middle men to find what shape the polling was taking.

---

\(^6\) It is a popular dish and health food widely prepared in South Asia and mostly in India. It is prepared from rice and lentils with occasionally few seasonal vegetables mixed in it.
The study showed that local level politics was more significant for the people than Parliamentary and Assembly elections. The functioning of this local politics directly affects local people. Pre-election time is very crucial as it brings even the dominant people in the party to the common people. This is also a platform for the local people to bring up grievances and voice the demands that they have. Young people also earn some money as during this time they are engaged in work like campaigning, distribution of posters and also some paper work. Thus local level election is an important time for the people of the villages. Those who cannot read names cast their vote according to the symbol.

Someone said that when election would get over, the festive mood would vanish. Before few days in advance of these elections, they had been enjoying campaigning for the party and their daily subsistence had been taken care of by the political parties. Many women felt that the polling day was a rare occasion for them to dress well and come for voting. It is generally seen that women and young girl dress well, wear make-up, and come to the polling station as if they are going to some festival. There was hardly any shop opened in the regular market area as people were busy in the polling stations. Only two or three permanent stalls were open and the transport facility was very bad. But in spite of this, people came to cast their vote by faring different means of transport such as tempo, rickshaw, etc. There is a locality where tea garden labourers reside. It was about one kilometer away from the polling station. One party had taken the initiative to take people from that village to the voting centre by tempo and the fare was paid by the party member. It was believed that those people would cast their vote only for that particular party.

The women in the village had less knowledge about the elections than their male counterparts. However, there were some who showed their concern for having good roads and equal access to goods and services provided by the government. They are also aware about the government schemes in the village and the source of the problems created in the functioning of the programmes. They said that unless and until they raise their voices against it, problems would not be solved. According to them, these elections are crucial for there was high a chance of a change in the ruling party. This concern was seen among the women who at least had some level of education.
Women who hardly find time to come out and talk to people on normal days because of domestic work were seen enjoying outside their homes on the day of polling. They were talking, laughing and interacting with each other. Their conversations were mostly related to their children, their family, and their husbands. It is seen that after reservation policy for women, they also are becoming politically conscious. Political issues have now found a place in their discussion. However, their interpretation is different from men. They understand politics only at the local level, know the names of only local leaders, and do not know much about the all India or the state scenario. When asked about whom they would vote for, they replied that they heard the male members in their families discussing about the candidates and the parties. It was on the basis of the decisions of the male members that they voted or chose a particular candidate. They were usually not very open to talking about election related issues. They were hesitant to discuss these issues in public. However, their response varied on the basis of communities they belonged. For example, a Muslim woman was more shy and hesitant than a Nepali or Bihari woman. Further, the way of responding also varied according to classes, as economically better off women were discussing issues more openly than poor women and their exposure to education and the outside world also determined their level of political awareness.

The contestants came to visit the polling booths and the common feature about them was that they would all go and greet the people in the queues. They would show them their respective symbols so that even the illiterates will be able to easily recognize their names on the ballot paper by looking at the symbols. Thus the symbols became their identity. They would also request people to pray for them, to bless them so that they emerge victorious. They also gave their last try by requesting people to vote in favour of them by making innumerable promises. Party workers also were bargaining with voters till the last moment. It is a common phenomenon during the time of elections.

Coming to the kids, the polling day was a fun time for them. No school, no classes, no studies, no scolding, they were freely enjoying their time, running here and there, playing games with friends etc. Thus different section of the people spent the day in their own way. Though people were disappointed with the government for not taking care of them, not fulfilling their needs, not keeping their promises, not living up to their expectations, and
denying them a descent living, they would still vote. The reasons cited by them reflected that even if they were not very enthusiastic to vote, majority of them especially women voted out of the fear that if they did not vote, their names might next time come in the list of D-voter. It becomes a big trouble to get their names out of that list as it also requires some money. Again they feared that they might lose their citizenship if they did not vote, they might be deported out from their country.

