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HOW ELECTIONS GOVERN PEOPLE

Samir Kumar Das

One usually reads the book¹ as a brilliant piece of current history well in line with the great tradition of *buranji* writing in Assam – in this case the history of how people living in an ethnically plural society are mobilized during and between elections, exercise their franchise, cast their votes and thus influence the electoral outcomes. The electorate is understood as an open field in which strategic moves are made by the contesting political parties to wean away the people into their respective folds and it is for the people to decide whether to respond to these moves and how. Not all strategic moves are successful, some are. It is the people who have the freedom of responding and equally not responding to them. Mobilizations, in other words, are an inseparable part of elections and the emergence of the ‘Hindutva regime’ in Assam reflects the high point of convergence between Hindutva strategies of mobilization employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party and the other members of Sangh Parivar and the positive way people seem to be responding to them. The book, as one reads it conventionally, traces these moves in the fairly long history of the past decade and draws out their implications for the state of democracy of our body politic. The book may be read as a textbook illustration of democracy.

Although much of what I argue in this paper is inspired immediately by my reading of this book, the paper has a wider scope in the sense that it seeks to tease out the general implications of the author’s argument made in the limited context of Assam. I would rather see the book as one that offers deep insights into our understanding of the tectonic shifts that have taken place in recent decades in

the art of governing the people in general and in Assam in particular. The book prompts me to ask if it is possible to see elections playing a vital role in governing the people (*demos*) and democracy. Could the title of the book be – How elections govern people?

Elections have hitherto been viewed as a democratic means of governing those who govern us, whether by selecting them, or keeping them under a leash and holding them accountable to those who elect them. This book forces me to view elections as a technology of governing people, of constituting the *demos* and bringing them under the regime of what Spinoza calls the ‘whole’. They ‘must necessarily come together’, Spinoza tells us, if they are ‘to live together as securely and well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals’. Their life should be no more conditioned by ‘the force and desire of individuals that will be injurious to other fellowmen, but by the power and will of the whole body’.²

While much is being said about the problem of evolving, modifying, calibrating, refining and thus improving the means so that people may exercise ever greater and more effective control over their governors with a slew of electoral reforms, correspondingly much less – if at all – is written on how people are transformed into a mere object of government through the instrumentality of elections. This, as we have said, will take us beyond the conventional path of understanding democracies charted out by the textbooks we grew up with - to the way, for instance, the people are reduced to the numbers of an electorate, how they are organized and classified into constituencies, how constituencies are gerrymandered and delimited, how voters are enlisted, how their names are dropped from the voters’ list – a phenomenon variously known as ‘scientific rigging’ in West Bengal during the Left Front rule or as ‘D’ voters’ in Assam and so forth, how the electorate is mobilized and campaigns are conducted, in short how the people are constituted as a ‘whole’, as subjects by the very act of election and so forth.

The book thus has the potential of turning around one of the founding assumptions of the liberal-democratic architecture which says that the voters already constituted as political subjects go to the polling booth and cast their votes

while exercising their right to franchise – otherwise considered as the mainstay of democracy. What we argue instead is that elections become a technology by which people's subjectivities are shaped and constituted. There are no *apriori* political subjects existing prior to the elections. They become subjects only in and through elections.

Let us explain the point by way of trying to unpack the otherwise complicated relationship between ethnicity and elections in Assam. One cannot stop referring to ethnicity as one seeks to make sense of the politics of the region. The central question is: how ethnicities are sought to be governed and managed through elections for the 'convenience' of governing the people? One way of explaining it is to argue that people vote along given ethnic lines. Subjectivities being uniquely ethnic in a country like India and more so in a region like the Northeast are formed along ethnic lines and electoral outcomes only reflect the given ethnic composition of the particular society in which it is held. Sylhet referendum of 1947 may be regarded as the originary moment of postcolonial Assam. According to Amalendu Guha, the outcome of the referendum exactly coincided with the communal composition of the district's voters and Sylhet – predominantly a Bengali-speaking district - was thus pushed into the then East Bengal as a walkover by Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC).³

Once-undivided Assam had witnessed enough of the struggle for acquiring and retaining the majority status by the Assamese-speaking elite by getting rid of the areas where the majority status of this community is either fragile or simply non-existent. A book published sometime in the early 1960s entitled *Asomiya*, for instance, raises the question of why Assam should not have remained satisfied with only the erstwhile five districts of upper Assam where the Assamese had a comfortably stable majority.⁴ Many of today's problems would not have emerged at all.

When electoral outcomes reiterate the ethnic composition of a given political unit, it is the ethnic majority that calls the shots and 'ethnocracy' masquerades as democracy based on the majoritarian principle. Election as a result ceases to have the kind of significance that was once attached to it by such theoreticians of representative democracy as John Stuart Mill and others. Mill was stoutly arguing

for organizing democracy within a flat and mono-national template which, according to him, will rule out the rise of ethnocracy and organize the electorate in a way that would enable it to put up a ‘joint resistance’ to the tyrant rulers. For him, representative democracy can function best only in a mono-national country.

