

Assembly Elections of India, 2021: Revisiting Assam

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Abstract

In India, Assembly Elections were held in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry in the first half of 2021. Driving this study is an attempt to analyse the election results of the state of Assam where Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, *Mitrajot* or National Democratic Alliance (NDA), successfully defeated the Indian National Congress (INC), and its allies, *Mahajot* (Grand Alliance). Drawing primarily upon secondary data and applying GIS techniques, the study makes a critical analogy of how *Mitrajot* managed to accomplish victory.

Keywords: Assembly Elections 2021; Assam; West Bengal; Kerala; Tamil Nadu; Puducherry; GIS Techniques; India

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Introduction

Amradahri-topi-lungiwallah manusher sarkar hoiba. Aamrar ma-bhanidder dupatta izzat kora lagbo, amrar ma-bhanidder burkhar izzat kora lagbo (we beard-cap-lungi wearing people will form the government. The duppata of our mothers and sisters have to be respected. The burqa of our mothers and sisters have to be respected (Kalita, 2021)

These radical-religious-centric statements were made in the third phase of the election rally in Bhabanipur, Bajali district, Assam, on 3 April 2021, by Abdur Rahim, son of Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, the founder and Chief of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), on 03 October 2005.¹ Earlier, at another election rally of 30 March 2021, AIUDF hubris also commented:

Uppar Allah, dharti ka uppar Badruddin Ajmal, Inshallah (there is [a] God above and Ajmal in the ground) (Singh, 2021)

Unsurprisingly, these kinds of seismic statements seeded shockwaves among the common people in a state, who have been fighting against undocumented/ (il)/legal migrants from Bangladesh for decades. This fight culminated in The Assam Movement (or Anti-Foreigners Agitation), which was launched

jointly in 1979 by All Assam Students Union (ASSU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). This movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord² on the independence day, that is, on 15 August 1985 between the Union of India, Government of Assam, All Assam Student of Union, and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Barooah Pisharoty, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2009). During this historical movement, Assam lost 855 martyrs, young Bravehearts and sadly, Khargeswar Talukdar, the first martyr, who lost his life on 10 December 1979 due to police firing hailed from Ujanbarbori village near Bhabanipur, Barpeta district. Weiner (1983) compared this Assam movement with the violence and large-scale civil conflicts of Northern Ireland, Malaysia, Cyprus and Lebanon. We argue that this Assamese sub-nationalism movement entrapped in the linguistic and sub-cultural identity (ethnic and indigenous identities) of *jati, mati, bheti* (nationality, land and the hearth)³ (Bhattacharyya, 2019; Dutta, 2017) can be compared to Benedict Anderson's 'creole nationalism' (Anderson, 1983; 2006). Himself an expert on South East Asia's military conflicts, Anderson (2006: 47) commented about creole nationalism:

[W]hether we think of Brazil, the USA, or the former colonies of Spain, language was not an element that differentiated them from their respective imperial

¹ The AIUDF was born during the proceedings of the revocation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983. Popularly known as IMDT Act, it was promulgated in 1983 aimed at detecting and deporting illegal migrants from Bangladesh. However, the nuanced reading of the clauses of the Act appeared that the Act was indeed serving as a barricade to identifying and deporting illegal migrants as the onus of proving that a particular suspected individual accused of being illegal immigrant laid on the informer or the police rather than the suspect. This came to surface following the judgement of the writ petition, *Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union Of India on 5 December, 2006* at the Honourable Supreme Court of India (Sinha, nd). The question remains as to what was the need for the IMDT Act, which was specific to Assam alone when in other states, the illegal immigrants can be detected and deported under The Foreigners Act, 1946.

² Full text of the Assam Accord is available at: *The Assam Accord. Government of Assam: Implementation of Assam Accord*. <https://assamaccord.assam.gov.in/portlets/the-assam-accord>

³ Assam is home to about 30 ethnic groups (Hazarika, 2018) formed from centuries of conglomeration of Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Tai populations (Saikia, 2004). The physiography of Assam comprises of the mighty Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak (or the Surma Valley) along with Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The ethnic Assamese is predominantly found in the Brahmaputra Valley, while Bengali people dominate the Barak Valley. The Census of India (2011) reported a dwindle in the percentage of people speaking Assamese, Bodo, Rabha and Santali. In 2001 Census of India, the percentage of Assamese speakers stood at 48.80, which plummeted to 48.38 in 2011. The percentage of Bengali speaking people increased from 27.54 in 2001 to 28.91 in 2011.

metropolises. All, including the USA, were creole states, formed and led by people who shared a common language and common descent with those against whom they fought.

Anderson’s (1983; 2006) ‘creole nationalism’ can perhaps be connected to the emotional attachments of belonging of a particular community in a particular place, where the community discerns and perceives the danger of losing their identity (Yuval-Davis, 2011); here, as already mentioned above, the people of Assam continues to remain petrified by the linguistic and religious threat, primarily because of illegal migration from Bangladesh. However, this study is an attempt to critically discuss the Assembly Elections (*Vidhan Sabha*) of Assam, 2021. In so doing, it demonstrates how Bharata Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United People’s Party Liberal (UPPL)—the so called *Mitrajot* or National Democratic Alliance (NDA), as opposed to *Mahajot* (Grand Alliance) comprising of the Indian National Congress (INC), AIUDF, Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) and Communist Party of India (Marxist)(CPI (M)) managed to retain its power in Assam for the second consecutive term.

In the first half of 2021, three other states— West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry (the Union Territory) went to Assembly polls. As stated above, using GIS techniques, closer scrutiny of the election process of Assam alongside ethnographic observation deriving from the ‘insider’ status of both the authors, this brief communication is an attempt to analyse the verdict of Assam election critically.

The study begins with a brief overview of the outcome of Assembly Election 2021 of the different states. This is followed by a short discussion of the background to Assam Election 2021. Then we move on to discuss how BJP made an inroad into Assam and successfully held on to power for the second consecutive term.

Assembly Elections of India, 2021

The fate of the candidates, across the party lines, captured via Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) were declared on 02 May in the aforementioned states. The verdict unveiled that in West Bengal, despite a mighty contest between All India Trinamool Congress, popularly known as TMC and BJP; the TMC, under the leadership of Ms Mamata Banerjee, could win 213 constituencies taking a vote share of 47.9% while the saffron camp could manage to make in-roads to 77 constituencies with a vote share of 38.13%. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) won 133 seats out of 234, embracing a vote share of 37.7%; in Kerala, the incumbent Left Democratic Front (LDF) won 99 constituencies out of 140, indeed, eight more than the 2016 election. N Rangasamy, the leader of All India N.R. Congress (AINRC), along with BJP as its alliance, won 16 seats out of 30, making a simple majority. While Figure 1 illustrates the winning parties currently governing the states for the next five years, Table 1 presents the breakdown of the total number of constituencies of the different states. Following this, the party-wise results of the political parties of the respective states are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Total Constituencies in Each State and Union Territory, Assembly Election, 2021		
States/Union Territory	Total Constituencies	Total number of seats to win
West Bengal	294 (292 went to poll)	148
Tamil Nadu	234	118
Kerala	140	71
Assam	126	64
Pudducherry	30 plus three nominated members	17

