ABSTRACT

Political participation and democracy have become central to the recent discourse of social scientists, practitioners and the public at large. The present-study is an initial effort in the process of identification and analysis of salient trends in the attitudes and behaviour of a minority community in the Indian state of Assam. In this analytical study we have presented summary data on the attitudes of the Muslims of Assam towards political process and looked at the theoretical significance of these data. Hopefully this may add to our knowledge of contemporary political culture of the community in the state under study.

Political participation refers to all those voluntary involvement of individuals or groups at various levels of political process that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities, or the policies of government. These activities either may be supportive of the existing politics, authorities, or structure, or they may seek to change any or all of these. The study is solely based on empirical analysis of the beliefs, orientations and perceptions of the Muslim minority in the state of Assam especially focusing on the role of this segment of population in the political system at micro level. With this objective in mind, a survey was conducted by this researcher with the support and help of friends and associates throughout the state in order to empirically explore Muslim’s political cultural orientations in the state. The survey was made in nine districts divided into two famous valleys (situated on the river bank of Barak and Brahmaputra) by randomly selecting eight hundred samples from the Muslim community. During the survey we attained full cooperation of the respondents in some areas while in some other areas a lack of cooperation was felt due to the suspicion on the part of the respondents. (See Chapter-iv for detail). However, on the basis of data collected and computed, an analysis has been made on political culture of Muslims in Assam that leads us to conclude with a few observation of general nature.

Cognitive orientations covers people’s knowledge about political system and various sub systems. Consciousness of individuals about their elected representatives, especially accurate information about various socio-economic and politico-cultural associations and organisations which work for their cause, awareness about various problems which the country, state as well as the community is facing is also included.
in the cognitive inquiries. The extent of their knowledge about the national anthem, National Flag, national, regional or local leaders was also covered in our data. A variety of impressions emerge from this data, covering different aspects of the individual’s images of the polity.

The study reveals that Muslim minority in the state of Assam has an impressive knowledge about politics and existing political system. Table 4-1., shows that at least 82% respondents in the state could correctly name two or more candidates from their respective constituencies and one third (33%) could name three or more candidates along with mentioning party. more than 63% could recognize three or more national political parties, about 46% could name the party of the Prime Minister of the country and 69% could correctly mention the name of the party to which the chief minister of the state belongs (Table; 4-1). Close to or more than majority can correctly identify political candidates and election winners. Their knowledge of candidacies at the state level, because of the salience of politics at that level, is greater than at the national level.

As far as the awareness of national symbols and heritage is concerned, though 83% of the respondents could correctly identify Indian ‘National Flag’ as tri-coloured, yet only 35% among them could correctly describe its colour pattern. Again, almost 40% could correctly recite few lines from the ‘National Anthem’ of India. (Table; 4-2) It shows a deep sense of patriotism that at least 67% could mention some of the names of national leaders or freedom fighters who gave sacrifices for the country and 77% could correctly say the name of the President of India. Thus, above findings about cognitive orientations of Muslims of Assam lead us to conceive that they have more than expected knowledge about political infrastructure. It means people are becoming more and more interested and paying more attention to political happenings around them since the agitation of 1983. (Details in the Chapter-IV)

Turning towards ‘affective orientation’ one can certainly see some encouraging reports from the survey data. Affective orientations imply their feelings of attachments and involvement on the one hand and detachments and rejections on the other with political objects. We find that inspite of being badly suppressed the community is highly attentive and much active in the political process. The data shows that 40% are interested in politics, while taking “great deal of interest” the slides down to 33%. Again, we find that 41% have ‘high interest’ and 31% ‘normal interest’, while only 25% have ‘no interest’ in voting. (Table 4-7) It is reasonably
higher level keeping in view the general backwardness of the state and moreover, many of the respondents come from the marginalized segment of the population in the state.

