

# **Working of Parliamentary Democracy and Electoral Politics in Northeast India**

*Editors*

**GIRIN PHUKON ❖ ADIL-UL-YASIN**

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The working of parliamentary democracy in India during last few decades has demonstrated an unhealthy political culture emanating from secessionism, communalism, ethnic conflict, political defection, political corruption, politicization of bureaucracy and criminalization of politics. The sub-regional forces like caste, religion, language, issues of minorities and backward classes have stood in the path of functioning of democratic process. Most of these problems are connected with the electoral politics which manifest in the form of electoral behaviour and malpractices like impersonations, booth capturing and bribing voters. However, people's mass participation in the electoral process demonstrate their faith in the system. These growing parliamentary trends involve the question like whether working of parliamentary democracy in Northeast India is conducive where there has been the perennial problems of regionalism, secessionism and terrorism, where there is very little influence of western political culture over most of the tribals who constitute a large chunk of its population? Can parliamentary democracy accommodate the conflicting interest and demand for larger share of political power of the emerging diverse social forces in the Northeast? These questions need careful examination and serious academic exercise. No scholarly work based on empirical investigation on this aspect of the problem of Northeast is available. This volume is an endeavour to fill up this gap.

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# WORKING OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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## Preface

The working of parliamentary democracy in India during last few decades has not demonstrated a healthy political culture. It has been confronted with the challenges emanating from political insurgency, terrorism, secessionism, excessive regionalism, communalism, politics of defection and political instability. The growing political corruption, criminalization of politics and role of money and muscle power in politics has further led to the erosion and corresponding decline of social and political value. What has added fuel to the fire is that the bureaucracy has more or less ceased to be an effective instrument of development and social engineering rather it has been highly politicized. Similarly, Parliament has almost ceased to be a forum for serious and purposeful discussion on issues of public importance. Besides, disintegration of major political institutions, specially, the decline of the Congress has not been offset by the development of an alternative national party. The coalition politics with fast changing political equation cannot guarantee political stability in the country necessary for responding to the emerging issues of national importance.

All these problems of parliamentary democracy in India are directly or indirectly connected with the electoral politics of the country, because election forms the substance of democracy and is an important mechanism reflecting popular will. The growing intensity of the caste and social conflict and the protest movements rooted in violence are a consequence of both the public policies pursued and the compulsions of electoral politics. The political parties in order to gain support seek to mobilize different social groups in their favour designing political manifestoes acceptable to the emerging vocal section of the society. The growing criminalization of Indian politics also manifests it-

self at the time election in the form of electoral abuses and malpractices like impersonations, bogus voting, booth capturing and bribing the voters. It is however, significant to note that despite these various hurdles, the successful conduct of periodic elections to the Lok Sabha, State legislatures and other democratic bodies and peoples massive participation in the electoral process demonstrate their resilience in the system. In fact, the people have shown considerable maturity, election after election, in throwing out without a bit of remorse all those who were not wanted. Thus the Indian voters, though most of them are illiterate and poor, have, by and large, acted as vigilant wards of democracy subscribing to the maxim "eternal vigilance is the price of democracy".

All these issues and growing political concern since the seventies led us to the question as to how the general trend of working of India's parliamentary democracy is reflected in northeast India which possess certain peculiar socio-economic and geo-political characteristics. Does parliamentary democracy function effectively in this strategic region where there has been the perennial problems of regionalism, sub-regionalism, secessionism, insurgency, terrorism and so on? How far is its functioning in this region conducive, where there is very little influence of Western political culture (as parliamentary democracy traces its origin to the western societies) over most of the tribals who constitutes a large chunk of its population; where individual freedom of choice has been replaced by the chief of the community who is accepted as the 'legitimate authority' to guide the individual? To what extent has the gradual penetration of capitalist market system changed the tribal society in the northeast region paving the way for effective functioning of parliamentary democracy? Can parliamentary democracy accommodate the conflicting interests and demands for larger share of political power of the emerging diverse social forces in the northeast region? Keeping in view these questions and issues, a national seminar was organized by the Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University on 23-24 September 1996 on the theme: "Working of Parliamentary democracy and Electoral Politics in Northeast India". This volume is an outcome of this seminar.