But, what Israeli geographers call ‘ethnocracy’⁵ has its different connotation in Assam. Assam is not Israel. The society in Assam is irreducibly plural and winning elections here throws up the challenge of governing the very plurality of the society. Territorial reorganization does not seem any longer to be an option in the region – the last being Arunachal Pradesh way back in 1987. Governing ethnicity has by and large to take place within the given territorial framework of the region. This book, as I read it, tells us the story of how the plurality is governed through elections in the present scenario. A great change has occurred in this regard. AGP perhaps could not have understood the importance of leveraging elections for bringing about any social transformation. It took the society in Assam for granted and faced trouble.

Let us take 1985 election as an example. The Assam movement has just come to an end and Asom Gana Parishad has come to power reportedly riding on the huge popularity wave of the Assam movement. If one were to demystify the numbers, AGP even at its heyday could not muster more than 35 percent of the total votes polled in the election. It could come to power precisely because the opposition votes were divided. Another significant point is that AGP could not win a single seat wherever Muslims would constitute 25 percent or more of the population and could bag only half of the Assembly seats. Besides territorial reorganization, keeping the opposition divided by way of shaping and aligning the political forces could serve as a tool of governing the people in the region.

One can do it either by keeping others divided as it happened in 1985 elections or by way of building alliances across ethnicities as it happened about a decade later - in 1996. The 1991 results were an eye opener for AGP in the sense that it was voted out of power insofar as the Opposition forces joined hands and closed ranks with each other. AGP came to realize the irreducible plurality of the society in Assam only in 1996 and joined hands with those forces that were once vociferously opposed to the Assam movement. This was complemented by AGP’s

strategy of slowly dumping the demands of the Assam movement by the wayside and quietly distancing itself from the movement's ideology.⁶

The liberal-democrats would certainly heave a sigh of relief. They would rather take it as the growing maturity of our democracy. For such alliances across the ethnic divide and distancing from narrow ethnicist demands would gradually propel de-ethnicization of the society and leave space for the play of individual subjectivities let loose from their ethnic allegiances. The existing literature on elections in Assam is of course marked by this liberal expectancy. Elections are expected to bring about this social transition - from ethnically loaded electoral majority to an electoral majority that is what Sheldon Wolin would have called 'ideological cipher'⁷ and emptied of its ethnic and ideological essence.

The elections of 1996, I will argue, could have been an opportunity for AGP to create a rainbow society in tune with the AGP-led multiethnic political alliance. AGP could only accomplish the political task of building alliances across ethnic divisions without correspondingly undertaking the social task of creating what Akhil Dutta might call a rainbow society. AGP was caught in a conundrum- whether to create a society of the Assamese people or a society for the people living in Assam that also includes many other communities besides the Assamese-speaking population. Assam in that sense is a governor's nightmare. For governing Assam calls for the uphill task of rendering the society governable in the first place literally by altering its demographics almost brick by brick.

The task of using elections as a means of altering the social fabric in order eventually to influence the electoral outcomes was still unknown to the Asom Gana Parishad. Dutta's book in that sense is unique for it portrays how saffron is etched deep and wide in the very fabric of the society. Neither Congress nor AGP was cut out for the job. The book shows cogently how Hindutva in power is also an agenda of social transformation. BJP could accomplish in the second decade of this century what AGP could not during its two reigns - between 1985 and 1990 and again between 1996 and 2001.

The challenge today is not so much to make government democratic but to govern democracy itself - constitute people's subjectivities, bring the demos into existence as a collective, a 'whole' as Spinoza would have said and render

them governable. Let us call this body an electoral community that comes into being in and through elections. It is not ethnocracy of the Israeli type. Insofar as this electoral community is produced by elections, what about those who resolutely refuse to be identified with it and stay away from elections? Staying away, I will argue, is also integral to the electoral game and so-called oppositional subjectivities are also framed through the instrumentality of elections. One of the enigmas that never stop puzzling us is: Between 1952 and 1978 – in six consecutively held Assembly elections in Assam, 44 percent of the voters on an average did not participate in voting. By contrast, according to *The Hindu*, since 1961 there have been as many as 41 elections in India in which the voting turnout was 80 percent or above – out of which 30 had taken place in the Northeast. Why do people vote with their feet up in the air in a region which has acquired the notoriety of being turbulent and prone to insurgencies and violence? It is because an electoral community has come into being that spills across the conventional divide between elections and insurgencies.⁸

This again goes against the very grain of our textbook habit of making a surgically precise distinction between elections and insurgencies. I think our concept of the production of electoral community will help understand the fraught nature of ethnic relations and the nexus between elections and insurgency. In 1996 elections, for instance, the commands of an insurgent organization played a significant role in setting forth the election agenda of the political parties contesting it. In this election, the same organization (United Liberation Front of Assam) asked each of the contesting political parties to clarify its stand on the issue of foreign nationals. In many constituencies, it would actively back up candidates known for their closeness to the insurgents. .