The findings demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Assam favour direct engagement in political process. About 79.5% said that they have been voting regularly in any of the three types of elections. (Table 4-8) This data is almost identical to the CAIR report of 2006 in which we find 79% American Muslims voting regularly. The survey report is also proved to be encouraging if we compare it with the 2004 national figure of USA which showed almost 78.5% of such response. Again, we found 67% respondents who voted at least once and 40% for more than twice in all the three (i.e. Panchayet, Assembly and Lok Sabha) elections. The latter category of respondents consists of voters who even have been voting for 25 years. Similarly, 44%, 57% and 88% could take part in the recent national (Lok Sabha), regional (Assembly) and in the local (Panchayet) elections respectively and amazingly, 41% could take part in all the three recent elections.

Although political discussions and many other informal participatory activities are common in Assamese Muslims, yet the percentage comes down when we observe on their direct participation. The data shows 42% respondents as active members of political party. (Table 4-9) There is no clear majority in party affiliation among respondents, but a plurality of the sampled voters reported an AUDF leaning. However, 28% of our samples do not belong to any party. This report is very much identical to the CAIR survey where 28% Muslims in America also reportedly do not belong to any party. Similarly, 35% of our sample helped a candidate or party during election, 33% distributed poling cards or literature for any political party or candidate and 34% joined in election campaign. This figure is very much encouraging in comparison to American federal government data which shows that only 29% of all American adults volunteered in 2005. It is found that 17% respondents have contributed money or provided any type of assistance for the election campaigns of a candidate or party. Again, the study finds 67% respondents joined the meetings or seminar of at least one party, 40% in two parties and about 23% attended three or more parties or candidates. Among them 61% attended the meetings of A.U.D.F., 54% of Congress, about 29% of A.G.P. and interestingly, twenty one percent 21% attended the meetings of all the three major parties. (Table 4-11)
Political discussion is a common phenomenon among the Muslims of Assam whether they directly participate in politics or not. Almost 92% respondents are believed to be involved in this practice. It is to be noted that most the respondents of this category are male. About 48% discusses it frequently, 32.5% for sometimes and a small number of 12% does the same for once in a while. (Table 4-12)

The survey report finds high eagerness of Muslim community to know about political news and election results. More than 86% listens radio during election periods; about 31% regularly, 26% often, 29% for sometimes and 31% among these respondents listen radio once for a while. However, only 23% who mostly belong to town area can regularly watch T.V., 12% can do so often and a negligible number of 7% can watch for once in a while. Again, some 19% read newspaper regularly, 21% often and only 15% avail this opportunity once in a while during election days. (Table 4-12)

The survey finds 41% respondents vote independently without caring for any person’s advice while 28% considers the advice of others before voting. (Table 4.10) The latter category of people belongs mostly to the extreme backward segments of the community which is still under some feudalistic influences residing generally in hilly area of tea garden. It is a matter of pleasure to find out 61% of Muslims vote on the basis of secularism and only 14% votes on the basis of other narrow considerations like- communalism and regionalism and so on. (Table 3.6) Similarly, 44% votes on the basis of candidate and 36% of them vote on the basis of party.

As the study is primarily concerned with the participatory activities of Muslims in the political process after the “Assam Agitation” of 1983 we find some remarkable changes in these activities. Muslims have become more conscious about the political responsibilities and started forming different organizations which culminated to the birth of A U D F. recently. Majority of Muslim population has been united under its banner. This trend of political behavior has been taking place as a result of their discontentment against the treacherous politics of various political parties who formed government in the state after the Agitation. According to H. N. Rafiabadi, Muslims in Assam feel insecure because of illegal deportation to Bangladesh by the government.

One noteworthy observation is that number of apolitical Muslims in the state is 20%. This phenomenon may be attributed to the large-scale backwardness of these people in almost every front of social life. Moreover, due to interrupted
communication facility, many of the Muslim dominant areas remain disconnected during the rainy seasons. The most important factor that led the community to be disinterested in politics is the lack of material development and nation building effort made by the Government. From the time of independence, they have been believed to be deprived of employment. Muslims residing in the hilly areas are more apathetic in comparison to plains. However, the survey reveals that 25% of the respondents regularly vote for a long time despite their having negative feelings towards political system. (Table 4-11) Thus, there is a tendency of alienation and involvement at the same time for the same citizen. Surprisingly, some of them actively participate in the political activities beyond voting.