Source: Election Commission of India

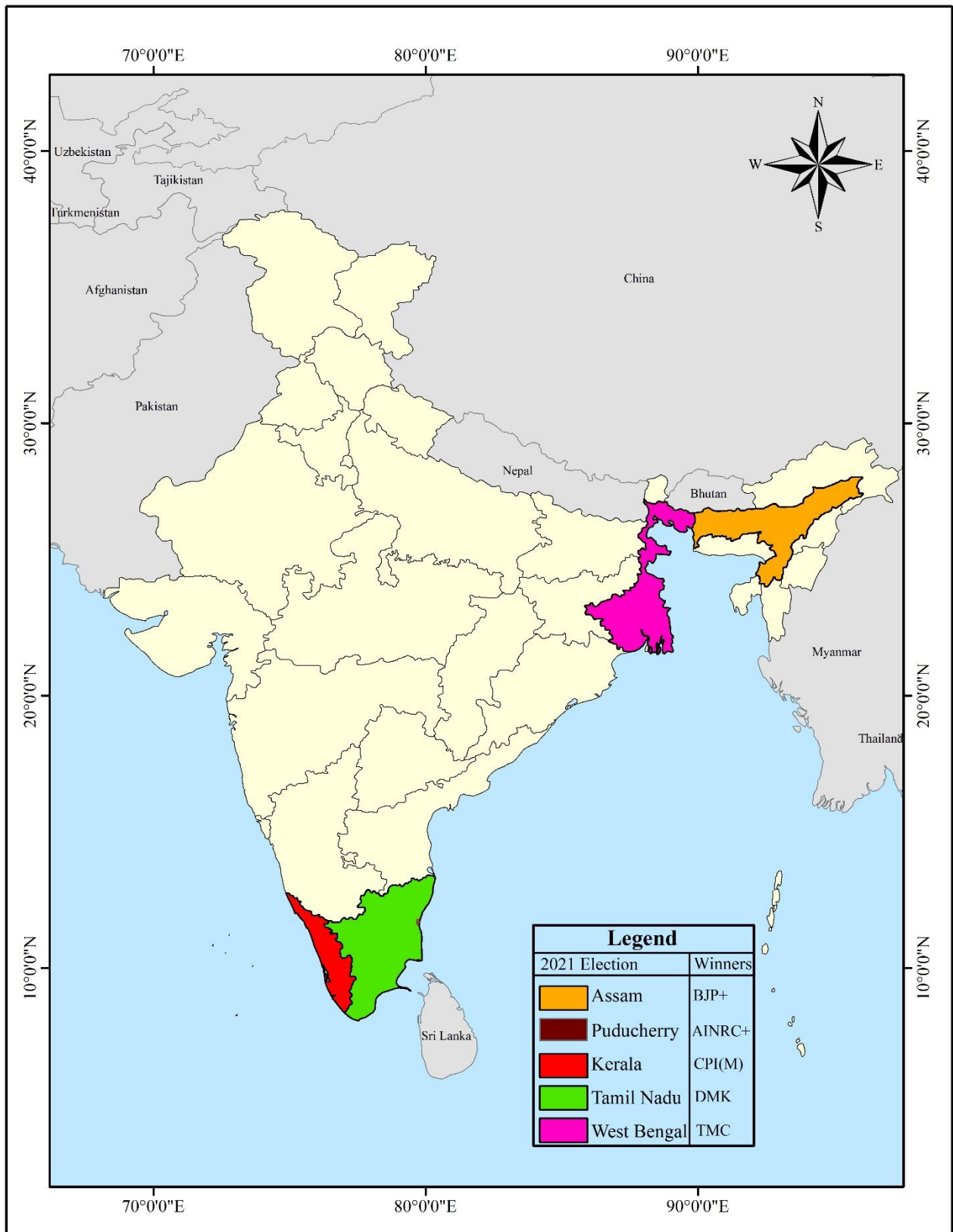


Figure 1: Winners of the Political Parties in the Assembly Elections, 2021 — Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry

Source: Prepared by the Authors

Table 2 Party-wise Assembly Election Results, 2021

Political Party	Number of Constituencies Won
Assam	
All India United Democratic Front	16
Asom Gana Parishad	9
Bharatiya Janata Party	60
Bodoland Peoples Front	4
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	1
Independent	1
Indian National Congress	29
United People's Party, Liberal	6
Total	126
West Bengal	
All India Trinamool Congress	213
Bharatiya Janata Party	77
Independent	1
Rashtriya Secular Majlis Party	1
Total	292
Tamil Nadu	
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	66
Bharatiya Janata Party	4
Communist Party of India	2
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	2
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	133
Indian National Congress	18
Pattali Makkal Katchi	5
Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi	4
Total	234
Kerala	
Communist Party of India	17
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	62
Congress (Secular)	1
Independent	6
Indian National Congress	21
Indian National League	1
Indian Union Muslim League	15
Janadhipathiya Kerala Congress	1
Janata Dal (Secular)	2
Kerala Congress	2
Kerala Congress (Jacob)	1
Kerala Congress (M)	5
Kerala Congress(B)	1
Loktantrik Janta Dal	1
National Secular Conference	1
Nationalist Congress Party	1
Revolutionary Marxist Party of India	1
Total	140
Puducherry	
All India N.R. Congress	10
Bharatiya Janata Party	6
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	6
Independent	6
Indian National Congress	2
Total	30
Source: Election Commission of India. https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/partywiseresult-S25.htm?st=S25	

Background to the Election of Assam, 2021

It remains paramount to mention that even after more than three decades of the signing of the historic Assam Accord but failure to implement Clause 6 of the Assam Accord⁴ (Barooah Pisharoty, 2019), the state of Assam continues to blister under the debates of the National Registrar of Citizens (NRC)⁵ and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019.⁶ The CAA has been vehemently criticised by the opposition, left-liberals and common citizens across the spectrum of different states as anti-Muslim (Pulla et al., 2020). In Assam, too, people have demonstrated protests against CAA but with a slightly different twist— not as an anti-Muslim Act but anti-CAA protests were on the grounds of the ongoing controversial debates of NRC; non-execution of the Clause 6 of Assam Accord vis-à-vis protection of the indigenous people of Assam and the persistence of illegal migration of Muslims from Bangladesh. As a result of the misinformation⁷ propounded by some of the leaders and playing on the emotions of the people of Assam, who continue to live in

trepidation of facing a cultural and linguistic threat from the Bengali people from Bangladesh; it was saddening to witness that anti-CAA protests turned out to be violent (Deka, 2019; Hasnat, 2020; Pandey, 2019). Five persons succumbed to firing by security forces; approximately 175 were arrested, and about 1400 were detained (Deka, 2019; Hasnat, 2020; Pandey, 2019). Evidently, some leaders used anti-CAA protests to climb the political ladder. For instance, with the support of AIUDF and Congress, Mr Ajit Bhuyan became a member of *Rajya Sabha* (the upper house of Parliament) and floated the political party *Anchalik Gana Morcha* (AGM) (Regional People's Front) in June 2020. They contested as a part of the *Mahajot*. Advocate Arup Borbora launched the United Regional Party, Assam (ARPA) party on 20 August 2020. Mr Jahnu Barua, the noted filmmaker, is a quasi-static guiding force behind the United Regional Party-Assam (Hasnat, 2020), and actor Jerifa Wahid rendered support to ARPA.⁸ Seemingly, with the symbol of Ship driving in water, the Assam Jaitya Parishad (AJP) was

⁴ Clause 6 of the Assam Accord reads: “[c]onstitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.”

