

Youth Voters On Political Change In Northeast India: A Survey Among University Students

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Abstract: Since 2014 General Election unlike other parts of India, the Northeast Region also influenced by BJP Dominant system. This paper is an attempt to understand the youth voters view on political change in Northeast India. This paper will try to understand the youth voters perception about recent political change in Northeast India after 2014 general Election based on its two months fieldwork survey in three Northeastern states.

Index Terms: Northeast India, Electoral politics, Political parties, Indian Politics

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to understand the youth voters view on political change in Northeast India. I have mainly focused on university students of age group 18-30 years in three states of Northeast India i.e. Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh in this study. This study examines the level of participation, political awareness and youth voters understanding about the recent political change in Northeast India. Election plays a vital role in a democratic country like India. Though country like India, we have still vast difference between political democracy and economic democracy but people has the ultimate say in terms of electing their government through first-past-the-post electoral system. India as the largest democracy with more than 900 million voters enjoy their adult franchise in every elections. Among these voters India has about more than 45 million youth voters since 2014 according to 2018 data from the Election Commission of India. With a median age of 27.9 years in 2018, India is a young country. By 2020, Youth population will become 34 percent of the country's total population (Tiwari, 2019). This paper will try to understand the Youth voters perception about recent political change in Northeast India after 2014 general Election based on its two months fieldwork survey in three Northeastern states.

2 METHODOLOGY

Research for the paper was conducted through a fieldwork survey on youth voters in Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. By following a structured questionnaire, I have conducted my survey in 6 different government and private universities in three BJP ruling state i.e. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur among post-graduate students and research scholars from Assam University (Silchar), Gauhati University (Guwahati), Dibrugarh University (Dibrugarh), Rajiv Gandhi University (Doimukh- Arunachal), Arunodaya University (Naharlagun) and Manipur University (Manipur). From 11 February to March 27, 2019, I have conducted my interview with 120 students where 65 are male and 55 are female respondents from the age group of 18 years to 35 years. Area wise among these 120 respondents 81 belong to rural area and 39 belong to urban voters. Community wise 58 belong to Schedule Tribe (ST), 4 Schedule Cast (SC), 40 Other Backward Caste (OBC) and 18 belongs to others. Religion wise 56 belong to Hinduism, 29 Christian, 7 Muslims, 3 Buddhists, 17 others and 5 No-religion. Both quantitative and qualitative data as a form of mixed method has been applied in this research to understand the youth voters perception about political change in Northeast India.

3 Political Change in Northeast India

Recent two election i.e. 2014 and 2019 general election became very crucial for Northeast India. In this, two general elections for the first time BJP like party with its Hindu Nationalist agenda become a dominant national party by replacing long-standing Congress regime from this region. In Northeast like region excluding Assam, Tripura, Sikkim all other states mostly dominated by Christian and tribal population. In such situation, BJP's rise along with their NEDA partners is phenomenal. BJP's political journey as ruling party has started with Assam victory during 2016 Assembly election where for the first time BJP able to win 60 seats with 29.51 percent vote share as the single largest party and formed a coalition government with two significant regional party AGP and BPF (Sharma et al., 2019). In 2017 also same way, BJP formed its elected government in Manipur along with alliance partners NPF-M, NPP, LJP. In 2018 election, also BJP formed its third state government in Tripura with 35 seats as the largest party. In Nagaland also BJP become the significant player between two regional parties i.e. Nagaland People's Front and National Democratic Progressive Party after 2018 assembly election in forming a state government with new partner NDPP. Same way in Meghalaya also BJP become a minor alliance partners with National People's Party (NPP). In Mizoram, also BJP's alliance partners Mizo National Front come to power and recently in 2019 BJP for the first time formed their elected government in Arunachal with 41 seats as the largest party under Prema Khandu's Chief Ministership. Among these Northeastern state, Congress became a dominant ruling party for long time since independence where BJP was just like a marginal party with very limited seats share as well as vote share. However, after 2014 General election with their phenomenal victory at centre, Northeast also changed accordingly. Many factor here contributed to this rise. First BJP has understand it very well that only through religious card they cannot establish their strong presence in Northeast as Congress for long time became the dominant ruling party. Therefore to oust the dominance of Congress party, BJP has followed mainly two track i.e. selective use of their party agenda in state specific by appropriating local issues and secondly not to go against the local tradition which could be seen in terms of their dual stand on Beef ban issue in NE states (Shah,2017). Secondly, BJP's parental organisation RSS become an instrumental factor in this rise where their good works, different social welfare programme help BJP to expand their support base (Sharma et al. 2019). Along with these factors the formation of NEDA as the coordinating