As far as the evaluative orientation of Muslims in the state of Assam is concerned the data is somewhat admirable. We find 30% respondents expressed their full satisfaction, 24% showed somewhat satisfaction, and 23% asserted negative response with the performance of the Government in Delhi with regards to the problems of the state. A small number of only 23% respondents could not say anything regarding the responsiveness of central government. An impressive number of 91% respondents could give their opinions either positively or negatively about the performance of the local administration. (Table 4-4) But it is a matter of deep regret that nearly 50% of the sample replied negatively when enquired about the performance of government officials at local level.

Muslims in Assam commonly believe that government officials are not much careful about the problems of people in general and Muslims in particular. This is due to rampant corruption and nepotism in the local institutional set-up with which ordinary citizens interact regularly in their day to day life. It is well known among the people of the state of Assam that nothing can be achieved from the government officials without offering money. Moreover, it is widely believed that no post of repute in government services would deliberately be provided for a Muslim candidate. Thus, dissatisfaction among the Muslim population of the state has been generated.

As far as their views on the performance of the Prime Minister of India is concerned, 50% expressed their appreciation, only 11% viewed him as fairly good and a small number of 18% showed dissatisfaction with his performance. This high percentage of favouring P. M. may be due to his representation from Assam itself or for his being from minority community. The data reveals that a considerable number of Muslims in Assam have support for democratic values and institutions: almost 55% of
our total sample believe that their vote has a great value and do have positive effect in the affair of the country while 17% thinks that their votes do not play any significant role on the affair of the country. More than 67% of respondents could give their opinion about the law and order situation of the country in last ten years. Again, 67% could say something about the carefulness of their leaders towards the community.

Turning to the extent of political efficacy i.e. one's role perception in the political system, we find a breeze of optimism in the Muslims of Assam. The survey reveals 53% respondents as efficacious who believe that government officials take care to the problems of the public, while 40% replied that these people do not care much about people's problems. Again, nearly 53% are satisfied with the performance of the government at Centre while only 34% are content with the Government at the state level. During the survey, we have noticed a great degree of distrust prevailing over the performance of local administrative set-up. People feel insecure at the hand of police administration more than militants because of its exercising extra-constitutional power. Harassment of innocent Muslims and their deportations from the state has become a normal trend in the administrative activity. Therefore, the Central Government must keep a kin eye on the issue and bring out its proper remedy.

As far as satisfaction with the Local Self Government or Gram Panchayet system is concerned our data is quite optimistic. Almost 30% sample believe that Gram Panchayet remains careful as it is fully controlled by the villagers, while some 32% declared it as somewhat careful and 23% have no faith on this institution. (Table 4-6) It seems that local self government institutions in Assam are less corrupt and more responsive than higher governmental offices. It speaks volume about the utility of democratic decentralization, especially in the context of minorities in the state.

Although there are a number of Muslims leaders in the State Legislative Assembly, yet Muslims feel that their voice is not properly conveyed to the government and their demands are not fulfilled: The leaders have no interest to serve the community. It was found that 46% respondents are of the opinion that there is no leader who cares for Muslim cause. Only 27% of total sample, who are mostly active participant in politics or who are kins of politicians are of the opinion that there are some leaders who struggle for the interest of the Muslim community. (Table 4-6) This type of negative feeling has become common after the agitation of 1983. It is not unusual in public opinion polls to see a high percentage of Muslims feeling alienated in a country which is yet to be fully developed. The CAIR Research Center in 2006
presents the results of its first scientific survey which shows that a large segment of American Muslim voters (43%) feel a certain level of alienation. Therefore, the overall sentiment swings between the hope for inclusion and the fear of prejudice. To reach a deeper understanding of this sample in its larger American and Muslim contexts, this report compares findings of this poll to other surveys, including U.S. Census Data and public opinion trends.

There is no doubt that Muslims in Assam were encouraged to participate in politics largely by Assam Agitation. The Nellie massacre in 1984 also strengthened their feeling of a separate nation. Moreover, the recent dismantling of I.M.D.T. Act., by the Supreme Court of India which eventually gave birth of A.U.D.F. an influential political party led by high level Muslim clerics also has given impetus in the participatory activities among the Muslims of Assam. The sample also shows satisfactory degree of political efficacy score 50%.