⁵ As the name implies, NRC is an exercise to incorporate the names of genuine Indian citizens. It was first launched in the state in 1951 stemming from the unrelenting migration from current Bangladesh during the colonial period. Indeed the 1931 Census of India, Assam clearly expressed concern about the growing Muslim population in the state (Census of India 1931, Volume III, Assam, Part I- Report by CS Mullan; see also, Bhattacharyya, 2019). The 1951 NRC included those citizens who were born on or before 26 January 1950, or had been residing in India for at least five years before 26 January 1950, which was the benchmark date. However, with the continued flow of implacable and unabated illegal migration, the honourable Apex Court ordered for a fresh NRC in 2013 taking the cut off date as 24 March 1971, two days before Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan (Das et al., 2020). In the NRC review process, 65 million documents and 32.9 million people were scrutinised bearing an expense \$178 million of taxpayers money. The NRC process revealed 40,70,707 people as illegal residents of the state. The list however appeared to be flawed. The final revised list of the NRC was published 31 August 2019, which excluded nearly 2 million people, constituting approximately 6% of the population of Assam as

‘stateless’. Of these 2 million, many are indigenous population of Assam and the Hindu refugees who fled Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 (Das et al., 2020), who had failed to furnish appropriate documents. This final (draft) of the NRC list, which escalated controversy remains sub judiced in the honourable Apex Court following the move by the state government praying for 20% sample reverification of names already incorporated in the draft NRC in those districts bordering Bangladesh and a 10% sample reverification of names in the rest of the districts (Singh, 2021a).

⁶ The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA), was passed by the Indian Parliament on 11 December 2019 and made into an Act on 12 December 2019 with the assent of the Honourable President of India. This Act, which is an amendment of the Citizenship Act, 1955 aims at providing citizenship to those religious minorities especially the Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsi communities who arrived in India as refugees on or before 31 December 2014 escaping religious persecution from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan (The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019; Pulla et al., 2020).

⁷ That Hindus from Bangladesh will arrive and settle in Assam

⁸ New regional political party ARPA formed by noted lawyer Arup Borbora (2020, 27 August). *The Sentinel*. <https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/new-regional-political-party-arpa-formed-by-noted-lawyer-arup-borbora-497623>

founded under the leadership of the former AASU leader, Lurinjyoti Gogoi, and another student organisation called *Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chhatra Parishad* in September 2020. Eighty-one candidates contested from AJP for 82 Constituencies, but none could win, including Lurin Jyoti Gogoi, who had contested from the Duliajan and Naharkatia constituencies. In a similar way, the renowned activist Mr Akhil Gogoi and the founder of *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti* (KMSS), with the support of 70 alliances, formed Raijor Dol, fielding 19 candidates. However, the activism of Akhil Gogoi and himself being a popular public figure for over one and a half-decade had minimal impact on the election results. Out of the 19 seats, only Akhil Gogoi managed to win from the Sibsagar constituency. Arguably, despite the question of Assamese sub-nationalism, anti-CAA protests vis-à-vis the formation of solid regionalism on which these parties were formed to take on BJP-led government failed to display its robust footprint; the BJP and its allies could very well understand it (Hasnat, 2020). In Hasnat's (2020) interview, Pulak Gohain, Assam BJP Vice President, remarked:

People of Assam have realised why some had led protests against CAA. Because they had political interests — after forming new parties, they now want to win elections. How many Bangladeshis have come after one year of protests? Of course, the Assamese community shares sentiments, but the issue cannot be manipulated for political gains. People will vote for development and for their future, not for insecurities (Hasnat, 2020).

Now the question remains, did the people of Assam vote for development? Indeed 'yes'. The following section probes this question.

Politics of Development

To examine the narrative of 'politics of development', it is vital to reflect, step back and re-look at the history of governance of Assam. It is interesting to note that Assam, despite being a solid hub of ethnic and indigenous people, remained a Congress governed bastion since

India's independence in 1947 except for 1978 when Janata Party ruled for five years (1978-1983), in addition to 1985 and 1996 led by AGP. In fact, AGP is the only regional party that won for the first time in Assam in 1985 following the signing of the Assam Accord, piggybacking the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh (Barooah Pisharoty, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2009). From 2001 again till 2011, the state of Assam had a Congress-led government. The first and the second parties in Assam polls and the percentage of the vote share of the first and the second political parties since 1951 is presented in Figures 2 and 3. Since 2016, the BJP made inroads to Assam, riding on the vehicle of election results— out of 126 seats, BJP and its 2016 allies {AGP and Bodoland People's Front (BPF)} won respectively 60, 14 and 12 seats making a total of 86 (Dutta, 2017). The Congress could retain 26 seats; AIUDF managed to win 13, while others won one seat. In the 2019 *Lok Sabha* (House of the people or Lower House), the BJP won nine out of 14 *Lok Sabha* seats in the state. Earlier in the 2014 *Lok Sabha* election, BJP won seven *Lok Sabha* constituencies. Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, the new Chief Minister of Assam, who had joined BJP on 23 August 2015, was the prime architect behind BJP's entry to Assam. Dr Sarma, however, began his political career as a Congress man who won the Assembly election for the first time in 2001, defeating the AGP stalwart late Mr Brigu Kumar Phukan from the Jalukbari Constituency. Assam has started witnessing 'politics of development' and 'hope' since Dr Sarma was bestowed responsibility in the Congress Ministry led by the late former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi. Dr Sarma operated important portfolios (both state and cabinet) in health and education from 2002 to 2014. His prudence, hard work and diligence spelt out through his works made him emerge as a powerful Minister in the Gogoi cabinet. For instance, under Dr Sarma's leadership, three medical colleges were built in Jorhat, Barpeta and Tezpur, and five more medical colleges in Diphu, Nagaon, Dhubri, North Lakhimpur and Kokrajhar are in the various stages of construction. As an Education Minister, Dr Sarma introduced the Teachers Eligibility Test (TET) by

eliminating the interview process and appointed 50,000 teachers. Similarly, other government jobs, such as recruitments at the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) were done in absolute transparency. There are many other examples of his works through which Assam,⁹ a developing state of India, started seeing ‘lights of development’. Indeed, these steps towards

positive development made Dr Sarma a ‘blue-eyed boy’ of Mr Gogoi and became a star campaigner of the Congress party for the 2006 and 2011 Assembly Elections. Post-2011, Dr Sarma developed some form of a rift with the Congress Party and tendered his resignation on 21 July 2014.¹⁰The following section discusses the Assembly Elections 2021.