The papers included in this volume mainly deal with the evaluation of different elections held in the northeast; mobilization of social groups and electoral politics; and working of parliamentary democracy in northeast India with special reference to a particular issue. There are seven papers concerning the evaluation of different elections. In his paper titled: "Community goes to polls: an Interpretation of Assam election, 1996", Samir Kumar Das points out that there has been the disintegration of the Indian high culture perpetuated by the Congress which eventually paved the way for participation of the various ethnic communities in the electoral process for asserting their rights. In fact,

he asserts that disintegration of the 'Indian High Culture' helps the thriving of national unity. In such a situation, Das reasoned, diverse ethnic communities got an opportunity to make use of parliamentary democracy as a means of asserting their rights. Referring to the Asom Gana Parishad's attitude towards the non-Assamese speaking Indian citizens, he states that it was initially in favour of excluding non-Assamese speaking citizens from the broad framework of the Assamese society. Further, he opines that the situation had reversed during the last Assam election, 1996 when the AGP changed its perception by accommodating the minorities whether autochthones or immigrants into the broad perview of "Assamese Community" as a part of tactics to grab power in the state. In his paper, A.K. Baruah emphasizes that during the pre-independence period the Congress championed the cause of the "Asomiya national identity" in terms of safeguarding Assamese language and culture. By doing so, he argues, Congress could create a strong support base among the Assamese. In the post-independence era, owing to the unabated negligence of the central government under the leadership of the Congress towards the demands of Assam and the 'Assamese' it gradually started losing the support of the 'Assamese'. On the other hand, the continuous influx of Bangladeshis, phenomenal increase of numerical strength of the linguistic and religious groups in Assam and the solid and decisive vote bank of tea garden labourers led the Congress to generate a new support base among these groups in the state in a bid to capture power as well as perpetuate its rule, Baruah states. As a corollary, it remained in power for a long time in Assam. But in the general election of 1996, he maintains, the Congress suffered a setback, largely due to disillusionment of the religious minorities and their alienation. At the same time, he believes, alliance of regional and few national parties, besides misdeeds of Congress rule also greatly contributed to this debacle reducing the Congress to a 'regional party'. Sandhya Goswami examines the voting pattern in Assam Lok Sabha Election, 1996 against the backdrop of existing socio-economic and other relevant parameters. She however, feels that scientific analysis of voting behaviour in Assam is a difficult task due to its peculiar demographic structure. The political behaviour of different communities concentrated in a particular constituency decides the election result of that constituency, she opines. The turn-out of voters in ethnic dominated areas indicates the prevailing assertive behaviour of tribal electorates in support of their ethnic identity and the unity of major non-Congress parties of the regional, leftist and ethnic orientation played a decisive role in the Election, 1996, she observes. Jaigeswar Bora in his paper states that the AGP for the first time came to power in 1985 with a solemn pledge of detecting and deporting foreign nationals from Assam. But after its defeat in the 1991 general elections, the AGP realized that it would not be possible to grab power with

the same pledge of deporting the foreign national as in that case it would not receive the support of religious and linguistic minorities. In view of this, the 1996 election manifesto of the AGP remained silent about its earlier demands of detection and deportation of foreign nationals and perhaps, for this reason, it captured power in 1996 for the second time, Borah observes. Such power grabbing tactics, he maintains, is a betrayal on the part of the AGP which would not result in happy consequences. While highlighting the parliamentary election in Manipur, 1996, Bimola Devi observes that the voting pattern was greatly on the basis of ethnic line in most of the constituencies. Neither the election manifestoes of the political parties nor the personality of the candidates had any impact on the minds of the electorate. It is difficult to deny that money power did not play a role in determining the fate of most of the candidates, she maintains. C.G. Thomas in his paper gives a brief demographic and historical profile of Arunachal Pradesh and discusses the various dimensions of electoral politics of the state. The fight for parliamentary elections, he maintains, normally remains dull and low key in the state unlike other parts of India. He opines that a number of factors such as peripheral location, multi-ethnic demographic composition and the problem of refugees greatly determine voting behaviour of electorates of Arunachal Pradesh. Thomas, however, interprets the result of parliamentary election 1996 in which official candidates of the Congress were defeated, as a mandate against the All India Congress Committee's failure to understand the problem of simmering Chakma and Hajong refugee and continued inter-party conflict and power struggle between prominent Congress leaders of the state. The most important development in Arunachal Pradesh in the post-parliamentary election of May 1996, he observes is the emergence of a new regional party, i.e. Arunachal Congress. A.C. Talukdar and Pura Tado in their joint paper empirically analyse the various Assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh and it led them to conclude that competitive politics have not yet taken root in the state and hence party politics in the state moves, by and large, round the party in power at the centre. The state displays, what they call, a classic case of single party dominant system. It is not a particular party, they argue, that dominates the state politics of Arunachal Pradesh but any party which remains in power at the centre. The existence and operation of multiple parties in the state is a transitory phenomenon of electoral polarization which appears as a manifestation of factionalism within the dominant party rather than the support of different political parties. This situation, unlike in other northeastern states, has given a political stability to Arunachal Pradesh, they maintain.