In the Chapter V, we have discussed the nature and magnitude of political mobilisation of Muslims in Assam. Special importance has been given to analyse the role of political parties in the process of mobilization as these institutions perform a crucial function particularly in a society like India where open and competitive politics is relatively a new phenomenon. In such a society they play active role in the institutionalization of political system and in the process of national integration. As a result of their internal competitions for holding power, every community or group at the “periphery” of the social system is mobilized into the centre of organized politics. These political parties provide foci to durable political identification among the large mass of voters who are still apolitical. Thus, they make people’s participation in the political decision making meaningful and relevant.

We have used a device namely “Campaign Exposure Index” in order to determine the level of campaign-exposure of the respondents. (See detail in the Chapter-V). On the basis of that index, campaign exposure is recorded and then correlated with various types of participatory activities. The data of the index indicates merely 9% of the respondents is completely out of contact, while about 38% of our sample is minimally exposed, 29% as considerably exposed and remaining 24% constitute the high exposure to the election campaign process. Here it is worth mentioning that though data is the culmination of combining exposure levels of all the three types of election, yet regarding the local election campaign the figure is more impressive than the exposure level of the Parliamentary or Assembly election. Thus,
the exposure level of Muslims in the state is not negligible in comparison with modern democratic world. The political activity of this group has increased dramatically within the past twenty five years as a result of relentless efforts of United Minority Front (UMF) formed after facing tangible prejudice and bigotry during 1983 Agitation. In fact, Muslims in the state, like in other parts of India were not much active in the politics before 1984. When the community faced severe Nellie massacre in 1984 and its subsequent illegal evictions and deportations to neighboring Bangladesh through misusing IMDT Act. by the government officials, they found no room to escape from these problems and started leaning towards politics. They saw in the use of democratic institutions as a means to protect themselves from the organized harassment by violent groups like ULFA, AASU, BODO, NFBD and the like. They also have already lost faith in govt. officials due to its unequal and partial treatment. For instance, during the AGP regime thousands of Muslims were deported to illegally alleging them as Bangladeshi immigrants in order to satisfy the party supporters and AASU leaders. So there activeness in politics is nothing rather than a demand of the situation where they have been adapted. Certainly, it was in the 1985 campaign and immediately afterwards that Muslims became significantly and dramatically more active.

The data brings out a distinct pattern of analysis regarding the co-relation between the campaign exposure and political participation. The exposure to the party and campaign is concomitant with the frequency of participation in political activity. Both march hand-in-hand and exposure leading to frequent participation activities and vice-versa. Thus, table 5-2 shows that those “0” exposure category takes much less interest in politics (6%) than that of “1” exposure category (followed politics in the media of mass communication) that constitute 35%. Similarly, the exposure level further increases in “2” exposure category (i.e., who attended election meeting rallies etc.) constituting 62% interested in politics. This reaches to its peak with “3” (highest) exposure level scoring 77% interested in politics. The trend is similar in other indices taken for showing political involvement in the table 5-2.

Therefore, we can undoubtedly assess that with the development of political infrastructure in the state, political parties also have achieved astonishing success in reviving suppressed Muslims political culture in the state over the span of twenty five years. They have succeeded in penetrating to the overwhelmingly traditional outfits and mostly suspected and neglected community of Indian society. This is a major
contribution to the process of nation building and efforts for promoting national integration of a nascent Indian state thereby bringing this prejudiced and hatred community of the society to the main-stream of the nation.

We have also looked carefully at the selected orientation of different mobilized sub groups of Muslim community in the state of Assam. For the sake of convenience our study is concentrated on voting behaviours as the criterion in order to analyse participatory activities of different mobilized sub-groups. The respondents were divided into--New Entrants, Regular Voters, Irregular Voters and Perennial Non-voters. (See Chapter-V for detail) Data in table 5.3 dealing with orientations of different categories of mobilized groups, places newly mobilized voters on the top of categories supporting the political system. They are the most active category followed by regular voters. Perennial non-voters are the least supportive of the political system. Similarly, regarding the support for party system the data shows seventy 71% respondents’ support of regular voter which is little less (i.e., 3%) than the newly mobilized voters. As far as support for local self governance system is concerned there is consistent difference between the two sub-categories of the respondents. Among the regular voters 59% respondents support has been recorded which is 17% less than that of new entrants in political participation

A very important and interesting fact in the form of overwhelming support for the self-governance-system among the newly mobilized sub-groups amply signifies that political development process is socializing the Muslim population of the state to a greater support for the democratic system. It also reveals the relevance of political parties for expansion of popular support for the system. This percentage is impressive considering the backwardness of the community of the state under study.