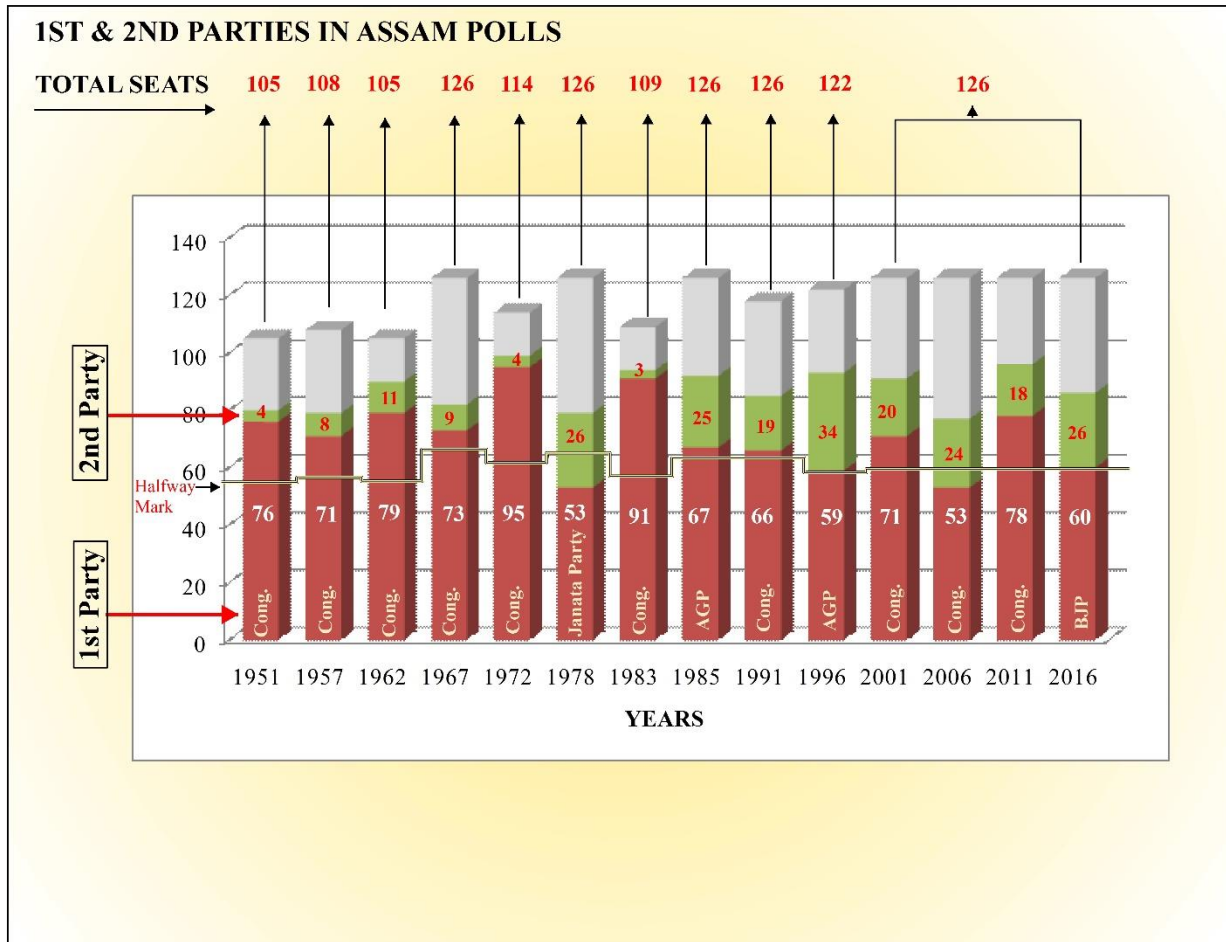
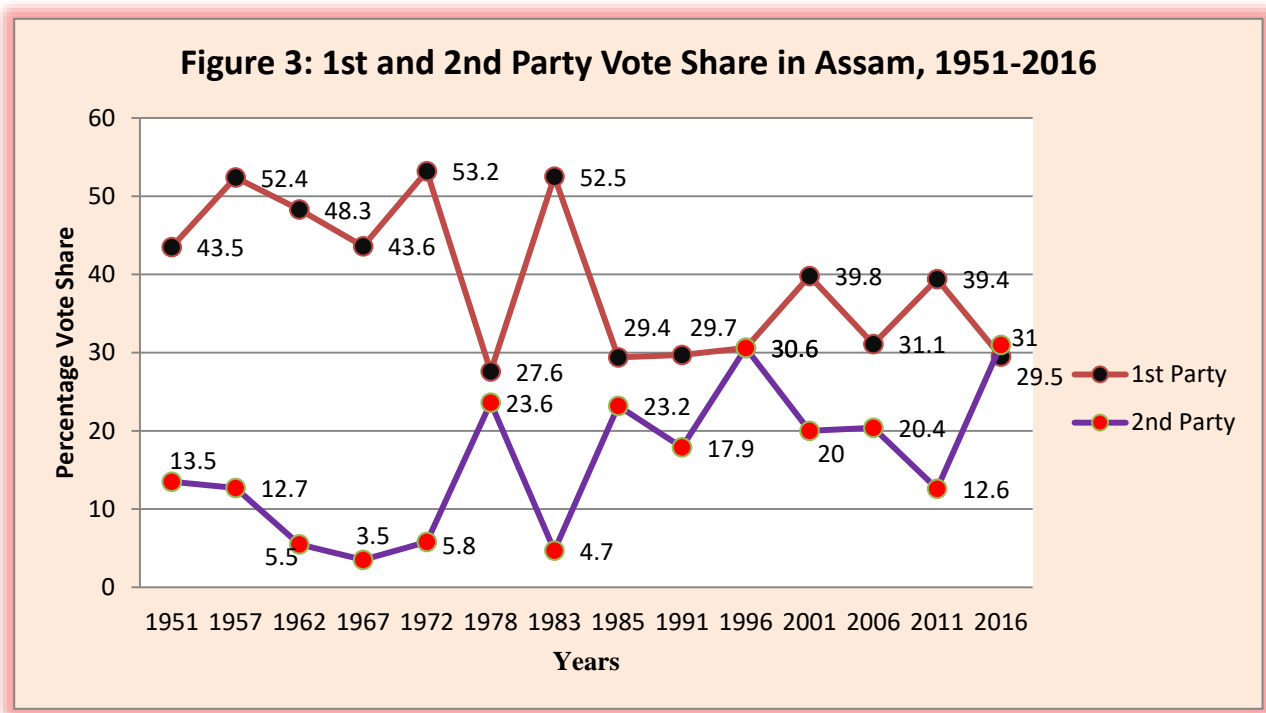


Figure 2
Source: Election Commission of India

⁹ According to the Assam Budget Analysis, 2021, the GDP of Assam stands at INR 4.09 trillion (or US\$57 billion) (Highlights of Budget, 2020-2021).

¹⁰ It is not to say that only Dr Sarma quit Congress Party; many other stalwarts from different states; to name a few, Jyotiraditya Madhavrao Scindia (Madhya Pradesh); Rita Bahuguna Joshi, Jitin Prasada (Uttar Pradesh) followed

Dr Sarma. But one has to acknowledge that Dr Sarma was built a political leader by the Congress Party albeit he learned everyday politics since the age of 9 when he started actively taking part in the Assam Movement (1979-1985) with the leaders, Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and late Mr Brigu Kumar Phukan and then as a student leader at Cotton College (now Cotton University).



