

ASSAM MUSLIMS AFTER 2016 ASSEMBLY ELECTION

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In 2016 Assam Assembly election, BJP led alliance won with overwhelming majority. In this election BJP proved that it can win election in Assam without the support of Muslims, more than one third population of the state. This has pushed the Muslims of Assam to a peculiar situation as the community has always been considered as the 'king maker' in Assam elections. Before the 2016 Assembly elections and after coming to power, BJP in Assam has been trying to prove the Muslims, particularly the immigrant section, as a threat to the existence and identity of Assamese people. On the other hand, there is a widespread feeling among the Muslims of India that serious attempts have been made to push them to further marginalization. In this background, this article is an attempt to understand the Muslim situation in Assam under a BJP led government where Muslims constitute more than one third of total population of the state. For understanding the Muslim question in Assam at present situation, this article also tries to know the background of the community in the state and situations of the Muslims in contemporary India.

Keyword: AIUFD, communal politics, Hindutva, immigration, vote bank

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1. Introduction:

In contemporary India, Muslims have faced unprecedented challenge to show their allegiance to the state under a very powerful BJP government. In independent India, Muslims as a community never had to face such challenges before. Holy Cow has emerged, in recent times, as the instrument to alienate Muslims socially as well as politically. Cow vigilantism has increased in alarming scale which has directed mainly against the Muslims and Dalits. Without showing any seriousness to deal with such targeted violence in the name of cow, the central government pushed the responsibility to the state governments to contain violence in the name of cow. The contemporary BJP considers Muslims of India as a part of an international Islamic umma, which does not satisfactorily responds to the nation's patriotic demands. Moreover, BJP does not consider Muslims of India as an important constituent of a larger national community and it believes that the community does not deserve to be treated as a special social group (Ahmed, 2017: 9). As a consequence, there is a growing tendency in Indian politics to label anything done for Muslims as 'appeasement' and 'vote bank' politics. Muslims is a backward community in India and it deserves attention from any government for its welfare. However, under present circumstances, whenever a government tries to do something for the community's welfare, the Hindu based political groups are quick to label it as 'Muslim appeasement'. Actually, the so-called secular political parties always, in the name of development, compartmentalize Muslim community. They never try to articulate the need and concerns of the Muslims as national concern. That is why any move for upliftment of the Muslims looks like appeasement (ibid).

The politics of Hindutva and idea of Hindu Rastra have been contributing to the formation of separate Muslim identity in India which is communal and reactionary. Particularly, the Babri Masjid demolition and the growth and consolidation of BJP as the alternative political force to Congress have contributed significantly to this situation. During last two decades after BJP emerged as a national political party, a new wave of politics gained ground at the hands of different wings of organizations affiliated to Sangh Parivar to show Hindus as victims (Chishti 2017, 9) at the hands of Muslims. Before 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election, Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) made 'Ghar Wapsi' a big issue where Hindus were portrayed as the victims at the hands of Muslims. Even BJP supported the 'Ghar Wapsi' movement launched by VHP.

Before the Assembly election in Assam in 2016, BJP portrayed indigenous Assamese as the victim at the hands of immigrant section of Muslims of the state and termed the election as the last struggle for the indigenous Assamese to save their land, house and identity. A recent newspaper report shows how Sangh Parivar has been trying to consolidate Hindus against the Muslims. In the first week of July 2017, a communal violence occurred in Baduria block in Basirhat sub-division of North- 24 Pargana district of West Bengal as a consequence of a Class XII Hindu student posted derogatory religious imagery of Prophet Muhammad on his Facebook page. The incident that would have been settled quickly at the local police station level has become a communal playground for BJP and the Trinamool Congress who rules West Bengal. Regarding the incident, international joint secretary of VHP commented: ...Atrocities are being committed against Hindus. We will not allow West Bengal to become waste Bengal...We have been able to tackle Assam, our Hindu unity is intact in Jammu. Now our focus is West Bengal. Hindus of Bengal need to be united. We will do whatever necessary to protect Hindus who are under threat in the state (The Indian Express, Kolkata, July 6, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, RSS, which controls BJP, believes in justice for Hindus (Ribeiro, 2017: 9), 80 per cent of total population of India. RSS still believes that Hindus has not got the justice in independent India. In this situation, Muslims really suspects the slogan of 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas' of the BJP government at the centre.