Regarding the activities beyond voting of Muslims the score is also very high. It is interesting to find that newly mobilized or new entrants are found more active than all other groups. The chief reason is that most of the new entrants are mostly students and unemployed young people who generally believe that without having a proper recognition with a political leader it is not possible to settle down with a government job in a least industrialized state of India where one can fortunately think of a job in private companies. Moreover, political leaders also can exploit these younger generation by luring them for jobs to work for them as volunteers, picketers and supporters during elections. However, from this observation we find that political
socialization of this segment of population has been dramatically developing from the period after Agitation of 1984.

The role of leadership is of crucial importance in mobilizing popular participation in a country. As our study is about a religious minority, it would be of special importance as the minority politics has become the heart of Indian politics in the recent years. Moreover, in a state where about one-third population belongs to Muslim community, their exposure to leadership obviously would have a great relevance in the process of political participation. A glance on the Table 5.5 leads us to comprehend that Muslims in Assam are excellently exposed to the leadership. We find 93% are exposed which ranges from marginal exposure (i.e., knows none but contacted with one) to high exposure (i.e., knows leaders personally and receives helps from them) category. Marginally exposed group (i.e., category no. 2 and 3) constitutes 20% of the total sample some of these people come in contact with leaders unintentionally but only by chance they happened to meet. Some of these people meet with leaders unpurposefully while they go somewhere like markets, towns or in the houses of relatives and leaders were already there in some meetings. Similarly, during the house to house poll campaigning they meet some of the leaders.

This impressive percentage of leadership exposure is a recent development found among the Muslims of Assam. Although it can not be denied that Muslim community in Assam was considerably exposed even before the attainment of Indian Independence as there were a number of leaders from their own community. Muslim activism in politics in the past few years has risen dramatically. The last five Assembly elections in the sate witnessed a sharp rise in Muslim voter turnout. But as described by Asghar Ali Engineer “since the Assam Agitation of 1983 the community has been an important vote bank for every political leader”. The importance of Muslim votes were further felt after the collapse of AGP regime proved to be the end of racial politics in 1999, now it is felt that Muslim vote bank is the deciding factor in the wining of elections in Assam as the community represent about one third population in the state.

Here, it is worth mentioning that if political development implies the acquisition of new cultural orientations, new awareness and beliefs in new institutions and process such as parties, periodical elections, gross root democratic institutions then such development has amazingly taken place within the Muslim community in the Indian state of Assam. Although this development is a comparatively a new
phenomenon and took place as a result of some incidental suppression, yet it is an achievement of Indian democracy.

In 'Chapter-VI', we have discussed about the extent and manner of public involvement as it is a key test of the democratic character of the system and is central to democratic theory. We are interested in the performance of the political system and feel that the extent and pattern of the public's participation can be related to the system's performance both in the narrow sense of the decisional outcomes from that system and in the much broader sense of the nature of the political process and the achievement of certain functional goals for the system, such as 'integration,' 'stability' and 'democracy'. We have followed the suggestion of Milbrath that there is no particular typological scale to measure the dimensions of political participation. On the basis of data we have made a seven fold classification among the several principal types of participation. These are (1) Allegiant (2) Attentive (3) Mass participative (4) Social group associates (5) Voting (6) Electoral campaigns (7) Elite contact. Each of these principal categories has some sub-categories. We have not found any hierarchical pattern among them on the basis of analyzing our data rather than a configurative model. Thus, a cosmic pattern has been found in Muslims participation in the political process.

