

Original article

The Influence of Ethnicity on Electoral Politics in Assam

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Abstract: This paper explores the profound influence of ethnicity on electoral politics in Assam, a region characterized by its diverse ethnic composition and complex socio-political landscape. By analyzing historical and contemporary electoral data, the paper investigates how ethnic identities shape voter behavior, political mobilization, and party strategies. It highlights the role of ethnic based political parties, such as the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), in leveraging ethnic sentiments to secure electoral support. The study also examines the impact of ethnic leaders and their ability to galvanize communities around shared cultural and linguistic identities. Through case studies of key ethnic groups, including the Bodo, Ahom, and Mising communities, the paper reveals the intricate interplay between ethnicity and electoral outcomes. Additionally, it addresses the challenges posed by ethnic conflicts and their implications for democratic processes and governance in Assam. The findings underscore the centrality of ethnicity in shaping political narratives and strategies, while also raising critical questions about the long-term sustainability of ethnic-based politics in a pluralistic society. This paper intends to contribute to the broader discourse on ethnicity and politics in India, offering insights into the dynamics of electoral behavior in multi-ethnic regions.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Electoral Politics; Assam; Voter Behavior; Political Mobilization; Ethnic Conflicts

1. Introduction

Assam, a vibrant state in Northeast India, is a melting pot of diverse ethnic communities, each with its unique cultural and historical identity. This rich ethnic tapestry has profoundly shaped the state's political landscape, making ethnicity a central factor in electoral politics. Political parties and leaders often harness ethnic sentiments to mobilize voters, leading to the rise of ethnic-based movements and parties. However, this reliance on ethnic identity has also sparked conflicts, hindered development, and complicated governance.

1.1 Background and Context

The state has witnessed the rise of ethnic-based political movements, such as the Bodo and Ahom movements, which have sought to assert their identity and secure political autonomy. These movements have often translated into electoral strategies, with political parties leveraging ethnic sentiments to garner support. The historical context of migration, resource conflicts, and insurgency further complicates the interplay between ethnicity and politics. For instance, the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) highlighted the tensions between indigenous communities and migrant populations, which continue to influence electoral dynamics. Understanding the role of ethnicity in Assam's electoral politics is crucial for comprehending the broader challenges of governance, representation, and conflict resolution in multi-ethnic societies.

1.2 Objectives of the paper

- a. To analyze the role of ethnicity in shaping voter behavior and political mobilization in Assam. \
- b. To examine the strategies employed by political parties to appeal to ethnic groups and secure electoral support.
- c. To assess the implications of ethnic-based politics on governance and democratic processes in Assam.

1.3 Significance of the paper

This study holds significant academic and practical relevance. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on ethnicity and politics, particularly in the context of Northeast India, which remains underrepresented in mainstream political discourse. By focusing on Assam, the research sheds light on the complex interplay between ethnic identities and electoral politics, offering insights into the mechanisms through which ethnicity influences political outcomes. Practically, the findings have implications for policymakers and political stakeholders in addressing ethnic conflicts and fostering inclusive governance. Understanding the dynamics of ethnic-based politics can aid in designing strategies to mitigate polarization and promote social cohesion. Furthermore, the study highlights the challenges of democratic representation in multi-ethnic societies, providing a framework for analyzing similar contexts globally (Das, 2015).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Ethnicity and Politics

The theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between ethnicity and politics draws from seminal works in political science and sociology. Ethnicity, as a social construct, encompasses shared cultural, linguistic, and historical identities that often serve as the basis for political mobilization (Smith, 1986). Political theorists like Horowitz (1985) emphasize the role of ethnic identity in shaping group behavior, particularly in plural societies where competition for resources and power is intense. Ethnicity becomes a tool for political entrepreneurs to mobilize support, often leading to the formation of ethnic-based parties and movements. In the context of electoral politics, ethnicity influences voter behavior by creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among members of a community. Chandra (2004) argues that ethnic voting is not merely a reflection of identity but also a strategic choice driven by the desire for representation and resource allocation. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing how ethnicity shapes electoral politics in Assam, a region marked by its ethnic diversity and historical conflicts.