2. Assam Muslims

In case of Assam, Muslims are the largest minority group consisting of 30.92 per cent of total population. The Muslims in Assam mainly concentrate in the lower, middle Assam districts of Brahmaputra valley and Barak Valley districts. Six districts of Assam have more than 50 per cent Muslim population of their total population. The Muslims have remained an integral part of Assamese nationality building process since independence Though numerically strong, the socio-economic conditions of the Muslim community of Assam is also not an exception to all India situation. The Muslim community of Assam also suffers from high level of poverty, illiteracy and economic, political and social marginalisation. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) showed the underdeveloped condition of Assam Muslims in comparison to other religious groups in the state.

However, Muslim question is peculiar in Assam than the all India situations because of several factors. First among them is the number. Muslim comprises of only 14 per cent nationally. But in Assam, Muslims constitute more than one third of total population of the state (34.22 per cent according to 2011 census). The Muslim population in Assam has been increasing fast. During last six decades (1951-2011), in Assam, Muslim population increased by 9.54 per cent (census reports). More than one third population strength of Muslims has made the community very decisive in the electoral politics of the state. Assam has total 126 Assembly constituencies out of which 102 are unreserved and from among these unreserved constituencies, election results of 31 constituencies are determined by Muslims voters (Nath 2016: 89). During 2016 Assam Assembly election, BJP campaigned that in 35 constituencies Muslims determine the election results. Nationally, Muslims are not such decisive in electoral politics.

Second, illegal Muslim immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh to Assam is the core of all Muslim- non Muslim conflicts in Assam. Nationally, illegal immigration is not an issue vis-à-vis the Muslims. Assam has been experiencing large scale illegal immigration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh of both Muslims and Hindus because of porous international border between the countries, and also because of benign negligence of the Indian state towards this continuous process of illegal immigration. This large scale illegal immigration has already brought about significant demographic changes against the indigenous Assamese. Assam experienced six years long Assam movement from 1979 till 1985 in demand for identification and deportation of foreigners illegally staying in the state, but without any tangible result till date. After three decades of Assam Accord, illegal migration from Bangladesh is still continuing. Third, in Assam, Muslims are not a single community. There is a broad division among the Muslims of Assam: indigenous and immigrant. Indigenous Muslims consists of those who migrated to Assam till the advent of the state by British, who living in Brahmaputra valley are linguistically and culturally Assamese. This group of Muslims has never emerged as a controversy in society and politics of Assam. The immigrant Muslims, who migrated to Assam under British administration and during 1947 and 1971 after independence, are mainly issue of contestation in the state. Because of its growing numerical strength and overwhelming majority over indigenous Muslims, this section of Muslims represents the Muslim question in Assam. There is a psychological division between the indigenous and immigrant Muslims and the former

believe that they have been made ‘minority within the minority’ in society and politics of Assam by the later.

Fourth, although Assam is known for Hindu Muslim unity for centuries, an animosity towards Muslims emerged in Assam during the Assam movement. Assam movement, its counter movements from some minority organizations and role of the state during the movement, communally divided the society of Assam for the first time after independence. The Muslims who migrated to Assam after independence became the direct target of the Assam movement. However, Assam accord made the immigrant Muslims of Assam till 25-03-1971 legal citizens of the country. The indigenous Assamese still believe that they were compelled to bear the burden of the illegal migrants, both Hindus and Muslims, till 1971. This belief emerged as the faultline between the indigenous Assamese and immigrant Muslims in Assam after the Assam Accord. This says, the animosity against Muslims in Assam is a recent origin. Nationally, the birth of Pakistan has remained the faultline between the Hindus and Muslims.

Fifthly, in comparison to national scenario, Muslim communal politics remained visible and strong in Assam after independence. Till independence, League politics for separate Pakistan was very strong in Assam. A large section of Muslims from entire Assam supported the idea of Pakistan. After independence, Congress used Jamiat-Ul-Ulema-E-Hind (Jamiat) to bring the support of the community to the party which supported League before independence. Jamiat, till Assam movement, worked to gather the support of Muslims for Congress in elections. However, after Assam movement, the Jamiat began to play an active role in politics of Assam by lending its support to different political parties in consecutive elections. And in 2005, Jamiat played a direct political role in Assam by forming AUIDF¹. Since then, in Assam, Jamiat has been playing active politics via AIUFD.