**Are Panchayat Elections More Important?**

Panchayat elections play a significant role for the people. The people said that during Panchayat elections they are well aware of the candidates as the candidates are from the same village or community which is generally not the case in parliament or Assembly elections. They further said that in terms of some crisis the people could seek the help of the Panchayat where they could get help within a short span of time. These things make Panchayat elections so significant in the lives of the people.

For most of the rural people, Panchayat elections are the most important. They have different reasons for this. Firstly, Panchayats are more easily accessible to them and they can easily approach the Panchayat member for any of their problems, which is not the case with the MPs or MLAs. Further, all rural development schemes are implemented through the Panchayats so their requirements are fulfilled by the Panchayats and thus it is a very important institution for them. Again, some Panchayat members are from their own village, so the community sentiment is there. Mostly Panchayat elections are a local affair and therefore people are more enthusiastic about it. They are also familiar with most of the members, know how they are, who they are and this makes Panchayat elections interesting for them.

Regarding the difference between Panchayat elections and Assembly elections, one of the respondents said that the Panchayat elections are smaller than Assembly elections. Another one said that both are the same. Some respondents said that Assembly elections were more important because ministers were elected in those elections. In Panchayat elections only local people are elected. Some respondents said that Panchayat elections were more powerful in terms of influencing people so it was more important for them. When one
woman was asked whether she would vote or not, she directly replied ‘vote dile ki hobo, mor eku labh nai, heikarone najau’ (What will happen if I vote, I won’t get any benefit, that is why I will not vote). One man from the tea garden community said that if someone would pay me, only then I would cast my vote, otherwise not.

While responding to the questions, some women from the tea garden community got aggressive and opined that corruption was everywhere. She argued that the members of the political parties only came during elections to seek vote, they always ran after the people to get support. But once they captured power, the people have to run after them. One woman from that group said that it was very unfortunate that ticket was always given to the rich people. Nobody from their community was given the ticket. Therefore, they always remained backward and deprived.

One old woman sarcastically put forward her views. She said that the Panchayat members often maintained, ‘there are no poor people in our village’. That meant we all are rich, so we are not given any facilities which are provided by the government. But there existed a very pathetic condition in their village. That is why, this time around, they decided not to go for polling. She lamented that earlier members of the Gaon Panchayat won because they voted and helped them. After winning they had no time for the people. They were only busy in making their own profit. She said that one can observe that the houses of the members of the Panchayat were kutcha before elections, but after that it became a concrete building. Their kin and relatives got all the schemes instead of the poor. She said that Panchayat elections were totally dependent on them. In a real sense, they believed that Panchayat was their government. They have no rights or control in Parliament or in the affairs of the Assembly. But at the local level, they had right and chance to make a good Panchayat committee, which can help the poor and work for the betterment of the villages.

**Why Vote?**

There are various reasons because of which people vote. It is evident from the field work that one of the most important factors why they vote is to prove and retain their Indian citizenship. We know from chapter 3 that postcolonial Assam has witnessed much internal as well as international migration. Polling percentage in most of the places in Sonitpur
District is near about 90%. This is not imaginable in other parts of the country. It is largely because there is a political propaganda by brokers that if one does not vote, for one or two specific parties, then she/he will lose their citizenship status; fearing this, people vote in large numbers in this region.

Mukulika Banerjee in her study on elections tried to explore why people vote. She found out that there are various reasons why people vote. These are: resignation, instrumentality, loyalty, affectivity, peer pressure, voting for citizenship, voting for recognition, voting as a duty and right (Banerjee 2014). But Banerjee did not address the issue of what are the factors involved and why people vote for a particular party or a particular candidate. In the concluding chapter of this study, it has been discussed on the basis of the findings of the field work.

**Election as People’s Power**

It is seen from the study that mostly marginalized people who are not comfortable in dealing with the government officials come out openly during the time of elections. They form various small groups for getting a kind of bargaining power to interact with the middlemen or political broker. The idea of political clientelism has been discussed in chapter 3.

