



## **Electoral Politics: A study of socio-economic factors influencing the electoral politics of Jorhat district of Assam**

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### **Abstract**

Elections are one of the few methods that enable a society to reach a collective decision based on individual preferences. Elections serve as a means of linking citizens to government. Voting is one of the core part of electoral democracy. Electoral politics determine by a variety of factors some of them are socio-economic (status, education, religion sex, etc; some psychological (differences in drives and capacities) and some are influenced by the political environment (political structures and institutions, party system, etc.). but all these factors are closely interconnected. The present study primarily focuses on the socio-economic factors of electoral politics of Jorhat district in Assam. To understand the true nature of people's attitude towards electoral politics primary data has been collected under deferent categories. Finally, an effort will be made to categories the factors, which influence the election in Jorhat district.

**Keywords:** election, politics, factors, jorhat, Assam

### **1. Introduction**

Electoral politics in India essentially is a constitutional affair drawing its strength from the Constitutional body popularly known as Election Commission. Indian democracy working since 1947 and the country organied its regular general elections.

The electoral politics along with the party politics in Assam, has some unique features. In Assam, caste-based politics is not predominant. However, a close look at the trend in the electoral politics in Assam would reveal that there is a divide between upper Assam politics and that of the lower Assam politics. The predominance of upper-caste families in upper Assam politics could be visible through their elected representatives.

For the convenience, the study has been concentrated in one district of upper Assam. Jorhat has always been the in the helm of all political activities for a long time. Therefore, the researcher decided to take up Jorhat as the district for the study of electoral politics.

### **2. Objectives of the study**

- To understand the trend of electoral politics in Jorhat district
- To identify the factors influencing the trend
- To analyze the role of these factors

### **3. Methodology**

The study is based on both quantitative and qualitative research; exploratory in nature and consists of various quantitative tools. The study based on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data gathered through a field survey from the respondents who were selected through multistage stratified random sampling. Data has been analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software package. Total 340 sample has been collected for this study.

### **4. Electoral Politics in Jorhat**

Jorhat district of Assam was carved out of the erstwhile Sivasagar district in 1984. It is observed that all the legislative assembly constituencies within Jorhat District have their distinctiveness arising out of ethnic composition and socio-cultural factors. The district has comprised of five Legislative Assembly Constituencies of Assam eg., Jorhat, Majuli, Titabor, Mariani and Teok.

The Mariani constituency shows a natural growth of voters which fluctuates between 5 percentage and 18 percentages. The lowest growth could be observed in the 1983 election (05.55%) while the highest growth (18.08%) could be observed during the 1991 election. In the majority of elections vote polled was more than 60 percentages. Highest votes were polled in the election of 2016, which is 84.88 percentages. In 11 general elections, Congress won ten times. Only in 1985, during the AGP wave, it was won by an AGP candidate, Naren Tanti who hailed from a tea tribe community.

In the first general election in 1951, the Teok constituency had an electorate to the strength of 52193. The constituency was later re-adjusted against few other adjacent new constituencies came up until the year 1967 belonging to other adjacent districts.

As regards people casting votes in the Teok constituency, it observed that people's participation in the casting of votes is significant. Excluding the year of exceptional elections (1983) in all other elections, people had cast their votes enthusiastically. The lowest percentage of votes cast was 45.39 in the first general election while the highest was 80.60 in 2016.

Majuli constituency was created delimiting the areas of mainly Jorhat and few other adjacent constituencies in the year 1962. As people belonging to tribal community main inhabitants are of the area, it was declared as the constituency reserved for only Scheduled Tribe. Between

1962 and 1967, there was a decline of voters in this constituency.

This was mainly due to the re-alignment of the constituencies of Jorhat district. Thus, there was a decline of 13.37 percentage voters in Majuli constituency in the year 1967 compared to 1962 elections. It is worth mention here that in 2016 election Chief Ministerial Candidate of BJP, Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal contested from this constituency won the seat with 49602 votes

Titabor constituency is one of the oldest constituencies of Jorhat district. The first election in this constituency was held in the year 1951. Total voters at that time were only 46974 out of which 48.39 percentage voters had cast their votes. Titabor constituency acquired an important position in the State, as it happened to be the constituency of the former Chief Minister of Assam Shri Tarun Chandra Gogoi. The constituency has a considerable proportion of the population belonging to OBC communities- mainly Ahoms. The highest being 83.40 percentages in the 2016 assembly election. Remarkably, this constituency is an original constituency of the district where the election has been held since 1951. The constituency is known for its Congress stronghold. Out of the 14 elections held till 2016, Congress could manage to occupy the seat for 10 times and remained in the second position for 3 times.