Source: Election Commission of India

Assam Assembly Elections 2021

Perhaps, the BJP could realise that Dr Sarma carries the values of a warrior—a man with a rush of energy who always works for a broader picture, thinks like a ‘soldier’ rather than a ‘ruler’. On the eve of 2021 Assembly Elections, Dr Sarma corraled with the allies, AGP and United People’s Party, Liberal (UPPL), divorcing its former partner, BPF of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). Dr Sarma understands the pulse of the people, so while strategising candidates for the constituencies, he applied the subtle and pedantic forms of thinking, considering the ‘attention to details’ of every local component of each of the 126 constituencies. It is important to reflect on the 2019 General Election where ugly forms of ‘memes’ and ‘jibes’ were hurled against honourable Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Damodar Modi, calling him *Chowkidar Chor Hai* (the gatekeeper is a thief). Following the ‘unpleasant negativities’ against a sitting Prime Minister, the BJP leaders and workers and the allies too drove it in a ‘positive way’ by changing their social media handles into *Main Bhi Chowkidar* (I am also a gatekeeper). In a way, the ‘jibes’ helped the NDA accomplish their goals in

the form of an election mandate. In the Assam election, too, similar strategies were adopted. The youths developed a ‘meme’ Mama meaning ‘uncle’ referring to Dr Sarma. Dr Sarma capitalised on this ‘meme’ addressing in the election rallies *Mama-Bhagin* (uncle-nephew/niece) relationship helping *Mitrajot* win 75 seats as opposed to 51 by *Mahajot*. The difference in vote share between *Mitrajot* and *Mahajot*, however, is meagre $\{(33.21+7.84+3.39)-(29.66+9.29+3.39+0.45)\}$ and stands at 1.65 per cent (Figure 5), indicating a strong opposition. There were a total of 2,33,74,087 general electors in the state, of which 1,91,76,847 exercised their franchise. Interestingly, 0.219 million or 1.14 per cent of voters pressed the NOTA (None of the Above) option, markedly demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the parties’ right candidate. This is perhaps a lesson to be learned by all parties. The details of the election results are displayed in Figure 4, and the vote share of the respective parties is shown in Figure 5. Appendix I presents the details of votes gained by the candidates across the parties in all the 126 constituencies.