In six papers, the theme, "Mobilization of social groups and electoral politics" has been dealt with. D. Bhagawati in his paper, "Social bases of dominant political parties of Assam" analyses the shifting bases of the Indian

National Congress and the AGP among the tribal, ethnic migrant and similar groups of Assam. The social base of the Congress was limited to dominant castes upto 1972 and since then its leadership passed into non-high caste cadre which resulted in the articulation of regional interests by the forces thwarted by the new leadership of the Congress. But the misdeeds and misuse of power by the Congress ultimately alienated it from the major groups of Assam. The AGP emerged from the mess created by the Congress. But the electorate of Assam had really no choice, Bhagawati observes. Pascal Malngiang, in his paper asserts that money and muscle power played a significant role in the 1993 Assembly election in Meghalaya which manifested the rising trend of violence. The electoral politics in Meghalaya have shown that the major political parties such as the Congress and the Meghalaya Federation try to promote the interest of the elite after the election and care very little for the interest of general masses, he opines. As such the political elite, Malngiang argues, compete for power among themselves without any accountability to the people at large and they deliberately create a situation for defection and counter defections as a strategy of power-game. Chandra Nath Baruah investigates the changing trend of positive and negative response of the Assamese to regionalism on the basis of electoral verdict of 1985 and 1991 general election in Assam. Baruah maintains that regionalism in Assam is a phenomenon of Assamese middle class which is mainly composed of the upper caste elite. This class, he views, tries to mobilize the Assamese masses on regional issues when it faces challenge to its dominant position from the non-dominant communities. Thus through Assam movement (1979-85), Baruah argues, the middle class leadership had organized the Assamese masses politically which culminated in the formation of AGP and it captured power in 1985. But in 1991 the Assamese people rejected the AGP as it deviated from its original promise such as deportation of foreign national and elimination of corruption on the basis of which it was voted to power. Although, again in 1996, the AGP has captured power in the state taking advantage of the misdeeds of the Congress and employing new political strategy, i.e. making alliance with the major non-Congress(I) parties, it has started losing its base of the Assamese people due to its drastic change of attitude towards regionalism which is characterized as "regionalism with a national outlook" and incapability to materialize its declared objectives. Baruah observes, Nirola Buragohain discusses the circumstances which led the Ahoms to participate in the elections on ethnic line. She states that with the growing process of democratization of the political system during the British rule. Ahom elite gradually aspired for a "legitimate share" of political power in the decision making process of the State to safeguard the interest of the community and for this purpose, the Ahom organizations involved in the electoral politics. In the pre-Independence period, she asserts,

the Ahom Association was the only political force which challenged the monopoly of the upper caste dominated Congress. In the post independence period also the Ahom organizations felt the need of participating in the electoral politics to protect, what Buragohain calls, the interest of the Ahom and desired to have their own representatives in the legislature. However, the Ahom organizations failed to show promising result in the electoral politics, as she believes, mainly due to lack of solidarity within the community. Most of the Ahom leaders exploited the sentiment of the community as a vehicle to fulfil their individual aspiration, she maintains. Rudraman Thapa, emphasizes that with the growth of numerical strength and emergence of educated Nepali elite, the budding Nepali leaders gradually started involving themselves into electoral politics as a means of safeguarding their interests. By doing so, the Nepali elite exploits the consciousness of the Nepalese for the fulfilment of their parochial political ambitions, Thapa argues. Criticizing the role of the Asom Gorkha Sommelon, the most articulate organization of the Nepalese, he regrets that it has been working more as a "party in power platform" than a popular mass based socio-cultural organization. Udayan Misra analyses the rather complex role played by insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in relation to the electoral politics of the state. He observes that after the creation of the state of Nagaland and the introduction of representative politics, the efforts of the insurgent groups to chart out an alternative path have received a setback. Misra points out that the insurgent groups like the NSCN have, at no stage, effectively tried to disrupt the different elections which have been held at regular intervals. Rather, the militant groups have used the elections time and again to gain concession for their cause. Misra focusses on the point that both the national and the regional parties involved in the electoral process in Nagaland have consistently tried to gain support from the underground. Thus, the insurgent groups have remained a central factor in the state's electoral process.