2.2 Historical Overview of Ethnicity in Assam

The history of ethnicity in Assam is deeply intertwined with migration, colonization, and socio-political movements. The region's ethnic landscape is characterized by the presence of indigenous communities such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, and Ahom, as well as migrant populations like the Bengali Hindus and Muslims. Colonial policies, particularly the British encouragement of migration for tea plantations and agriculture, disrupted the demographic balance, leading to tensions between indigenous and migrant communities (Baruah, 1999). Post-independence, the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) highlighted the political salience of ethnicity, as indigenous groups protested against the perceived threat to their cultural and political rights posed by migrants. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which sought to address issues of migration and citizenship but left underlying ethnic tensions

unresolved. The historical context of Assam underscores the centrality of ethnicity in shaping its political trajectory, with ethnic identities often serving as the basis for demands for autonomy and representation.

2.3 Previous Studies on Ethnicity and Electoral Politics in Northeast India

Previous studies on ethnicity and electoral politics in Northeast India have highlighted the region's unique political dynamics. Baruah (2005) examines how ethnic identities are politicized to create vote banks, with political parties often aligning themselves with specific ethnic groups to secure electoral support. In Assam, the rise of ethnic-based parties like the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) exemplifies this trend. Das (2015) explores the role of ethnic leaders in mobilizing communities and shaping electoral outcomes, emphasizing the symbolic importance of ethnic identity in political campaigns. Studies by Misra (2000) and Hussain (2008) further illustrate how ethnic conflicts and demands for autonomy influence electoral politics, often leading to fragmented mandates and coalition governments. In neighboring states like Nagaland and Manipur, ethnicity plays a similar role, with tribal identities dominating political discourse. However, the literature also points to the challenges of ethnic based politics, including the marginalization of smaller groups and the perpetuation of conflict. These studies provide valuable insights into the interplay between ethnicity and electoral politics, offering a comparative perspective on the dynamics in Assam and the broader Northeast region.

3. Methodology

This research relies primarily on secondary sources to analyze the influence of ethnicity on electoral politics in Assam. Data is collected from a variety of sources, including academic journals, books, government reports, election commission records, and credible news articles. Historical and contemporary election data, such as voter turnout, party performance, and demographic statistics, are gathered from the Election Commission of India and Assam State Electoral Office. Academic works focusing on ethnicity, politics, and electoral behavior in Northeast India provide theoretical insights and contextual understanding. The Government reports and policy documents, particularly related to ethnic autonomy and conflict resolution, offers valuable information on the socio-political landscape of Assam. Additionally, news archives and media reports are utilized to track the role of ethnic issues in political campaigns and electoral outcomes. The use of secondary sources ensures a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the topic, enabling the identification of patterns and trends in the relationship between ethnicity and electoral politics. This approach allows for a robust examination of the historical and contemporary dynamics of ethnicity in Assam's political arena.

4. Ethnicity and Political Mobilization in Assam

4.1 Role of Ethnic Identity in Voter Behavior

Ethnic identity plays a pivotal role in shaping voter behavior in Assam, where diverse ethnic communities often prioritize group interests over individual preferences. Voters tend to align with political parties or candidates who explicitly represent their ethnic identity, as this is seen as a means of securing cultural preservation, political representation, and resource allocation. For instance, the Bodo community has consistently supported the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), viewing it as a vehicle for their autonomy and development (Gohain, 2011). Similarly, the Ahom community has rallied behind organizations like the Tai-Ahom Students' Union and political parties that advocate for their recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. Ethnic identity also influences voter turnout, with higher participation observed in regions dominated by specific ethnic groups during elections that are perceived as critical to their interests. This trend underscores the emotional and symbolic significance of ethnicity in electoral politics, where voting becomes an act of asserting identity and securing collective rights.

4.2 Ethnic-Based Political Parties and Movements

Ethnic-based political parties and movements have been a defining feature of Assam's political landscape. These parties emerge as a response to the perceived marginalization of ethnic groups and their demands for autonomy, recognition, and resource sharing. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), founded in the aftermath of the Assam Agitation, initially represented the interests of the Assamese-speaking population but later faced challenges in maintaining its

ethnic appeal. In contrast, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) has successfully mobilized the Bodo community around the demand for a separate Bodoland state, securing significant electoral victories in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) (Bhattacharyya, 2016). Similarly, the Mising community has formed organizations like the Mising Autonomous Council to advocate for their political and cultural rights. These ethnic-based parties often employ symbolic gestures, such as the use of traditional attire and language in campaigns, to resonate with their target communities. However, their success also depends on their ability to address practical issues like development and governance, which remain critical for sustaining electoral support.