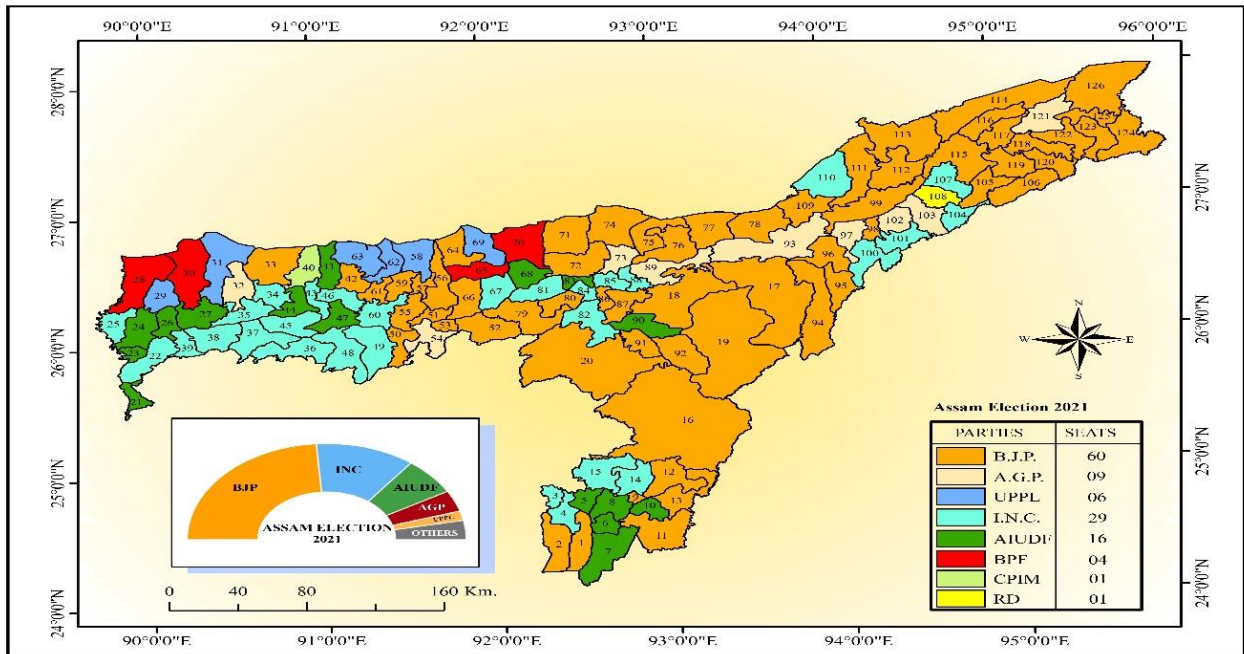


Figure 4: Results of Assam Election 2021
 Source: Election Commission of India

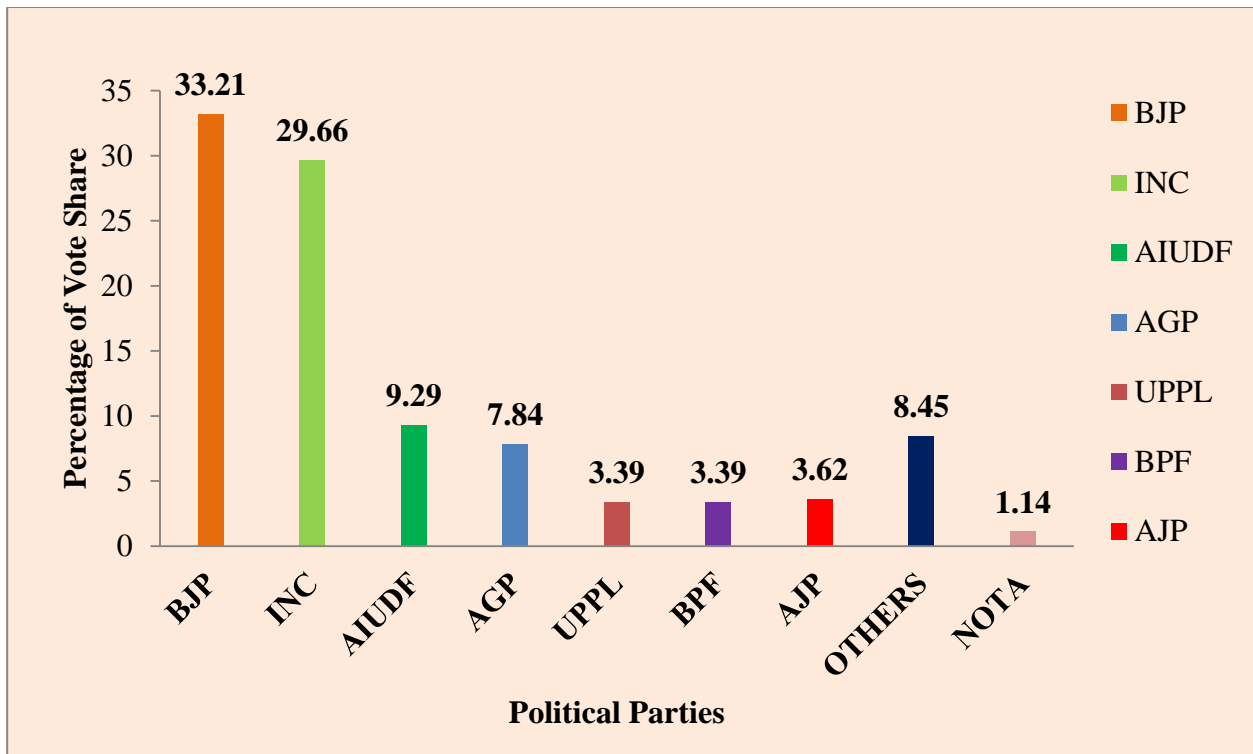


Figure 5: Percentage of Vote Share of the Political Parties
 Source: Election Commission of India

In his article titled *How BJP retained Assam*, Dutta (2021) made the following observation:

The BJP has achieved this victory through multiple strategies. It manufactured social perceptions, implemented competitive populist schemes and brought almost all mainstream tribal

ethnic outfits into its fold. During the first wave of the pandemic, the BJP regained the political legitimacy it had lost during the period of the CAA enactment through initiatives such as the Arogya Nidhi. By exempting the three Sixth Schedule council areas — the Bodo Territorial

Council (BTC), the Karbi Autonomous Council and the Dima Hasao from the purview of the CAA — the BJP government succeeded in luring away many ethnic nationalist organisations from the anti-CAA movement. While the two new regional political parties — the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and the Rajbor Dal (RD) — centred on the anti-CAA sentiments, the BJP limited the anti-CAA fervour to a section of the Assamese speaking non-tribal population. The victory of Akhil Gogoi, president of the RD, is more a reflection of the peoples' wrath against his extended imprisonment. Meanwhile, the grand alliance forged by the Congress with the AIUDF, the Left, the BPF and a few other smaller regional parties failed to mitigate inner and intra fighting among the parties and produce a common minimum programme.

The BJP consolidated its base by foregrounding developmentalism, accompanied by hyper populism. The decades-long work by the RSS had turned the tea tribes, particularly in upper Assam, to BJP supporters. The community received the highest patronage from the incumbent government. The number of beneficiaries under various schemes such as the "Orunodai" under the National Food Security Act also increased substantially. It also launched new and innovative schemes for different segments of society. Not a single segment of society remained untouched by the populist beneficiary schemes, including girls and women belonging to the minority Muslim community. The BJP's Sangkalpa Patra 2021 is a case in point. The BJP also successfully engineered the perception that Narendra Modi stands for all-inclusive development (Dutta, 2021).

While we endorse the majority of the views of Dutta (2021) and have already argued above that

the parties founded on anti-CAA sentiments had failed to hold much water, Dutta (2021) appears to have incongruous views. He talks about the BJP government's populist schemes, the efforts of the government to bring the tribes together and work towards 'inclusive development' on one hand and hyper populism on the other hand. Arguably, populist schemes are necessary for a state where 31.98 per cent of the populations still live below the poverty line (Niti Aayog, 2020), signalling that they are extremely poor. As insiders of the state, we have observed that the quality of life of even those living above the poverty line (APL) are multi-dimensionally poor. It is the responsibility of any government to have welfare schemes for its citizens. Of course, these should be flagship schemes for the support of its citizens as and when in need.

Regarding hyper populism, we question whether leaders do not have to connect with the common people? Over the years, Dr Sarma and his BJP comrades have demonstrated that they are indeed peoples' men by connecting with the grassroots people. This connection was further reinforced by the first phase of the Covid 19 pandemic when Assam was projected as an exemplary state in tackling the virus. And the proactive leadership demonstrated by Dr Sarma and his team has been labelled as 'workaholic'. Hence, the trenchancy about 'hyper populism' and 'populist schemes' disparages and insults the common people. Every citizen should have a fundamental right to live in dignity. We argue that if the poor do not have to think about their daily bread, they can perhaps be far more creative and imaginative. And the BJP in Assam has been able to add "*swaabhimaan* (self-respect) to their tenacity and elevate their hopes" (Pulla, 2017: 1). Pulla (2017), however, made this argument in the context of the Prime Minister, Mr Modi. For this, Pulla (2017) applied Gramscian 'counter hegemony' to describe Mr Modi as an 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci, 1987: 161-323), a thinking being, who himself hails from a humble background and has emerged as a *messiah* (saviour) of the poor (Pulla, 2017). Similarly, the BJP group of workers under Dr Sarma has been demonstrating 'counter hegemonic' leadership in the state of Assam.

In one of the articles published in *The Hindu*, the scholars argue that ‘Hindu consolidation pays off for BJP’ (Palshikar et al., 2021). Is it really so? According to Census (2011), the Hindus constituted 61.47 per cent, and the Muslims comprised 34.23 per cent of the demography of Assam. In 2021, it is estimated that the percentage of the Muslim population has increased to over 40 per cent, consisting of about 14.02 million of the total population of Assam. The decadal increase of the Muslim population is more than 31.3 per cent, and 11 districts out of 34 are Muslim majority districts in Assam. This means that the Hindu population has decreased to less than 60 per cent, which is indeed a very worrying trend. Some of the districts demonstrating proliferation in the Muslim population are Baksha (14.29 per cent), Barpeta (74.94 per cent), Bongaigaon (50.22 per cent), Cachar (37.71 per cent), Chirang (22.66 per cent), Darrang (64.34 per cent), Dhubri (73.49 per cent), Goalpara (57.52 per cent), Hailakandi (60.31 per cent), Hojai (53.64 per cent), Kamrup (39.66 per cent), Kamrup Metropolitan (12.05 per cent), Karimganj (56.36 per cent), Kokrajhar (28.44 per cent), Morigaon (52.56 per cent), Nagaon (56.20 per cent), Nalbari (35.96 per cent), Sonitpur (22.74 per cent), South Salmara Mankachar (95.19 per cent), Udalguri (12.66 per cent). Because of the rising trend of the Muslim population, the leaders of *Mahajot* perhaps rode on their preconceived opinion that the mandate would favour them. And that is why people of Assam could witness a colossal horse-trading melodrama by the leaders and the contestants of *Mahajot*. However, despite the increasing trend of the Muslim population, it can be deduced from Figure 5 that the people of Assam are smart and intelligent enough to vote according to the choice of their ‘candidates’ regardless of religion. We argue that ‘polarisation’ is a media portrayal term rather than reality. However, it does not mean that the question of Assamese sub-nationalism (linguistic and cultural identity) (Bhattacharyya, 2019; Dutta, 2017) hinged on ‘creole nationalism’ (Anderson, 1983; 2006) has become blurred. It is rather an emotive issue and continues to remain

active in the minds and hearts of the people of Assam. However, it is arguable that peoples’ election mandate has been for ‘leadership of development and hope’ rather than political ideology. We, however, urge that further in-depth research is necessary to counter our arguments.