There are seven papers dealing with working of parliamentary democracy in Northeast India with special reference to a particular issue. B. Pakem, in his paper, "Working of parliamentary democracy with special reference to north-east India" considers democracy as practised in the West and finds that traditional cultures of the third world countries are not attuned to the competitive culture of the West. Not only the insurgency groups of the northeast but also the criminalization of politics in the rest of the country pose a serious question to representative nature of the government. Coalition government add confusion to the situation. Pakem traces the semblance of democratic elements in the tribal institutions of the northeast. But introduction of the western democracy in the region created a hybrid. The system brought about by the constitution of free India worked well only for a short period, while Pakem looks for a

bright future of parliamentary democracy in the region in the next century. Aparna Mahanta, in her paper observes that the question of women's participation in the parliamentary process must be considered as an effective parameter of the working of the system. In this connection, the main issue, she emphasizes, is the transformation of women's hitherto passive role in the process to an instrumental one through effective involvement. Though at the moment, the issue is seen mainly in terms of providing reservations for women's representation in parliamentary and other electoral bodies, she argues, a more fruitful approach would be a holistic one that takes into account a range of participatory models from grass roots activism at local level to the highest level policy making parliamentary bodies and ensuring women's participation through involvement in party politics and issue-based movements and social activism through legal and parliamentary bodies and forums. Representation of women thus becomes a necessity demanded by the circumstances of women's total involvement in the political process rather than a mere concession or tokenism as at present, she claims. The particular constraints in electoral politics in the NE in general and Assam in particular, such as socio-economic under-development, political alienation of masses from mainstream politics, local traditions of women's non-involvement in political process, etc. need to be given due weightage in constructing a viable political agenda for women of this region, Mahanta maintains. Girin Phukon in his paper observes that parliamentary democracy may be treated as a bourgeois or elite democracy in which bourgeois interests are sought to be protected. In the present situation, there is, however, he argues, no other option to parliamentary democracy in a capitalist country like India. The working of parliamentary democracy in Assam, he reasons, has been determined by its peculiar socio-economic and geo-political situation which is characteristically different from rest of the country. Phukon reveals that with the growing process of democratization, the diverse ethnic groups have become more articulate and organized in a bid to redress their grievances. This increasing ethnic assertion according to Phukon, has reinforced the degree of political participation which challenges the dominant position of the caste Hindu elite. The process of politicization of socio-cultural identities and their use for articulating political demands mobilizing support and utilizing their emotive power for political bargain by the ethnic elite has been a remarkable trend of working of parliamentary democracy in Assam, Phukon observes. Ratna Tikoo highlights the role of All Manipur Students Union (AMSU) in the political process of Manipur. The AMSU, she believes, has established its credibility as a pressure groups articulating certain vital issues of public importance and compelling the Manipur Government to redress the public grievances through democratic means such as protest, demonstration and strikes. Thus AMSU has been con-

tributing significantly towards the effective functioning of parliamentary process in Manipur, she maintains. Susmita Sengupta maintains that coalition government in different states appears to be a challenge to the one party dominance at the centre. Dealing with the coalition government in Meghalaya (1990-91) at micro-level, Sengupta views it as the product of defection of galaxy of Congressmen who deserted the then Congress(I) Chief Minister P.A. Sangma and joined the regional parties. There has been hardly any common political ideology or programme of action among the regional parties in Meghalaya. In view of this, she concludes by saying that the coalition of Meghalaya United Peoples Party was no more than an opportunistic alliance for sharing power at any cost. B.C. Bhuyan focuses the political developments in Assam which eventually led the opposition to table a no-confidence motion against the Ministries of Golap Borbora, Jogen Hazarika, Anwara Taimur and Keshab Chandra Gogoi. The politics of no-confidence, Bhuyan observes, acted as a means of serving the individual interest of the politicians rather than of safeguarding democratic values culminating in the politics of 'floor crossing' or 'horse trading'. The conversion of multi-party system of India into a bi-party one, is the best solution to the problem, he believes.

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January 1998  
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### **Politics of Identity and Nation Building in Northeast India**

*Ed. Girin Phukon and N.L. Dutta, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh*

This is a serious academic initiative to discuss significant questions like whether distinct ethnic identity and nation building are compatible and conceivable factors for development of society in a multi-national state like India.

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### **Mao Zedong and Social Reconstruction**

*Ed. Girin Phukon and Dhiren Bhagawati, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh*

Mao proved that a system of thought and a system of institutions do not have any intrinsic value of their own. They are important to the extent that they serve the masses and help in the realization of a secured life for the common man in society. His model of social reconstruction cast a spell all over the third world. Thus Mao's thought, idea and approach to social transformation are quite relevant for a serious academic debate. This work aims to initiate such a debate.

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