One old man was asked about the importance of elections for him was, as he was not very active in the political process. He replied that election time is the only time when they felt privileged and powerful. All along they had to beg political leaders and brokers to have access to scarce resources and welfare schemes. But during elections political leaders came to our houses to ask for our support and vote. So they felt proud and privileged during the time of elections and participated in it with enthusiasm. It can be inferred that the pre-election time was a phase which give poor and marginalized people a power to bargain and uncover themselves.

**People’s demand and expectations from their Leader**

Regarding the development of their region people have certain expectations from the newly elected MLA. As Napam and Panchmile regions are affected by flood caused by the Jiya
Bhoroli river, majority of the people are flood victims. So, their main demand is proper embankment on the river. According to the villagers, all kinds of socio-economic problems are exacerbated due to the flood. They, therefore, demanded rehabilitation of the flood victims. They felt that the Gaon Panchayat was corrupt and it should be checked. Otherwise, the poor people have to suffer a lot.

According to many people from the Muslim community, they belong to the minority community. That is why, there was always a fear that if they did not cast their vote they would be branded as D voters and that they would have to prove their Indian citizenship. One old man from the Muslim community sarcastically told, ‘if you wear a white cap, wear a lungi and speak Bangla (Mymensinghia) then you must be a Bangladeshi, who has come to India illegally. People do not know that we are settled here from generations. The masjid (mosque) here in Panchmile is 100 years old’.

When people were asked about the integrity and honesty of the leader of their choice, one replied with an Assamese proverb ‘Ji Lankaloi Jai Siyei Ravan Hoi’ (Whoever goes to Lanka, becomes a Ravana). They argued that all these manifestos, agendas, promises made by the political parties were only meant for their political gain and not meant for the welfare of common citizens. After getting elected they forget the common people and work for their own benefit.

The campaigning period has different meanings for different people. Some people look forward to free meals and free alcoholic drinks. Some of them are interested in money. One middle aged man from the Nepali community said that this was the time when they get bribes from the political broker and leaders; otherwise it is the other way round. We have to pay them to get our things done. The meaning of political campaign for different people is primarily in terms of free alcoholic drinks and free food.

Many women feel that during elections time, they take a day off from their mundane everyday life. They receive special attention from political leaders and vote seekers. It is a testing time for the broker as he has to show his power and strength to the candidate and party leader for whom he or she is working.
Elections as Magic and Performance

Yaahan murdo ke liye zameen hi zamme hai lekin Zinda logo ke liye sar tak dhakne ki zaga nehi hai (Here you have enough land for the dead, but for the living one no space to even hide their heads). Once I heard it from a co-passenger on a city bus while traveling by Raj Ghat area (This is a place in New Delhi where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated and where a couple of eminent politicians have their memorials). What is crucial here is the power of the dead as a symbol. People get elevated from their regular position to a higher position after death. This might depend on the social position of the dead. There are cases like Baba Mandir in Sikkim. (This is a temple erected after a soldier named Harbhajan Singh who died in a war while fighting with Chinese soldiers). Taking various cases from different sites in Latin America social anthropologist Michael Taussig discusses how magical powers enable things to be more powerful.

Oxford English dictionary defines ‘magic’ as the power of apparently influencing events by using mysterious or supernatural forces/mysterious tricks/a quality of being beautiful and delightful in a way that seems remote from daily life. Further, OED explains magic as an informal exceptional skill or talent/having or apparently having supernatural powers/very effective in producing the desired results.

Taussig quotes Nietzsche and writes that Nietzsche made the point that metaphor constitutes the human world by being forgotten. Absorbed in cultural reality, it takes the form of a literal truth. Taussig writes, “(T)ruths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions: worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses: coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins, but merely as metal”(Taussig 1997, 35).