4.3 Case Studies: Bodo, Ahom, and Mising Communities

The Bodo, Ahom, and Mising communities provide compelling case studies of how ethnicity influences political mobilization in Assam. The Bodo community, one of the largest Scheduled Tribes in Assam, has been at the forefront of the autonomy movement, culminating in the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003. The BPF, as the political arm of the movement, has consistently won elections in the BTR by leveraging ethnic solidarity and addressing local development issues (Sharma, 2012). The Ahom community, descendants of the Tai-Ahom dynasty, has sought recognition as a Scheduled Tribe to access affirmative action benefits. Their political mobilization, led by organizations like the All Tai-Ahom Students' Union, has influenced electoral outcomes in Upper Assam, where Ahom voters constitute a significant bloc. The Mising community, an indigenous tribal group, has focused on securing political autonomy through the Mising Autonomous Council. Their mobilization efforts emphasize cultural preservation and economic development, with political leaders often highlighting these issues during elections. These case studies illustrate the diverse ways in which ethnicity shapes political mobilization, reflecting the unique historical and socio-economic contexts of each community.

5. Electoral Strategies and Ethnicity

5.1 Political Parties and Ethnic Vote Banks

In Assam, political parties have long recognized the importance of ethnic vote banks in securing electoral victories. Ethnic vote banks refer to the consolidation of votes from specific ethnic groups, often achieved by addressing their unique cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic concerns. Major political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC), and regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), have tailored their strategies to appeal to these groups. For instance, the BJP has successfully expanded its base in Assam by forging alliances with ethnic-based parties like the BPF and addressing issues such as the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which resonate with both indigenous and migrant communities (Baruah, 2020). Similarly, the INC has historically relied on the support of minority ethnic groups, such as Bengali Muslims and tea garden workers, by promising welfare schemes and protection of their rights. The AGP, despite its decline in recent years, continues to appeal to the Assamese-speaking population by emphasizing cultural preservation and regional autonomy. These strategies highlight the centrality of ethnicity in electoral politics, where parties must navigate the complex web of ethnic identities to build winning coalitions.

5.2 Campaign Strategies Targeting Ethnic Groups

Campaign strategies in Assam are often designed to resonate with specific ethnic groups, reflecting their cultural and political aspirations. Political parties employ a range of tactics, including the use of ethnic symbols, language, and narratives, to connect with voters. For example, during elections in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), parties like the BPF and BJP emphasize issues such as the development of Bodo language and culture, as well as the implementation of the Bodoland Accord. Campaign rallies often feature traditional Bodo attire, music, and dance, creating a sense of cultural pride and solidarity. Similarly, in Upper Assam, where the Ahom community is influential, parties highlight the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and the preservation of Tai-Ahom heritage. Campaigns targeting the Mising community focus on issues like flood control, land rights, and the promotion of Mising language and traditions. Social media and digital platforms have also become crucial tools for reaching younger voters within these communities, with parties using targeted messaging to appeal to their aspirations. These

strategies demonstrate the importance of cultural sensitivity and localized narratives in electoral campaigns, where ethnicity serves as a bridge between political parties and voters.

5.3 Role of Ethnic Leaders in Shaping Electoral Outcomes

Ethnic leaders play a critical role in shaping electoral outcomes in Assam, acting as intermediaries between their communities and political parties. These leaders often command significant influence due to their ability to articulate the aspirations and grievances of their communities. For instance, Hagrama Mohilary, the founder of the BPF, has been instrumental in mobilizing the Bodo community and securing their support for the party. His leadership has not only strengthened the BPF's position in the BTR but also facilitated alliances with national parties like the BJP. Similarly, leaders from the Ahom community, such as those associated with the Tai-Ahom Students' Union, have been pivotal in advocating for ST status and influencing electoral outcomes in Upper Assam. In the Mising community, leaders like Rajib Lochan Pegu have played a key role in advancing the demand for political autonomy and development. These leaders often leverage their cultural and social capital to build trust and credibility among their communities, making them indispensable to political parties. Their ability to deliver on promises, whether related to development or cultural preservation, often determines the electoral success of the parties they align with. The role of ethnic leaders underscores the personalized nature of politics in Assam, where trust and representation are closely tied to ethnic identity.

6. Challenges and Implications

6.1 Ethnic Conflicts and Electoral Violence

Ethnic conflicts and electoral violence are significant challenges in Assam, often stemming from the politicization of ethnic identities. The competition for political power and resources among various ethnic groups has frequently led to tensions, protests, and even violent clashes. For instance, the demand for a separate Bodoland state by the Bodo community has historically resulted in conflicts with other ethnic groups, such as the Adivasis and Bengali speaking Muslims, who fear marginalization in the proposed state. During elections, these tensions often escalate, with reports of violence, intimidation, and voter suppression in ethnically sensitive areas. Political parties sometimes exacerbate these conflicts by exploiting ethnic divisions to consolidate their vote banks, further polarizing communities. The persistence of such violence not only undermines the integrity of the electoral process but also perpetuates a cycle of mistrust and hostility among ethnic groups, making reconciliation and peace building increasingly difficult.