Conclusion

This study has critically reviewed the results of the Assam Assembly election 2021. People’s mandate has been for good governance and development space with high hopes to see a developed Assam in the next five years under the ‘double engine *sarkar*’ (double engine government—both in the central government and state government governed by the same ruling party) (Palshikar et al., 2021). Of course, the government has many challenges— to name a few—Covid 19, floods and erosion, illegal migration, the war against drugs, corruption, syndicates and many more. One has to acknowledge that since 2016, the BJP government, under the leadership of Mr Sarbananda Sonowal, did work for reduced corruption, crime and rhino poaching. The time will speak how the *double engine sarkar* manages to tackle the state’s challenges that lie ahead.

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Conflict of Interest

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Author Contribution Statement

After we received the invitation requesting us to contribute a study on Assam Assembly Election 2021, both of us met over what's app video call and conceived the idea and the way to go forward with the analysis. While the first author contributed the GIS works, prepared majority of the tables and figures, the second author finalised the draft. The final draft was reviewed and edited by both authors.

ASSAM ASSEMBLY ELECTION, 2021

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	1-Ratabari (SC)	2-Pathakandi	3-Karimganj North	4-Karimganj South	5-Badarpur	6-Hailakandi	7-Katlicherra	8-Algapur	9-Silchar	10-Sonai	11-Dholai (SC)	12-Udharbond	13-Lakhipur	14-Borkhola	15-Katigorah
TOTAL VOTER	173974	190434	199602	192139	162441	163505	180247	163206		184450	191374	163771	166933	152761	189031
BJP	84711	74846	52674	xxx	50504	47303	66798	49181		52283	82568	61745	55341	57402	76329
INC	48490	70379	60998	88909	xxx	xxx	2931	XXX		xxx	62176	59060	42641	64433	83268
AGP	xxx	543	xxx	56422	xxx	xxx	xxx	7549		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
AIUDF	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	74452	71057	79769	66785		71937	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
AJP	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	2123	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	381	811	2991	776	xxx
BPF	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
UPPL	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
CPI(M)	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
NOTA	1200	1288	1180	985	1706	1063	745	442		1231	1561	1494	1536	1105	1112
OTHERS	2410	3651	31893	3964	2707	9413	3648	11069		21883	3365	7331	21537	738	1868
RAIJOR DAL	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
REJECTED	364	498	421	387	319	195	187	145		319	214	285	273	346	31
TENDER	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
TOTAL VOTE CAST	137175	151205	147166	150667	131811	129031	154078	135171		147653	150265	130726	124319	124800	162608

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	16-Hailfong (ST)	17-Bokajan (ST)	18-Howraghat (ST)	19-Diphu (ST)	20-Baithalangso (ST)	21-Mankachar	22-Salimara South	23-Dhubri	24-Gauripur	25-Golakganj	26-Bilasipara West	27-Bilasipara East	28-Gossaigaon	29-Kokrajhar West	30-Kokrajhar (East) ST
TOTAL VOTER	147384	150392		200287	210481	226709	189264	196081	205588	203940	173884	217630	189310	184635	186170
BJP	67797	60726		77032	89715	XXX	8919	46100	63349	79171	27054	66768	XXX	XXX	XXX
INC	49199	42841		36504	36278	XXX	146248	XXX	XXX	89870	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AGP	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	69033	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AIUDF	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	125873	XXX	123913	112194	XXX	90529	116068	XXX	XXX	XXX
AJP	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1704	XXX	410	1522	3375	XXX	XXX	XXX
BPF	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	70407	77509	63420
UPPL	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	60064	65438	83515
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	973	1584		2320	2082	921	937	1483	1758	1172	1306	1708	1801	1645	1883
OTHERS	1549	13794		36438	35037	11467	18041	3223	6426	12918	40781	9533	23524	11440	5437
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	255	67		168	92	194	86	78	188	239	11	216	85	135	95
TENDER	XXX	XXX		XXX	XXX	XXX	4	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST	119773	119012		152462	163204	207488	174235	176501	183915	183780	161203	197668	155881	156167	154350

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	31- Sidli	32-Bongaigaon	33-Bijni	34-Abhayapuri North	35-Abhayapuri South	36-Dudhnai (ST)	37-Goalpara East	38-Goalpara West	39-Jaleswar	40-Sobbhog	41-Bhabanipur	42-Patacharkuchi	43-Barpeta	44-Janja	45-Bagbar
TOTAL VOTER	205936	176306	162014	182297	207844	207571	223041	175037	159987	230013	148048	144190	208957	211920	165903
BJP	XXX	XXX	45733	XXX	XXX	77275	XXX	XXX	14053	85872	XXX	81284	XXX	11408	3038
INC	XXX	44633	XXX	93276	112954	78551	112995	85752	76026	XXX	XXX	18431	111083	XXX	79357
AGP	XXX	82800	XXX	60495	65869	XXX	67747	39728	54046	XXX	52748	XXX	66364	XXX	XXX
AIUDF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	55975	XXX	XXX	156183	65415
AJP	XXX	13988	9951	1264	XXX	XXX	1249	699	915	XXX	XXX	9831	XXX	784	XXX
BPF	65767	XXX	44730	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
UPPL	97087	XXX	35582	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	96134	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	2485	2179	1388	1025	1642	1367	1706	1308	970	1896	1037	1685	1727	890	740
OTHERS	6490	10030	2531	3157	4594	23562	11777	30800	3793	7558	15843	2183	2818	16240	2726
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	1002	331	664	321	143	75	175	9	22	390	220	426	422	80	122
TENDER	XXX	1	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST	172831	153962	140579	159538	185202	180830	XXX	158296	309812	191850	125823	113840	182414	185585	151398

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	46-Sarukhetri	47-Chenga	48-Bako	49-Chaygaon	50-Palasarbari	51-Jalukbari	52-Dispur	53-Gauhati-East	54-Gauhati-West	55-Hajo	56-Kamalpur	57-Rangia	58-Tamulpur	59-Nalbari	60-Barkhetri
TOTAL VOTER	206383	145283	236661	192597	158441	204691	412114	239586	297063	178082	180301	195439	215552	207754	196918
BJP	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	68311	130762	196043	113461	XXX	66165	81083	84844	XXX	106190	81772
INC	77045	22573	120613	93864	27320	28851	74386	29361	59084	28504	62969	XXX	XXX	56733	85826
AGP	47504	23373	68147	65820	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	137533	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AIUFD	44805	75312	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1106
AJP	3097	733	XXX	2481	28641	XXX	15636	21049	5770	51797	XXX	3560	XXX	11778	2582
BPF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	46635	XXX	XXX
UPPL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	78818	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	64624	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	1265	696	3723	1487	1427	2157	5782	3417	3925	1100	1605	1925	2562	1808	941
OTHERS	5168	5302	12571	2997	6147	7197	14471	3399	23402	4099	4679	7869	40564	2826	1292
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	283	102	323	239	147	188	240	XXX	96	134	172	327	139	575	3
TENDER	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	2	XXX	5	2	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST	179167	128091	205377	166888	131993	169157	306558	170692	229812	151799	150508	163149	168718	179910	173522