In this mundane world, many abstract ideas and symbols attain very powerful positions in a human being’s life. It starts from various totems and cultural symbols. One of the most common and apt examples of an abstract idea or symbol having magical powers is money. It is symbolic but it mediates into the concrete world. Money is both measure and medium of all commodities. A piece of metal becomes a coin or paper becomes currency and gets magical powers to operate at a different level. In the same way, during elections an
ordinary man gets power, indeed magical power to elevate him/her self so that he can get a
pure place. Money has to be in circulation. Then only it creates more magical value. All
that is solid melts into air. What I mean to share here is how dead people have a kind of
power over those who are living.

Magic, myth and elections are significant in the lives of many people. Under modern
democratic rule, governance is one of the key elements. The state tries to implement
policies in a scientific manner. The modern scientific practices of the state and its failure at
implementation are often critiqued in sociology and anthropology. Even though magic is
defined a pseudo-science by many, its performance in various ways is empowering many
people as Taussig has argued. In India, elections are most fascinating and it is no less in
Assam. It is interesting to note how political parties and leaders can exercise magic and
myth to bind the voters. Power is felt at various levels, starting from the bureaucrats to the
ordinary citizens. Elections occupy a special space in people’s imagination and in their
everyday life especially during elections. Malinowski (1992) writes that magic serves the
primitive to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation,
which holds right in some contexts even now, as in the places where the study has been
conducted.

Ajmal, Taj Mahal and Elections

Ajmal Ali was a farmer in Alinagar in the Nagaon District of Assam. He started a perfume
business by extracting agar in his area. Later, he became a wealthy businessman and started
many charitable work. His son Badruddin Ajmal was born in 1950 and inherited his
business. He runs Ajmal foundation and various charity organisations such as hospitals and
orphanages. Badruddin Ajmal established a political party named Assam United
Democratic Front (AUDF) in 2005, later it became AIUDF and registered as a national
party.

In the 2006 Assembly election in Assam, AIUDF won 10 seats. In the 2011 Assembly
election in Assam, the AIUDF won 18 seats to become the second largest party in terms of
strength next only to the Congress. Even established parties like AGP won fewer seats than
AIUDF. Over the period, Ajmal has reached the status of a messiah among large sections of
the Muslim poor. He is also considered a son of Allah for the poor. People believe he has some divine power through which he can ameliorate many problems that they have. That is why wherever he goes people in large numbers attend his meetings or gatherings. He even gives magical medicine to people and they take it very seriously.

The event which I am going to recount here occurred on the occasion of a public rally for the Panchayat elections. The event where Ajmal was expected to address the public rally was no less than a magic event. On 2 February 2013 in Panchmile locality, a large number of people gathered to witness a historical event. People were even brought from the nearby places in mini bus and small vehicle. People in large numbers came to attend the meeting from distant places. Free transport service was provided by the party from different places, which helped the people to come and attend the meeting. This was also a means for mobilizing people in order to get mass support. The older people were most benefited from this service. This free service therefore attracted a large number of crowds. People regarded Ajmal to be the child of 'Allah' who will work for their welfare and development. Ajmal was indeed the reason for many of the people to come to the meeting, as they believed that if they can get the sight of Ajmal all their sins would go away. People considered him so divine that they came early in the morning covering long distance just to hear his words. It was a festive scenario where large crowds were present, there were different food stalls, people were singing together expressing their love for Ajmal, children were playing together, women were colourfully dressed up and enjoying their day free from their regular household works. It was also observed that even elderly people were so excited to see Ajmal that they were carrying flags of the party chanting Ajmal’s name.

There was so much enthusiasm among people that though the meeting was to begin at 2 pm, they started coming to the ground from 8 am. Women dressed as beautifully as they could. Children had a great time full of fun and frolic. Many of them never had the opportunity to see helicopters from such a close proximity and this also tempted them to wait patiently for long hours to have a glance of the helicopter. Thus, there was great excitement, enthusiasm among the people. On the pretext of the meeting, the people found the opportunity to come out, all the family members could come out together to communicate, interact with others. Therefore, they had a good time, which otherwise they
hardly get because of their hard, busy work schedules to meet two square meals a day. Thus, there were several factors, which motivated them to gather in the ground leaving aside all their other daily work.