Jorhat constituency has been frequently under bifurcation, trifurcation, and amalgamation until 1967. In 1951 general elections there were two constituencies namely Jorhat North and Jorhat South having voters’ strength as shown below. In the first election 75, Jorhat South and 76, Jorhat North both polled 46.62 percent and 77.69 percentage respectively. In 2016, Hitendra Nath Goswami won the election as a BJP candidate from the constituency. Earlier Goswami was a leader of AGP contested and won in 1991, 1996 and 2001 election as a candidate of this regional party, later he joined BJP.

It is observed that the political parties always prefer to put candidates from general caste in this constituency, particularly from the caste Hindu community. Only in 1972 when Bijoy Krishna Handique elected from Jorhat as a candidate of INC who belonged to OBC community. It is because caste Hindu population has a stronghold in this constituency.

**5. Factors influenced in jorhat election**

The respondents were asked about their views on the factors influencing the election results in Jorhat district. The responses are categorized under the following broad headings for Jorhat district as a whole and are presented in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Single Factors Influencing Election Results in Jorhat District

S. No.	Factors	Nos of respondents	Percentage
1	Community factor	178	52.35
2	Money factor	22	06.47
3	Unemployment issue	44	12.94
4	underdevelopment	24	07.06
5	Community factor & money factor	14	04.12
6	Unemployment & corruption	14	04.12
7	Underdevelopment & community	20	05.88
8	No response	24	07.06
9	Total	340	100.00

The table 1 reveals that majority of the respondents believe the community as the major factor that influences the Jorhat election. This community factor includes – responses defined as caste factor, tribe factor, tea tribe, labour factor, etc.

**Community factor:** It is a fact that several socio-demographic factors play a crucial role in Jorhat politics. These factors have influences in one or more constituencies of the district and therefore given weight during electioneering. The community factor is discussed below under the following headings.

**Multi Ethnic composition:** Multiethnic composition of the population is one of the distinguishing features of Jorhat District. In contemporary times, electoral politics of any region or polity is influenced by ethnic issues; along with other demographic and social, political and economic forces and factors. The social situation of Jorhat reflects the general multi-ethnic characteristics of the social fabric of Assam. Numerous communities of Assam are divided along different lines of ethnicity, language, religion and such other criteria. Assamese society by its geopolitics, historical and ethnic linkages, seem to exhibit certain distinctive characteristics when compared with the rest of the nation.

**Caste and ethnicity:** It has been a fact that in the Indian situation, caste is also an important force that influences political decisions. The lack of homogeneity in the Indian population causes division between different sections of the people based on religion, region, language, caste, and ethnicity. This has led to the rise of political parties with agendas catering to one or a mix of these groups.

The issues or forces and factors that influence the outcome of elections are many and varied. It includes population diversity on ethnic, linguistic, religious lines class and caste factors, geographical and topographical conditions, economic level, poverty, occupational pattern, education. To know the electorate’s mind regarding the caste of the voters, they were asked whether they were aware of the caste of the candidate while voting him or her. The result is presented in the following table.

**Table 2:** Did you know the caste of the candidate you voted?

S. No.	Knowledge about the Caste of the candidate	Nos of respondents	Percentage
1	Yes	198	58.24
2	No	83	24.41
3	No answer/ did not vote	59	17.35
	Total	340	100.00

The table above shows that majority of the respondents are well aware of the caste of the candidate they had voted. They had not directly disclosed that they voted by looking at the caste of the candidate. Among those who did not, answer also contains persons who did not vote.

**Tea Tribal Community: Tea Garden Votes:** The Tea-tribes are found mainly in the districts where tea cultivation is prominent. These districts are Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj Tinsukia. Santhali speakers are also found in parts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. The population of Santhali speakers is about 135,900.