And finally, Assam Muslims stands in a favourable condition than the Muslim community as a whole in India. Because of its numerical strength, the community cannot be ignored by any political party during elections. After independence, non-Congress parties could win elections in Assam when Muslim votes were divided between Congress and others. Because of its increasing

bargaining power, Assam Muslims are well represented in Assam legislature and governance in comparison to their counterparts nationally.

3. Assam Muslim in post 2016 Assembly election

The background of the 2016 Assam Assembly election was created in 2011 Assembly election. After 2011 Assam Assembly election, AIUDF emerged as the main opposition party in the Assembly. This frightened the indigenous Assamese who consider AIUDF as a party of the immigrant Muslims. A section of media and intellectual of Assam began to campaign that AIUDF would form the government in the state if indigenous Assamese do not unite against it. In this situation, the Hindu organization started to gain ground in Assam which did not have much influence on the Hindus of Assam before. These organizations tried to convey the message that Hindus are in crisis in Assam and they are going to be victims of Muslim aggression. On the other hand, inspired by the success in 2011 Assembly election, AIUDF chief Badaruddin Ajmal tried to divide the society of Assam in communal lines by provocative communal statements. He firmly believed that his party cannot be stopped to come to power in Assam if more than 34 per cent of Muslim votes can be united. During 2014 Lok Sabha election, Ajmal, returning from holy Macca, declared that Almighty won't forgive him if BJP wins in Assam because of the mistakes of his party (Nath 2016, 91). This statement of AIUDF chief was sufficient for BJP to unite Hindu votes against the party. Actually, in post 2011 period in Assam, AIUDF has immensely helped the BJP to consolidate its support base in Assam. 2014 Lok Sabha election in Assam was communally polarized by BJP and AIUDF, and as a result, both the parties showed unprecedented success in this election. Out of total 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam, while BJP won seven seats, AIUDF won three seats, ruling Congress could win only three seats which won seven seats in Assam in 2009 Lok Sabha election.

Inspired by the success in 2014 Lok Sabha election through communal polarization, AIUDF began communal politics long before the election for 2016 Assam Assembly. Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a public gathering on 19th January, 2016 in Guwahati where he did not made any communal comment. Badaruddin Ajmal, on 22nd January, 2016 in a public meeting held in Muslim dominated Baghbor in Barpeta district made communal comment by appealing all Muslims to unite against the Hindus. He stated that all the Hindus have united after the

January 19 visit of Narendra Modi, and so Muslim should unite against the Hindus (Asomiya Pratidin, January 22, 2016). BJP responded very strategically. It began to talk about the interests of indigenous Assamese, indirectly targeting the immigrant Muslims. BJP repeatedly talked about safeguard to the indigenous Assamese under the Assam Accord. It made illegal immigration a big issue. BJP followed a two pruned strategy in Assam Assembly election. On one hand, it tried to unite and consolidate the Hindus behind it against the AIUDF. On the other hand, it tried to divide Muslim votes between Congress and AIUDF so that it can win through this division of Muslim votes. To divide Muslim votes, BJP raised different controversial issues in different phases of election and at different places. During first phase of election held in indigenous Assamese dominated upper Assam, BJP talked about implementation of Assam Accord, upgradation of National Register of Citizens in Assam etc. which attracted indigenous Assamese. During second phase of election, held in Muslim influential lower and middle Assam, BJP argued that in Assam only Citizens of Indian Origin should have the right to contest election in Assam. However, against all these issues which targeted the immigrant Muslims, in Barak valley, dominated by Hindu Bengalis, BJP promised to give citizenship to the Hindu Bengalis from Bangladesh. Muslim voters were confused with all these strategical moves by BJP. As a result, they were divided and BJP showed surprising success in Assam. This win of BJP also became possible because of strong anti incumbency feeling against the Congress government in Assam under Tarun Gogoi who ruled Assam for three consecutive terms. Congress under Tarun Gogoi also played a soft Hindutva politics against AIUDF since its origin. However, after 2011 Assam Assembly election, the soft Hindutva of Congress was taken over by hard Hindutva of BJP.