While talking with the women it was found that they did not have much knowledge about the elections, they were only aware about the fact that Ajmal was coming to the meeting. Some people also came to see the helicopter knowing that Ajmal would come in a helicopter. It was interesting to see that among the supporters of AIUDF there were also supporters of other parties like the Congress. These people were monitoring the situation, analysing the amount of support they were receiving and the chances of their party winning. They were playing a silent role where they were not showing their support to a particular party but were taking into account the views of different people.

There were thousands of people in their colourful dresses gathered in the meeting. It was like a mela. Both Hindu and Muslim people were gathered. However, Muslims were in majority. The Muslims considered him as an agent of God. He was not only a political leader but also a spiritual leader for the Muslims. They considered him as their problem healer. It was a sight which shows that for the Muslims, Azmal was seen as a mediator between them and God, who would help them to solve their problems. People were entertained with songs praising Azmal, which was also a way of attracting people to come to the meeting. Song’s lyrics described Azmal as the leader of the poor and Allah’s messenger to rescue the poor from the clutches of the Congress government which is sucking the poor people’s blood.

An old man was holding a flag of AIUDF and was roaming around the field. He said that he wanted to meet Azmal personally and ask his help to improve his conditions. He was very hopeful regarding this party. Even the women, were seen to be very enthusiastic. They were happy that they would see Azmal. The meeting in a way was also a source of relief from the daily chores for the women. Women said that it was indeed their luck to see and listen to their spiritual leader Azmal in person.

This charismatic figure attracted thousands of people with lots of hopes in their heart. They wanted to change their destitute condition. People were also carried to the venue by party
sponsored vehicles from far off places. Vehicles were running one after another to carry people to the meeting. This shows the importance of the presence of more and more people for the credibility of the party. Even people showed no complaints for traveling miles to come to the meeting. This is a sign of their grievances against the party in power and their growing concern to have a just party.

Party workers gave full energy and effort to make the meeting a success; they kept on announcing from many days before about Ajmal’s arrival, facilitated people to come to the ground by providing them free transport facilities, etc. They tried every possible way to convince people across caste, class, religion, and community to come and listen to Ajmal. The huge gathering on the meeting ground stands as a testimony to the fact that the party workers tried and succeeded in bringing people to the ground. In this area, especially poor people consider Badruddin Ajmal as a spiritual healer. He has been accorded almost godly status by the people here. The people, who were once diehard supporters of Congress, were seen shifting their loyalties to AIUDF, and thereby the party gained enormous popularity.

The reasons for this shift can be mainly attributed to people’s disappointment, religious factors and other community sentiments.

Another important reason behind rising popularity of AIUDF was undeniably the religious sentiment. As large chunk of population were followers of Islam and Ajmal too belonged from the same community, he had an added advantage as religious sentiment also strongly lured people to the AIUDF camp. They could connect or relate to him as they followed the same religion. For them he was a religious leader, an agent of God who would take away all their pains and heal their wounds. They were so devoted to him that they felt if they were fortunate to at least have a glance of him; their sins will be washed off. They would sing ‘Ajmal amar jaan’ meaning ‘Ajmal is our life’. Further the ‘lungi, the long-white beard and the white cap on the head’ image that he carries has imprinted itself on the minds of the people a sense of brotherhood and belongingness, because they can easily relate themselves with that image and the feeling that Ajmal belonged to them and that they belonged to the same fraternity. This sentiment went in favour of AIUDF.