One of the backward and most exploited tribes in India, though newer generation are comparatively educated and we now have intellectuals and professionals in various fields. The Tea tribes, being labourers, live in villages, inside tea-estates (established by tea-planters. These estates are located in interior places and this contributes to the backwardness and exploitation of them by the tea-planters. The workers, in a way, have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. The tea-planters usually exploit the tea-tribes in every possible way. Violence and agitation of labourers against the management are common, where the state machinery normally protects the tea-planters. Lack of - education, poverty, addiction of males to country-beer, poor standard of living and lack of health facility are the basic problems in their life. There are instances when tea-planters do not even supply the life-saving drugs when workers are dying of epidemics.

During the Colonial period, establishment of Assam Tea Company in 1834 to colonizing wasteland in Assam to provide new avenues of investment for foreign capital. The industry required a regular supply of labour and attracted a large number of labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and beyond. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from all the regions referred to above did not return home thus forming an important segment of Assam’s population.

Demographically, tea garden labourer community of Assam represents around 20 percent of the total population of the state accounting more than 45 lakhs tea garden labour population in the state and is one of the biggest contributors to the organized workforce as well as to the economy of Assam. In 1885, a narrow-gauge train services Jorhat Provincial Railway had come into operation and ultimately became instrumental in the rapid growth of the tea industry.

It has already been mentioned that the tea-garden community of Assam belong mainly to the Adivasi tribes whose origin can be traced to the migrants from Bihar, Chotanagpur Orissa, and such other areas. At present, they form more than 20 percent of the state’s population. Which includes both tea garden and ex tea garden workers.

Tea laborers comprise an enormous chunk of the electorate in the constituencies of Jorhat district. They usually vote in blocks – as per their community decisions. That is why the candidates try to woo these voters during electioneering. The results of almost 30 assembly constituencies of Assam are largely determined by the votes of these communities. Within the district under study, Mariani Assembly constituency is such a tea dominated constituency.

To examine the respondent’s view about how the tea

community dominated the election scenario, they were asked how they value the tea garden community as a factor in various constituencies of Jorhat Election. The respondents were requested to grade the constituencies where the tea tribe component is prominent and influential. Accordingly, as per response, the respondents are grouped into three categories as per the percentage stated.

**Table 3:** What Percentage of the Tea Electorates Influence the Election Results in Constituencies of Jorhat?

	Jorhat	Majuli	Titabor	Mariani	Teok
Single first	10%-11%	4%	7%-8%	96%- 97%	10% -12%
Second	6%- 9%	3%	6%	93% - 95%	9%
Third	Up to 5%	Up to 2%	Up to 5%	Up to 92%	Up to 8%

It may be observed from the Table above that as per the first category, the tea electorates influence Jorhat constituency between 10 to 11 percent while the minimum percentage states were 5 percent that is the third category. Similarly Majuli, Titabor, and Teok also have some influence of tea garden community in the election but that is well within 12 percent. The highest influence can be seen in respect of Mariani Constituency where none of the respondents had stated the influence as less than 92 percent. The highest influence has been gauged at 97 percent that is the first category.

**Scheduled Tribe Factor:** Another dominating factor in Jorhat polity is the Scheduled tribe factor. Scheduled tribe factor is most prominent in the Majuli Constituency of Jorhat. In Chapter II we have already mentioned that more than 70 percent of the total inhabitants of Majuli are Mishings- a hill tribe living in plains. Due to this, Majuli Assembly Constituency is reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Apart from them, the inhabitants are also from the Deori and Sonowal Kachari tribes. Languages spoken here are Mishing, Assamese, and Deori. As Mishings are the majority in number, elected representatives are mainly from the Mishing community. Although polling percentage varies from election to election.

An attempt was made to assess the people’s mind towards the influence of ethnic communities in the election. They are asked to show their assessment of the tribal influence in an election in terms of percentage. The results are presented in the following table.

**Table 4:** What percentage of the Tribal electorates influence the election results in constituencies of Jorhat?

	Jorhat	Majuli	Titabor	Mariani	Teok
Single first	06%-10%	83%	5%-8%	6%- 7%	11% -12%
Second	3%- 5%	77% - 82%	4%	3% - 5%	10%
Third	Up to 2%	Up to 72%	Up to 3%	Up to 2%	Up to 9%

It may be observed from the table that tribal influence is prominent in the Majuli constituency only. The respondents of the first category stated that the influence could go to the extent of 83 percent. While the lowest limit suggested was 72 percent which is also quite significant.