BJP's success to form an alliance (with Asom Gana Parishad and Bodo People's Front) government in Assam with overwhelming majority was possible because of the electoral alliance of Hindus of both Barak and Brahmaputra valley. To keep this alliance intact for the future also, the BJP led government in Assam has tried to marginalise the Muslim community through different means. Main objective of this attempt is to instigate the Muslims communally and react against the Hindus and to keep alive the Muslim communal politics. The BJP led government in Assam has started to divide the society of Assam in communal lines by celebrating different government occasions in Hinduised rituals. Assam government has celebrated 'Namami

Brahmaputra' festival from 31st March, 2017 to 4th April, 2017 to glorify river Brahmaputra. However, the government made the whole affair religious by importing Hindu priests from Haridwar, Uttar Pradesh and by involving the vaishnavite Satradhikars of river island Majuli. The Assam government, on February 28, 2017, decided to make Sanskrit compulsory in primary education till class VIII, although it withdrew the decision because of strong protests in Assam against it. In May, 2017 Assam government decided to disband the Madrasa Board and handed over the academic part of it to the Board of Secondary Education of Assam. Assam government has declared that, by disbanding the Madrasa Board, it wants to mainstream the madrasa education by incorporating science, Mathematics and Computer Science into its courses. In December, 2016 Assam government withdrew Friday holidays observed by the Madrasas in lieu of Sunday. Although government has tried to convince that its decisions are for the welfare of the Muslim community, the Muslims of Assam believe that the government has been trying to withdraw all the special facilities enjoyed by the community before. BJP realizes that its electoral success in Assam depends only upon the continuation and further strengthening of Muslim communalism. Now, the real challenge is before the Muslims of Assam, how they react to the BJP's strategy to instigate them communally.

The citizenship Amendment Bill 2016 introduced on July 19 in the Lok Sabha, which seeks to allow illegal migrants from certain minority communities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship, has created a dividing line between the indigenous Assamese and Hindu Bengalis of the state. The BJP central government wants to implement this act for consolidating a Hindu alliance in Assam through which Muslim influence in electoral equations can be marginalized. However, indigenous Assamese are deadly opposed to it mainly on the ground that Assam has already borne the burden of East Pakistanis, both Hindus and Muslims, till 1971 under the clauses of Assam Accord unlike other states of India. While the indigenous Assamese opposed to settle Bangladeshis in Assam on religious ground, the BJP government in the state has strongly argued for settlement of Hindu Bengalis from Bangladesh in Assam. BJP even argues that Assamese people should support the move of the central government for settling Hindu Bengalis from Bangladesh in Assam so that Asomiya Jati (Assamese nationality) can be saved from the growth of Muslims (Asomiya Pratidin, Guwahati, 15th Nov., 2016, p.4). One BJP minister from Assam in a conference on the clause 6 of Assam

Accord on December 16, 2016 commented that for constitutional safeguard under the clause we must be sure 'who we are' as we are already sure 'who are they' (Amar Asom, Guwahati, 17th December 2016). In this 'we' and 'they', the minister clearly identified the Muslim immigrated from Bangladesh to Assam during 1951-1971 as 'they'. In recent times, different leaders of Assam BJP have been trying to prove the Muslims of Assam as the 'they' against indigenous Assamese. At the same time, they are trying to create a 'we' for the indigenous Assamese in alliance with the Hindu Bengalis of Barak valley.

4. Conclusion

The Assam Muslims are in a peculiar position at present situation. They are living under a strong BJP led government which aggressively follows all dictates from Sangh Parivar organizations, which aggressively wants to bring Hindus from Bangladesh and settle in the state to save Assamese jati from the Muslims. The community, being more than one third of total population, does not have any representation in the present government. The immigrant Muslims of Brahmaputra valley have accepted Assamese language as a gratitude as they have been given shelter by the state. But Assam BJP leaders openly say that speaking good Assamese cannot be a criteria for becoming a stakeholder of Assamese nationality.

This aggressive attitude of the present BJP government in Assam against the Muslims, particularly the immigrant Muslims, has started to alienate the Muslim community of Assam from the society. This will definitely affect the process of Assamese nationality formation, which is secular and based on Assamese language. Moreover, anti social and national elements can influence a section of the community if they are repeatedly pushed to go away from Assamese society and nationality.

BJP realizes that its electoral success in Assam depends only upon the continuation and further strengthening of Muslim communalism. So the BJP government in Assam has strategically started to alienate the Muslims so that they feel deprived and react sharply against the government. Now, the real challenge is before the Muslims of Assam, how they react to the BJP's strategy to instigate them communally

Notes:

1. Assam United Democratic Front(AUFD) was formed in 2005 as a state political party. In 2009 the party was renamed as All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). However, till Assam Assembly election 2016, the Election Commission of India recognizes the AIUDF as a state party in Assam

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