Different people had different views and interpretations about how Ajmal was coming. Someone said that after performing Namaaz, Ajmal would come by airplane directly from
Macca/Arab, another said that he would come by train from Guwahati. Someone said that at the earlier meeting at Napam organized by the Congress party there were not so many people. It was then concluded that it was an indication that interesting elections at the Panchayat level could be seen for the first time at Napam. They contended that many people, not only Muslims, had split from the Congress and joined AIUDF or other parties. This was so, because they believed that some Congress leaders had beaten and scolded some Muslim men during the conflict between the Bodos and the Muslims of immigrant origin in the Udalguri area of BTAD during October 2008. Someone said that Ajmal was like a God for them, that he knew everything, that every Friday he used to go to Arab (where Macca, the most sacred place for the Muslims, is located) for praying. Someone from the crowd prompted ‘Ajmal is like the Tajmahal’. These people saw him as one next to God, there were countless stories that were doing the round. These people believed that Ajmal sahab was there for fighting for their rights.

The meeting also allowed lots of people to earn some money. Many shops selling sweets, food items, chocolates, etc were installed and this was a source of additional income for the shopkeepers. Further, the delay in the meeting was also a boon for them as it resulted in people getting hungry and therefore more sale and profit. Further, a group of young boys was given money to convince and bring people to the ground. Again, the local taxis also had additional earning as they were paid more than usual by the party members for bringing people to the ground. In this way, election meetings become a boon, a source of extra income for some people.

When the time got close to approximately 3 pm, people’s eagerness increased. They were waiting and waiting. Some people were looking and pointing towards the sky. They were looking for the helicopter in which Ajmal was supposed to come. After waiting for such a long time, we saw a sign of some flying object. It was the helicopter which many people were waiting to see. It was coming from the clouds creating a hazy environment. People were looking towards the sky as if an angel was coming from the sky. In a moment, the helicopter landed on the ground. The whole area was echoing with ‘Hazoor Saab Hazoor Saab’ chanting. But the next moment, it was not Hazoor Saab but his son who came out of the helicopter. People got stunned but next moment they changed their mind from Hazoor
Saab to his son. People were fighting to touch his beard. It is believed that for a good Muslim, his beard is a holy symbol. When I asked whether they are disappointed by Hazoor not coming, one person replied that his son had even greater divine powers than Azmal Sahab. If he wishes, he can bring on rain in moment or stop rain if it is raining.

Various lores were told about Hazoor Saab. There was a booth for publicity by Congress party erected outside the Tezpur University gate. While addressing a gathering of around 200 people, one worker from the Congress party mimicked Ajmal with his effigy. The next day, I met supporters of AIUDF and Ajmal. One of them narrated two stories to me. Once during the last Assembly election, one person soiled a poster of Ajmal. After two days, blood came out of his body from various parts and he died. Once dacoits went to loot Ajmal’s house, on gun point they asked Ajmal and he gave them keys to open his locker. When they went they found nothing, Ajmal was asked where the money was, he said it was there in the locker. They did not believe him and asked him to come with them. When it was opened, they saw millions of rupees kept in the locker. Dacoits bowed before him, touched his feet and they fled away. You see something must happen with this Congress worker who insulted Ajmal. You will come to know very soon.

On the next day, I met the supporter of Ajmal. He instantly told me with anxiety when he met me, ‘Janab, kaam to hoi goi se’ (sir, the work is done). I asked what happened, he told the person who mimicked Ajmal Saab met with an accident and even doctors from a big hospital in Guwahati are telling that it would be very difficult to save him. Now do you know Hazoor’s power? Such kind of lore elevated Badrudin Ajmal to a godly status. As magic is defined as a quality of being beautiful and delightful in a way that seems remote from daily life, similarly, poor people try to connect themselves to the magical power of Ajmal to experiences that which is not usual in everyday life. This kind of magical power gave the poor a kind of confidence which otherwise might not be possible.

Ritual, Performance and the Polls

In a big country like India, there are huge logistics involved in conducting elections and polls. This task is even harder in the so-called socially and politically unstable and disturbed areas. Once the dates are announced for the elections, distinctive administrative
officials start preparing for the polls. The DC sends a letter to many government employees in the district including university teaching and non-teaching staff. In the case of Sonitpur District, they conducted a training programme in the District library hall, Tezpur. On the specified date, those who had been asked to do the elections duty went to attend the meeting.