Is this then the end of the road for democracy? The growing depreciation of elections as a democratic instrument is also accompanied by a visible expansion of democracy outside its institutional limits. Akhil Dutta's earlier works on human security and civil society point out how the democratic space has exceeded the institutional contours of elections and their corollaries.⁹ While we know that law is made by the legislative bodies authorised to make them, one cannot but notice how Kisan Samsad sessions are held for instance on the outskirts of Delhi. There are multiple points of law making in the society and legislative bodies are only one

of them. In the words of an old, agitating farmer: ‘kanun sadak par hi banta’ (laws are made in the streets). Shall we describe it as the ‘democracy of the streets’?

I am particularly drawn to Akhil Dutta’s use of the phrase – saffron *in* the rainbow. Does it mean that the rainbow loses its multicoloured nature and melts into the saffron - a phenomenon known as ‘saffronization’? Does ethnic polarization threaten to rip apart the society of Assam? Claude Lefort too argues that liberal-democratic theory does not have an answer to the question. Any functioning democracy faces the threat of being dismembered as a result of this divide inherent in it.¹⁰ Ankur Tamuli Phukon’s yet unpublished ethnographies on 2021 elections in Assam provide ample testimony to how elections this year were fought on extremely local issues. He for instance addresses such question as, why the elderly women took out processions in support of Akhil Gogoi and his party viz. Raijar Dal in Sivasagar and not in other places? He shows why a remote village in Assam on the Assam-Nagaland border votes for a party and now the electoral behaviour of the villagers is influenced by whatever political developments occur across the border in Nagaland, the nature of political alliances amongst political parties than what happens inside Assam. At one level, it needs to be explained how all such local issues are woven together within the rubric of Hindutva and the ethnographic work in question like all other ethnographic works has a tendency of missing the woods for the trees. To say that it is saffronization of an otherwise rainbow society is an oversimplification. Borrowing from the title of Dutta’s book, I would say – it is not so much saffron displacing the rainbow, but saffron skilfully positioning itself within the rainbow without wiping any of the colours. Gautam Bhadra once described BJP as a hydra headed entity. Dutta’s book offers a clue to understand how the saffron ‘penetrates’ into the societies of the Northeast. Is it saffronization of the rainbow or the saffron in the rainbow? After all, we have to understand why cow slaughter is not an issue in Meghalaya or for that matter the iconization of Lord Rama is not an issue in any of the hill states of the region. Is it not true that Hindutva rearticulates itself within the rainbow? One has to explain how Hindutva reaches out to other social constituencies of the Northeast and recreates itself in the process.

End Notes:

- ¹ Dutta, Ranjan. (2021). *Hinduta Regime in Assam: Saffron in the Rainbow*. New Delhi: Sage. Two earlier drafts of my comments on the book were read in the panel discussions organized by Social Science Research Community (SSRC) and Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad on 19 and 22 August 2021 respectively. I am alone responsible for the lapses, if there are any.
- ² Spinoza, Benedict de. (2007). *Theologico-Political Treatise*.p.112. Retrieved 30 October, 2021 from https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Theologico-Political_Treatise.pdf
- ³ Guha, Amalendu. (1977). *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*. New Delhi. PPH. p.320.
- ⁴ Sarma.,Sushil.(1973) . Sarma, *Asomiya* (in Assamese). Guwahati: Manisha. p.201
- ⁵ See, for instance, Yiftachel, Oren. (2005). *Territory as the Kernel of Nation: Space, Time, and Nationalism in Israel/Palestine*. In Das, S. (Ed.), *Peace Processes and Peace Accords*. South Asian Peace Studies. Vol.2. New Delhi. Sage.
- ⁶ I have discussed it in detail, In Das, Kumar. (1997). *Regionalism in Assam: The Case of Asom Gana Parishad 1985-1990*. New Delhi: Omsons.
- ⁷ Connolly, E. (2001). *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, Eds. Botwinick, A., & Connolly, E. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.224.
- ⁸ I maintained the same point in my interview with *The Scroll*. See <https://scroll.in/article/831429/election-trends-why-indias-north-eastern-states-witness-huge-voter-turnouts> accessed on 31 October 2021.
- ⁹ Dutta, Ranjan. (Ed). (2009). *Human Security in North-East India: Issue and Policies*. Guwahati. Anwesha. I reviewed the book in *The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies*, New series, 7 & 8 (1 & 2), p. 160-162.
- ¹⁰ Lefort, Claude. (1991). *Democracy and Political Theory*. Trans. David Macey. Cambridge. Polity.