6.2 Impact on Governance and Development

The centrality of ethnicity in Assam's politics has profound implications for governance and development. Political parties, in their pursuit of ethnic vote banks, often prioritize short-term gains over long-term development goals. Policies and programs are frequently designed to appease specific ethnic groups rather than addressing the broader needs of the population. This approach leads to uneven development, with some regions or communities receiving disproportionate attention while others are neglected. For example, the focus on the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) for political reasons has sometimes overshadowed the developmental needs of other marginalized areas. Additionally, ethnic-based politics often results in fragmented mandates and coalition governments, which can hinder effective decision-making and policy implementation. The lack of cohesive governance further exacerbates issues like poverty, unemployment, and infrastructure deficits, perpetuating the cycle of underdevelopment in the state.

6.3 Implications for Democratic Processes

The influence of ethnicity on electoral politics in Assam raises critical questions about the health of democratic processes in the state. While ethnic-based mobilization ensures representation for marginalized groups, it also risks undermining the principles of inclusive and issue-based politics. Elections often become a contest of ethnic identities rather than a debate on governance, development, and public welfare. This trend can alienate smaller ethnic groups or those without strong political representation, leading to their further marginalization. Moreover, the reliance on ethnic vote banks can discourage political parties from adopting inclusive policies, as they may fear losing the support of their core constituencies. Over time, this dynamic can erode public trust in democratic institutions and processes, as

voters may perceive elections as merely a tool for ethnic assertion rather than a mechanism for accountable governance. The challenge for Assam lies in balancing the legitimate demands for ethnic representation with the need to foster a more inclusive and issue-oriented political culture. The interplay between ethnicity and electoral politics in Assam presents both opportunities and challenges. While ethnic mobilization has empowered marginalized communities and ensured their representation, it has also fueled conflicts, hindered development, and complicated democratic processes. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that recognizes the importance of ethnic identities while promoting inclusive governance, equitable development, and a more robust democratic framework. Only by striking this balance can Assam move towards a more harmonious and prosperous future.

7. Conclusion

This piece of article has explored the profound influence of ethnicity on electoral politics in Assam, revealing how ethnic identities shape voter behavior, political mobilization, and party strategies. Ethnicity serves as a critical factor in determining electoral outcomes, with political parties leveraging ethnic sentiments to build vote banks and secure support. The rise of ethnic based parties like the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) underscores the centrality of ethnicity in Assam's political landscape. However, this dynamic has also led to challenges such as ethnic conflicts, uneven development, and fragmented governance. The role of ethnic leaders in mobilizing communities and shaping electoral outcomes further highlights the personalized nature of politics in the region. While ethnic-based politics ensures representation for marginalized groups, it risks undermining inclusive governance and democratic processes. To address the challenges posed by ethnic-based politics, policymakers must adopt a multi-pronged approach. First, there is a need for inclusive policies that address the socioeconomic needs of all communities, rather than focusing solely on appeasing specific ethnic groups. Strengthening institutions that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and conflict resolution can help mitigate tensions and foster social cohesion. Second, electoral reforms should be introduced to encourage issue-based politics and reduce the over-reliance on ethnic identities. This could include measures such as stricter regulations on hate speech and divisive campaigning. Third, greater investment in education and awareness programs can empower citizens to make informed choices beyond ethnic considerations. Finally, ensuring equitable development across all regions of Assam is crucial to addressing the root causes of ethnic grievances and reducing the appeal of divisive politics. Future study needs to explore the long-term implications of ethnic-based politics on governance and development in Assam. Comparative studies with other multi-ethnic regions in India and globally could provide valuable insights into effective strategies for managing ethnic diversity in democratic systems. Additionally, the role of technology and social media in shaping ethnic narratives and electoral outcomes warrants further investigation. Another promising area of research is the intersection of ethnicity with other factors such as gender, class, and religion, and how these intersections influence political behavior. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of policy interventions aimed at reducing ethnic polarization could help identify best practices for fostering inclusive and sustainable development in Assam and beyond. Thus, ethnicity remains a powerful force in Assam's electoral politics, addressing its challenges requires a balanced approach that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and democratic integrity. By doing so, Assam can pave the way for a more harmonious and prosperous future.

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