Clifford Geertz suggested a terminology called ‘Theatre State’ with reference to 19th century Negara in Bali. Though his work faced criticisms of being ahistorical, it suggests an interesting sociological analysis, which can be applied to the modern state. This term is used in a sense where the state is more interested in continuing and performing dramas and rituals through various symbolic practices rather than emphasizing on the welfare of the subjects. The state often legitimizes itself through large-scale ceremonies and public rituals like the elections. In this work, Geertz’s idea of the theatrical state is relevant in the background of the election process in a country like India (Geertz 1980).

Before one day of elections, all government vehicles and hired vehicles gathered in the open field in front of a college to collect the ballot papers and ballot boxes. Then using these vehicles, polling officers along with security personnel reached the destination where they were deputed to conduct the elections. These vehicles are demarcated from other vehicles with a big sticker or banner on it writing ‘on election duty’. All vehicles carried a poster bearing the code name of the booth and its number. The officials recognized the booth by its number.

What happened a day before the polling at the place where voting was going to take place? What changed the whole environment into a magical arena through certain rituals reinforcing the presence of the state? It has been argued that the state manifest itself through concrete and abstract symbols as well as practices. How the idea of the state is perceived in everyday lives of the people, description of this voting event would give us a different kind of understanding of the process.

In the ‘Introduction’ chapter it has already been discussed how the idea of the state is very much present in people’s everyday affairs. Foster, through his ethnographic account of voting in the Tanga Islands, Namatanai Electorate, New Ireland Province of Papua New
Guinea, shows the concrete act of casting a vote in the national election assumes the form of a secular ritual in the structure and symbolism of its performance. He writes, “the act of voting performatively demonstrates membership in a community of voters (the nation) whose relationship to each other is mediated, expressed, and guaranteed by the state. At the same time, the act of voting constitutes 'the state' as an experiential reality however temporary, for people who otherwise rarely encounter state’s agents or agencies (military, legal, or administrative) as a salient aspect of their everyday lives” (Foster 1996, 146).

Generally, in India government schools are used as polling stations. Schools are also symbols of the modern secular practice of the state. The condition of government run schools in most parts of India is pathetic. This is the only time when the broken buildings of schools are put in a relatively fair shape. One evening before the day of polling, vehicles and election personnel take position at the school. All of a sudden the area looks different. With a red ribbon or marker demarcating the outer area from the voting area with various signs, wood and bamboos are used to make different queues to facilitate the polling process where men and women would line up.

The next day morning, it gives rise to an unusual scene. The place where children used to play and go to their classes is forbidden for them. They can only play outside the demarcated area for the day. Outside the polling booth, party workers would stand and sit with a table with a list of voters. Before entering the field their name would be checked in the list and they would be given a number, which is against their name, which they need to show to the election officers in the time of voting.

This checking procedure of names in the voter list gives identity of two kinds. One is where individuals reinforce their citizenship status through the act of voting and the other is that how they distinguish themselves from the non-voters who struggle to be part of the nation state’s legitimate member. The ink mark on the nail gives a different symbolic value to this process of voting. Foster mentions, “more tangibly, the indelible ink stripe drawn on one's finger signifies membership in the community of active voters. By the end of the day, the adult population would be classified into two categories: voters and non-voters, the former recognizable by their marked fingers” (Foster 1996, 163). This means people belonging to the marginalized sections, who are looked upon as a doubtful category of citizens, feel
relieved after voting. In the larger framework, it is also related to the issue of the patron-client relationship: whom to vote and why? From the ethnographic detail of the elections as discussed above, it emerges that people, especially the poor marginalized section in the backward rural areas, does not always vote on the issue of good governance. Political protection, patronage and material benefit become the most important consideration for voting a particular party or candidate. In this, candidates and parties with whom they can easily identify in terms of issues of interest and collective identities (religion, language, etc) get a preference in the voter’s choice. The voter believes that such parties or candidates would be more accessible to them for addressing their needs and concerns.