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	61-Dharmapur	62-Barama (ST)	63-Chapaguri (St)	64-Panery	65-Kalaigaon	66-Sipajhar	67-Mangaldai (SC)	68-Dalgaon	69-Udalguri (ST)	70-Majbat	71-Dhekiajuli	72-Barchalla	73-Tezpur	74-Rangapara	75-Sootea
TOTAL VOTER	141911	169810	161197	155257	184450	178319	237615	240796	158724	160449	217766	174036	147783	166718	190981
BJP	68362	XXX	XXX	72639	53713	74739	87032	XXX	XXX	38352	93768	70569		70172	84807
INC	43328	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	67605	111386	62959	XXX	XXX	58698	52787	61331	47827	60432
AGP	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	28344	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	71454	XXX	XXX
AIUDF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	118342	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AJP	6527	XXX	XXX	XXX	2908	2201	2746	XXX	XXX	XXX	1560	10192	8686	2976	XXX
BPF	XXX	38613	35065	36787	60815	XXX	XXX	XXX	56916	54409	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
UPPL	XXX	62385	61804	XXX	16871	XXX	XXX	XXX	61767	28413	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	1088	2092	1884	2335	1324	1326	1567	1689	3805	1785	2559	1856	2050	2273	2411
OTHERS	1190	30257	28470	6398	12487	2634	980	3038	XXX	5597	8225	1624	6312	8661	2441
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	13	16	526	335	189	110	282	93	107	454	470	34	552	21	433
TENDER	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1
TOTAL VOTE CAST	120508	133363	127749	118494	148307	148615	203993	214465	122595	129010	165280	137062	150385	131930	150525

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	76Biswanath	77-Behali	78-Gohpur	79-Jagiroad (SC)	80-Marigaon	81-Laharighat	82-Raha(SC)	83-Dhing	84-Bataadoba	85-Rupohihat	86-Nowgong	87-Barhampur	88-Samaguri	89-Kaliabor	90-Jamunamukh
TOTAL VOTER			204613	238898	193079	186704	221878	231325	166352	202820	189965	179641	165045	147083	221863
BJP			93224	106643	81657	34732	XXX	9048	51458	25739	81098	70111	55025	XXX	XXX
INC			63930	77139	XXX	60932	89511	XXX	84278	132091	70015	69360	81123	44957	XXX
AGP			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	76453	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	73677	18342
AIUDF			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	145888	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	136902
AJP			2904	12815	45125	1371	5616	1139	XXX	10006	2009	1922	1678	2627	3292
BPF			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
UPPL			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)			XXX	XXX	27290	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA			1753	1595	1571	1073	1517	1820	1078	997	1095	1291	1116	1809	2575
OTHERS			1352	903	939	65261	5752	49349	3612	12119	1725	1273	705	1676	27071
RAIJOR DAL			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED			XXX	589	496	1081	241	83	130	538	195	152	190	145	127
TENDER			XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1	1	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST			163163	199684	157078	164450	179090	207327	140556	181491	156138	144109	139837	124891	188309

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	91-Hojai	92-Lumding	93-Bokakaht	94-Sarupathar	95-Golaghat	96-Khumtai	97-Dergaon (SC)	98-Jorhat	99-Majuli (ST)	100-Titabar	101-Mariani	102-Teok	103-Anguri	104-Nazira	105-Mahmara
TOTAL VOTER	266431	212304	147846	267594	205586	141259	174870	186273	132403	156559	123568	136828	124890	133974	138108
BJP	125790	89108	XXX	107090	81651	65655	XXX	68321	71436	50924	44862			51704	51282
INC	92008	77377	XXX	67731	72326	38522	51546	61833	28244	64303	47308	46205	43712	52387	38147
AGP	XXX	XXX	72930	XXX	XXX	XXX	64043	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	47555	49891	XXX	XXX
AIUDF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AJP	XXX	3260	2334	27656	5062	7368	7585	6925	3246	3885	XXX	XXX	6987	2896	11357
BPF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
UPPL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	1724	1485	2482	2945	2245	1399	2441	1717	1075	1562	2056	1927	1313	1470	1340
OTHERS	2574	3349	42681	2564	XXX	3289	7487	1100	1781	901	1612	8185	1981	1061	11371
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	19	11	128	63	231	103	391	315	200	343	200	135	108	52	159
TENDER	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST	222115	174590	120555	208049	161515	116336	133493	140211	105982	121918	96038	104007	103992	109570	113656

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	106-Sonari	107-Thowra	108-Sibsagar	109-Bihpuria	110-Naoboicha	111-Lakhimpur	112-Dhakuakhana (ST)	113-Dhemaji (ST)	114-Jonai (ST)	115-Moran	116-Dibrugarh	117-Lahowal	118-Duliajan	119Tingkhong	120-Naharkatia
TOTAL VOTER	178790	115364	151675	152309	226744	189672	210546	247222	312180	143170	150348	154651	166137	149731	142035
BJP	69690	46020	45344	58979	XXX	70387	86382	87681	168411	55604	68762	59295	54762	62675	47268
INC	54573	48026	19329	48801	52905	67351	76786	44832	57424	33263	30757	42047	46652	34281	32292
AGP	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	35279	12486	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	4094
AIUDF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
AJP	16799	1705	XXX	6510	1934	2453	2988	56889	7726	9499	11062	10726	24192	16690	25231
BPF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
UPPL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
NOTA	2510	1146	639	814	2102	1114	1254	1643	2676	1910	1845	2954	2193	1928	1454
OTHERS	1617	XXX	1688	6411	101281	2507	2534	2367	8921	11645	1356	8164	1518	3445	696
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	57219	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX
REJECTED	106	319	298	187	XXX	88	320	XXX	553	343	149	110	206	200	223
TENDER	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1	1	XXX	XXX	XXX
TOTAL VOTE CAST	145295	97216	124517	121702	193501	156386	170264	193412	245711	112264	113932	123297	129523	119219	111258

PARTY / CONSTITUENCY	121-Chabua	122-Tinsukia	123-Digboi	124-Margherita	125-Doomdooma	126-Sadiya	TOTAL
TOTAL VOTER	165934	173562	140259	195861	152470	189382	22532731
BJP	XXX	85857	59217	86640	49119	64855	6018558
INC	34824	XXX	32241	28140	40981	42771	5505536
AGP	53554	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1573823
AIUDF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	1732505
AJP	XXX	15060	13001	22935	4348	29849	696356
BPF	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	651073
UPPL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	651744
CPI(M)	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	188048
NOTA	3332	2539	2733	2536	3186	1918	211827
OTHERS	37643	27469	XXX	13028	20125	3182	1274344
RAIJOR DAL	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	57219
REJECTED	138	114	85	27	148	311	26884
TENDER	6	XXX	4	11	3	XXX	43
TOTAL VOTE CAST	129497	131039	107281	153317	117910	142886	18552298