**Influence of Ahom community:** As Jorhat was the last capital of the Ahom kingdom, there is a quite sizeable proportion of the population belonging to the Ahom

community. Ahoms are a community of Tai origin who entered into Assam in the 13th century through the Patkai ranges in the East from Burma and slowly took control over most of the communities living in the hills and valleys of this region. They finally managed to reign over Assam and rule for about six hundred years. Although they have become Hindu zed but have not become a part of the Caste structure and have no place in the traditional caste hierarchy.

**Table 5:** What percentage of the Ahom electorates influence the election results in constituencies of Jorhat?

	Jorhat	Majuli	Titabor	Mariani	Teok
Single first	15%-19%	11%	5%-8%	6%- 7%	17% -21%
Second	9%- 14%	7% - 10%	4%	3% - 5%	16%
Third	Up to 8%	Up to 6%	Up to 3%	Up to 2%	Up to 15%

According to the respondents, the influence of the Ahom community is prominent in the Jorhat and Teok constituencies. The highest percentage stated is 19 percent in respect of Jorhat and 21 percent in respect of Teok. In other three constituencies also Ahom vote plays a significant role.

**Influence of Social Classes:** One can observe the presence of different social classes ranging from rural agriculturists and labourers in tea plantations to educated elites of different categories like tea plantation owners, managers, OIL executives, service holders, educated and business elites, rural landowners, Satradhikars, freedom fighters, new political elites among others. Because of the presence of a highly literate population, people of the district are much more aware of their problems. Thus they are quite conscious politically.

**Role of elites**

In the study district, the role of the elites who mainly belong to the Upper class and middle class is very significant not only as voters but also as a force influencing the voting trend among the common masses. As mentioned earlier, the district is highly literate and has quite a few research and technical institutions besides a large number of schools and colleges of repute. The oldest residents of this ever prosperous city have played a pivotal role in molding the city to what it is today. Among them are the families of Handique, the Singhs, Sharma, and Borgohains who are considered as the most influential families in transforming the once-sleepy city into a bustling and a well-organized city.

**Role of freedom fighters:** In the socio-political life of Jorhat District, the role of a strong network of families and associates of freedom fighters is prominently visible. From the time of India’s independence, along with most other regions of India, Jorhat has been mainly under the umbrella of Congress party. This can be seen from the results since the first General Elections of 1951.

**Role of Satradhikars:** On the North of the district, the Brahmaputra River forms the largest riverine island of the world, the Majuli, which spreads over 924.6 square kilometers with a population of about 1.50 lakh (170,000).

The island, threatened by constant erosion by the mighty and unstable Brahmaputra River, had been the principal place of pilgrimage of Vaishnavites since the age of the Ahom rulers. Several Satras (monasteries) resembling those of medieval times are headed by Satradhikars teaching Vaishnavism which Sankardeva (1449-1568) initiated. Each Satra has an unknown wealth of Vaishnav Scriptures and extensive revenue-free lands cultivated by the Bhakats (celebrated monks) of the Satras.

**6. Conclusion**

The trend of electoral politics and political participation of the district of Jorhat is more or less similar to that of the politics of the state of Assam. Except for the Mariani LAC, where there has been a different kind of electoral outcomes. The constituency mostly dominated by Tea Tribes community. The contesting candidates of this constituency are also the leaders of this community except for some occasions. INC has been able to win the seats in all the election except in 1985 where AGP won it. The Teok constituency of the district shows mixed outcomes of elections. In spite of the presence INC, regional sentiments supporting regional parties is very mush there has mostly dominated the constituency. The left party, CPI has also some strength in this constituency. This party won the election in 1972. The Majuli constituency is reserved for Mishing community mainly dominates ST. However, INC has a stronghold in this constituency winning most of the election but the regional party, AGP also has a remarkable number of supporters in Majuli for which it consecutively won the seat in 1985, 1991 and 1996 elections. All the constituency of the district shows a similar trend of political participation during the election. Although electorates of the district have conscious political mindset because of their educational and cultural background but the electoral politics of the district is mostly determining by caste and community factors as stated earlier except on some special occasions.

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