

THE BOOK REVIEW

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Shifting Political Terrains in Assam

Parvin Sultana

HINDUTVA REGIME IN ASSAM: SAFFRON IN THE RAINBOW

By Akhil Ranjan Dutta

Sage Publications, 2021, pp. 329, ₹1295.00

The 2014 elections witnessed an unprecedented performance by the BJP in Assam. This was further followed in the Assembly elections of 2016 which saw the Party come to power in the State for the first time. Similar electoral victories were registered in the Parliamentary elections of 2019 and the Assembly elections of 2021. Akhil Ranjan Dutta in *Hindutva Regime in Assam* puts forth an elaborate account of this rise of the BJP in the State.

Divided in six chapters along with an introduction, the book starts with the election of 2014 and the BJP's electoral strategies. The 2014 election was a mandate against the corruption charges of the Congress. It saw the BJP rise to power under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The electoral performance of the Party in Assam was also good as it managed to win 7 out of 14 constituencies. This gave a glimpse of the shifting political terrains in Assam.

This shift became more prominent in 2016 when the BJP increased its tally from 5 to 60 and came to power. A look at the campaign strategies of the BJP shows a convergence of issues of development and governance along with a promise to solve Assam's longstanding problem of illegal immigration. The popularity of Narendra Modi also helped the Party consolidate its support base. As opposed to a revived the BJP, the Congress reeled with in-fighting and the exodus of a number of MLAs under the leadership of Himanta Biswa Sharma. The grip of three times Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi clearly slackened over the Congress Party.

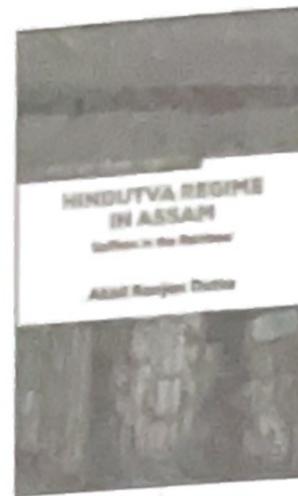
The BJP also succeeded in cementing a rainbow coalition by taking on board outfits representing various indigenous communities. Many non-Congress parties in Assam were disillusioned with the Congress and looked for an alternative. The BJP emerged as that alternative and this was seen unfolding with a pre-election alliance brokered between the BJP and Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF). BPF was an ally of Congress. The BJP succeeded in taking on board the Rabha and Tiwa leaders as

well. The alliance was finally strengthened when the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) joined the formation.

The electoral campaign was formulated around this formation. The BJP claimed to champion the interest of the *khilonjiyas* or the indigenous communities against an 'aggressive outsider'. Very soon the BJP targeted the Muslims of East Bengal origin as the 'other' and accused both the Congress and AIUDF of safeguarding them. As opposed to a hardcore Hindutva ideology-ridden campaign, what the people of Assam witnessed was an assertion of *Jati, Mati, Bheti* (nationality, land and hearth). The civil society and the media openly expressed their support to the the BJP-led alliance. And when the coalition won 80 plus seats in the election, it was hailed as a victory of the indigenous communities as opposed to that of a national party. The selection of Sarbananda Sonowal, a prominent leader from the Sonowal Kachari tribe and the face of the fight against IM(DT) Act further assuaged the people that the coalition will champion the demands of the indigenous communities.

Dutta elaborates how the Party creatively co-opted local icons like Srimanta Shankardev, the Ahom warrior Lachit Borphukan, Bhupen Hazarika and also included Satras—centres of Vaishnavism, as important issues during campaigns. Along with this co-option, the electoral victory was also a result of the long-term groundwork done by the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. The RSS has worked extensively amongst the tribal communities and set up Ekal schools (single teacher school) to bring the communities within the fold of Hinduism. Through its voluntary work during different natural calamities, the Sangh has strengthened its hold amongst the tea tribes and other indigenous communities. This was also a crucial reason for electoral gains by the BJP.

While the BJP rose to power in 2016 harping on the rights of the indigenous communities, the voters in the State soon became suspicious when the Party made clear its intention to pass a Citizenship Amendment Act which for the first time earmarked religion as a basis of granting citizenship. The Act was amended to provide non-Muslim minorities from six neighbouring countries who have entered the country till 2014, citizenship on relaxed terms. This subverted the most important clause of the historic Assam Accord which



earmarked 1971 as the cut off year of accepting people from erstwhile East Pakistan.

This contradicted the claim of the BJP of safeguarding the interests of the indigenous communities. The State saw widespread protests against the proposed amendment. Similar protests were carried out in other parts of India where both preparation of a National

Register of Citizens (NRC) and CAB were opposed vehemently. Assam however took a slightly different stand—while the people opposed CAB as it further risked minoritizing the indigenous communities by granting citizenship to Hindu refugees from Bangladesh, they supported the updating of NRC which they believed was crucial to solve the longstanding problem of influx of immigrants. Dutta in his book explains this stand of the people of Assam.

As the 2019 election came closer, disillusionment with the BJP became prominent. However the election across the country was fought on questions of national security following the Uri and Balakot incidents and saw the country further consolidate behind the leadership of Modi. Even in Assam, the protests did not translate into votes and the BJP succeeded in winning 9 out of 14 seats. The Congress was reduced to only 3 seats and AIUDF could manage to win only 1 seat.

A lot of speculation went into the reasons why the anti-CAB movement did not translate to votes against the BJP in 2016, 2019 and 2021 elections. This book elaborates the reason—while there was widespread anger, there was no electoral agency to translate this anger into votes. The movement did not rally behind any political party. The Congress also could not emerge as a viable alternative. The two civil society organizations, the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and All Assam Students Union (AASU) which led the protests did not share a common platform. This election also saw a campaign around national security, developmental promises and hyper populism and it worked in favour of the BJP.

A clear shift in electoral campaign becomes apparent if we take a look at the 2019 and 2021 elections. The Party has shifted to a more aggressive campaign around religious and linguistic identities. On the one hand, the Party used the individual-based beneficiary policies introduced before the elections for mobilization. On the other hand, the Party worked towards consolidating the Hindu votes against an