forum , political coalition among non-congress regional parties which helped BJP to become an insider part in NE states and expand their support base. In 2019 general election because of the electoral understanding with different regional parties, BJP got significant support from different tribal communities. BJP's alliance strategy help them to become a popular party in spite of their strong position on Citizenship Amendment Bill. In the recent 2019 general election BJP alone won 14 seats 9 from Assam, 2 each from Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura and 1 from Manipur and their NEDA partners also increased their tally with more 4 seats . Compare to 2014 general election, this 2019 election BJP gain much from Northeast i.e. from 8 seats to 18 seats with significant vote share.

TABLE 1

Electoral performance of INC, BJP in Northeast India, 2019 General Election

State/Party	INC		BJP	
	Seats	Vote	Seats	Vote
Arunachal Pradesh (2)	0	20.69	2	58.22
Assam (14)	3	35.44	9	36.05
Manipur (2)	0	24.63	1	34.22
Meghalaya (2)	1	48.28	0	7.93
Mizoram (1)	--	---	0	5.75
Nagaland (1)	0	48.11	--	---
Sikkim (1)	0	1.13	0	4.71
Tripura (2)	0	25.34	2	49.03
Northeast India (25)	4	---	14	---

Source: Data compiled from Election Commission of India's statistical report on general election 2019 available at [<http://results.eci.gov.in/>]

4 YOUTH VOTERS ON POLITICAL CHANGE IN NORTHEAST INDIA

To talk about the youth voters response in this electoral change I have mainly focus on some major questions like how do the youth voters see the electoral change in Northeast India after 2014? How do they make difference between INC and BJP in Northeast Region? How do they see the BJP's rise in Northeastern states? How do they evaluate the overall development of Northeast region over the last five years? To discuss about the political awareness among these youth voters I have asked where they consider themselves politically active and engaged. The study shows majority of the youth voters from six universities in three different states considered themselves as politically active or engaged. State wise though the youth from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh seems very politically active and participate in political discussions and activities but youth from Manipur in majority numbers do not consider themselves as politically active.

TABLE 2

Do you consider yourself politically active?

	Assam	Arunachal Pradesh	Manipur	Northeast
Yes	55%	53.33%	16.67%	45%
No	21.67%	26.67%	50%	30%
Can't Say	23.33%	20%	33.33%	25%

Source: Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Another question to understand the political awareness among the youth voters is did you vote last time in elections. In response to this questions I have asked their voting experience in three elections i.e. national election (parliament level), state election (Assembly level) and local election (panchayat/ municipal/ district council level).

TABLE 3

Did you vote in last elections?

	Assam			Arunachal Pradesh			Manipur		
	National	State	Local	National	State	Local	National	State	Local
Yes	41.67%	68.33%	53.33%	60%	70%	70%	20%	76.67%	43.33%
No	53.33%	26.67%	40%	36.67%	26.67%	26.67%	76.67%	23.33%	50%
Can't Say	5%	5%	6.67%	3.33%	3.33%	3.33%	3.33%	0.00%	6.67%

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

In terms of exercising their electoral rights youth voters from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh mostly active and more participatory in all three level of elections whereas youth voters from Manipur seems more participatory in state as elections than national and local elections. To understand their party preference as a supporter of any party, it seems most of the youth in all three states prefer to consider them as neutral instead of taking any party preference. Among the 120 respondents 66.67 percent respondents consider themselves as neutral whereas 21.66 percent called them as BJP supporter and 9.17 percent considered them as Congress supporter and only 2.50 percent considered them as other different parties supporter including regional parties.

TABLE 4

How do you consider yourself?