There is a sound record about Muslim respondents in Assam as reported in the data regarding the extent of participation in politics. A high percentage of sixty (60%) is found as allegiant activists and amazingly eighty six percent (86%) are attentive in political activities. As far as mass participative behaviour is concerned we have found fifty three percent (53%) attended in the rallies and a relatively small percentage of thirty five (35%) reported to join demonstrations protests, gheraos etc. This means they are either peace loving or supportive social group. However, sudden rise in joining protests, demonstrations and gheraos during the recent years is a good indication that the community is shifting towards violent methods of political participation for influencing the decision making system at any cost.

A glance on social-group-associate type of participation finds an encouraging percentage of respondents are involved. About forty two percent (42%) belongs to a party, while thirty five percent (35%) reported to have ever worked for a party and amazingly fifty six percent (56%) had worked with a social or community organization (Table 6-4). Although the trend of social group associate behaviour was prevalent among Muslims from earlier period as there were a number of socio-
political reformers and leaders among them, yet it has ripened with the recent emergence of A.U.D.F. party which is rooted on Jamiat-Ulema-E-Hind (A religious reformist Association).

Voting is the most important weapon for a minority community to influence decision making machinery as minority politics in present India is in its peak. Our data in table 6-5 finds a good percentage of fifty four percent (54%) in the national election, fifty nine percent (59%) in the Assembly election and an exemplary score of seventy eight percent (78%) participated in the recent local (Panchayet or Municipal) election. If we compare this data with the elections held in Assembly election and Lok Sabha elections we find a distinction of 16% and 11% respectively. However, election for local self government is a recent phenomenon.

Turning towards participatory activities in the election the data is comparatively poor. About thirty-five percent (35%) Muslims actively participated in different campaign activities, while only seventeen percent (17%) reported to donate money to the candidate or the party. The score is low because most of the Muslims in Assam are farmers who have neither much money to use for donating nor much time to spare for political purpose. However the data records a fair percentage of Muslim engagement in elite contact behaviour. About fifty five percent (55%) reported to have contacted with party leaders and about thirty nine percent (39%) met with government official for different reasons, mostly their personal ones. It means they are less faithful on government official.

We have constructed a “participation index” in the analysis of socio-economic bases of political participation to facilitate our research. An impressive score of (43%) thirty four percent are highly participant citizen (table 6.8) in Assam; it is found that rural people are, to an extent more active in political process. They represent fifty two percent (52%) while the rural population scores forty eight percent (48%) as highly active participants. This is a good sign of penetrating participatory institutions and orientations to rural areas. Apart from these two residential categories we have also studied about the participation of those homeless who are residing in the river bank of Brahmaputra (Char Adhivasi). About thirteen percent (13%) among them are highly participants against forty six percent (46%) rural and forty three percent (43%) of urban population.

The general perception of “higher education leads to high degree of participation” has been challenged in our research finding. Instead, we have found
that semi-literate or the moderately literate population is more active in politics than
highly educated Muslims in Assam. A pleasant finding is that about fourteen percent
(14%) illiterates are highly active participant in our sample. There is no specific
pattern of correlation in the age with political activism. Age advancement do never
leads to high degree of participation. On the contrary, older citizens are largely
apathetic and youths and early middle aged are found highly active political
participants. Similarly, income level also does effect political participation. We found
that middle classes are more active and the working class is found least active as they
can not manage time and money. The data assures that unemployed Muslims of
Assam are more active (46%) and they are followed by farmers (29%), professionals,
while-collar and businessmen (15%) and working class (10%) respectively. Here our
analysis is, to an extent, closer to the findings of Ahmad & Eldersveld who conducted
a nation-wide study during 1971.

Thus, participation norms have affected this marginalised community thereby
resulting in higher degree of socialisation, better sense of citizenship and their
enlightment on the political scenario. Similarly, increased participation (especially by
rural folk) has resulted in mass-based leadership recruitment which ultimately led to
more democratic and competitive party system. Political parties have been greatly
successful in penetrating the largest minority groups in the state since 1984.
Moreover, this large scale participation has helped in the way of achieving a greater
system-integration which has an immense significance. This trend must be maintained
because still there is a vast percentage of people in this community who do not
participate in politics at all. They must be socialized in the mainstream of the political
system which is the only way to prevent them from becoming alienated and hostile
towards the system which is the worst challenge of the contemporary world.