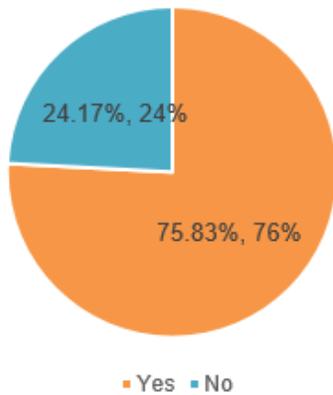
BJP Supporter	INC Supporter	Other Parties Supporter	Neutral
21.66%	9.17%	2.50%	66.67%

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Another important question to understand the political awareness among youth voters in Northeast India was- Do they think National Parties still dominate the electoral politics of Northeast India. In response most of them about 75.83 percent youth think that National parties still dominate the electoral politics of Northeast India. If we see the

electoral trend in these Northeastern states, Indian National Congress become the only dominant party before 2014 general election. Since 2014 general election with the phenomenal victory of BJP as the dominant national party in all over India, Northeast region also shifting its political orientation towards BJP dominant system. Within a very short period from 2014 to present 2019 BJP along with its alliance partners formed its BJP and NEDA government in all Northeastern states.

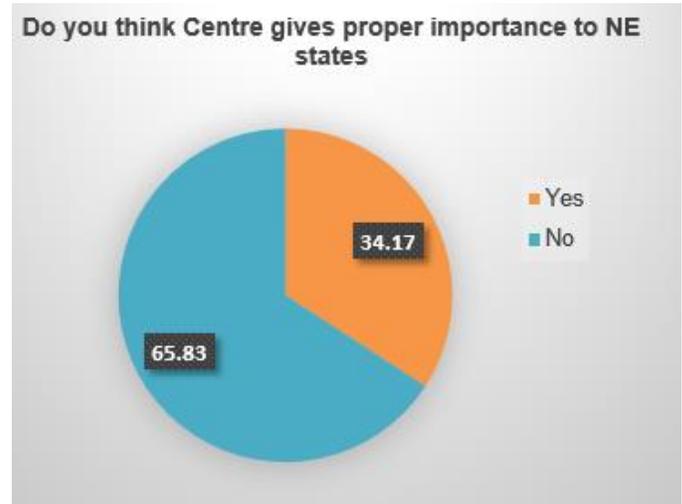
Do you think National Parties still dominate NE Politics



Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Fig.1. Do you think National Parties still dominate NE Politics.

Another important question of this study was how the youth voters from Northeast India think about the attitude, importance of the central government towards these all eight Northeastern states. Did centre give proper importance to the Northeastern states in comparison with other states. In response to this question, most of the youth voters 65.83 percent think that the government at centre did not adequately give proper importance to the Northeastern states due to its small size in terms of population and its distance from other parts of India and the different ethnic composition compare to other parts of India. As an asymmetrical federal arrangement though Indian state has given some specific privileges, constitutional provisions to these Northeastern states but in terms of their representation in parliament, the Northeastern states always remains politically less-significant states due to its tiny number of representatives in parliament i.e. 25 members in Lok Sabha and 14 members in Rajya Sabha. So compare to other states with large size and populations, the states from Northeast India not able to take that advantage in national level politics.



Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Fig.2. Do you think centre gives proper importance to NE states

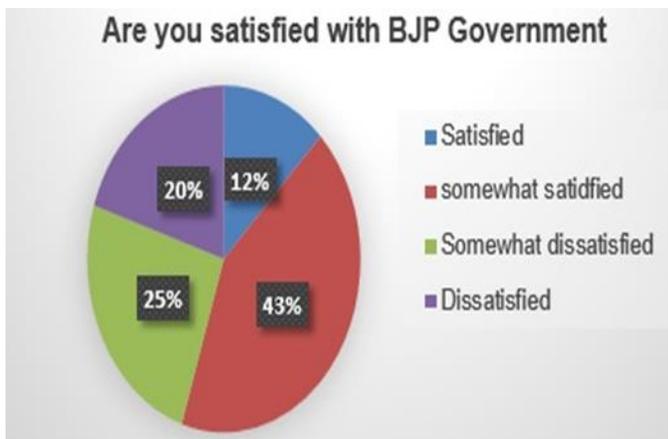
Most of the youth voters from these three states finds employment, education, development, health care and immigration as major issue in Northeast India that government should give more focus to solve this problem as mentioned in the table 5.

TABLE 5

Which issue you consider the most important in Northeast India that Govt. should give more focus?	
Employment	65.83
Education	51.67
Development	47.5
Health Care	42.5
Immigration	37.5

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

To discuss about the recent political change in Northeast India we have asked them are they satisfied with BJP Government. In response this question the dissatisfaction level is very low i.e. 20 percent whereas 12 percent respondents marked as satisfied with BJP government both at centre and states and interestingly 43 percent marked as somewhat satisfied with BJP government.



Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Fig.3. Are you satisfied with BJP Government

To discuss about the rise of BJP in Northeast India as dominant national party, majority of youth voters has opinion that because of their development initiatives towards Northeast India in recent times BJP become a dominant national party by replacing Congress party from this region. At the same time the other factors like BJP's alliance understanding with regional parties and the anti-incumbency factor also helped BJP to come into power for the first time in most of the Northeastern states after 2014 general election.

TABLE 6

The reasons of BJP's rise in NE India

BJP's Development Initiatives	25%
BJP's Alliance with Regional Parties	23%
Anti-incumbency of past govt.	19%
People wanted an alternative	27%
Dependency on centre	6%

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Another important question here was which government do they consider better serve the interest of Northeast India where most of youth has diverse answer. Some of them think both the parties has done lots of works, good efforts towards Northeast region where as comparatively large section of youth voters i.e. 25 percent thing that BJP has done much work in Northeast and after coming to power they have done lots of development works. At the same time a significant section of youth voters from our respondents about 15.83 percent think Congress party better served the interest of Northeastern states.

TABLE 7

Which Govt better serve the interest of Northeast India ?

BJP	INC	Both Parties	Neither One	Can't Say
25%	15.83%	16.67%	17.50%	25%

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

In terms of understanding the recent political change the study tried to understand the youth voters view on recent overall conditions of Northeast India in some development indicators. According to majority of youth voters the overall conditions of Northeast India as a whole in transport and connectivity, roads and bridges and electricity has improved

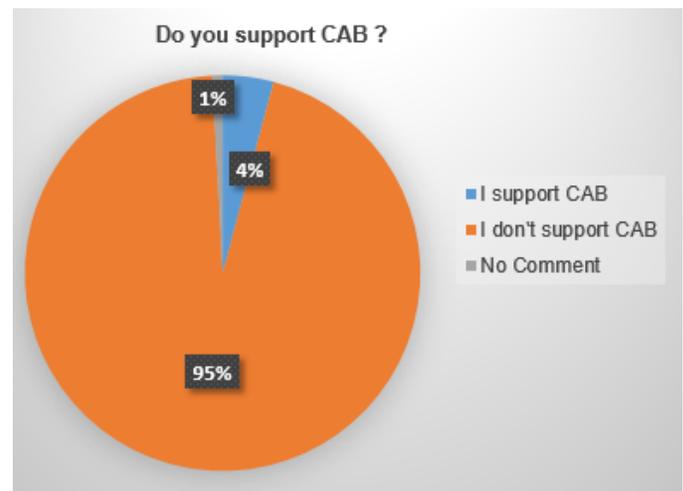
a lot whereas in education and employment, medical and health care and transparency in administration the overall conditions of Northeast India is not up to the mark.

TABLE 8

How do you think the conditions of Northeast India in recent times?				
Indicators	Improved	Remain Same	Deteriorated	Don't Know
Transport and Connectivity	66.67%	27.50%	4.17%	1.66%
Roads and Bridges	65%	25.83%	5.83%	3.34%
Education and Employment	16.67%	50.83%	26.67%	5.83%
Electricity	50.83%	39.17%	4.17%	5.83%
Medical and Health Care	38.33%	52.50%	2.50%	6.67%
Transparency in Administration	29.17%	36.67%	25%	9.16%

Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Another important question regarding Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016 through this bill BJP government trying to give citizenship status to illegal migrants belonging to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian religious communities coming from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan as persecuted minorities. This bill is considered as serious threat to the entire demography of Northeastern region mainly for Assam. In response to this question whether they support this Act or not , majority of the respondents 95 percent strongly reject the bill.



Source: Based on author's fieldwork survey, 2019

Fig.4. Do you support CAB ?

5 Conclusion

This study is an attempt to understand the youth voters opinion, perception about recent political change in Northeast India. This study found that youth voters consider development as a key factor while consider a political party for power. Instead of being a traditional voter or party supporter, youth voters considers to be a neutral voter and focus on the overall party performance towards governance and fulfill the aspiration of common voters. In terms of Northeast India, the youth voters from the three states that study has been conducted consider BJP as the ruling party for its initiative towards the development of the region. Majority of them have opinion that with the recent political changes the overall conditions of Northeast region has

changed to at significant level in transport, connectivity, electricity like infrastructural developments at the same time other key areas like education and employment, medical and health care and transparency in government remain same.

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