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## CHANGING ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR OF TEA TRIBES PEOPLE IN ASSAM: A STUDY OF MARIANI LEGISLATIVE CONSTITUENCY

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### Abstract:

The electoral behaviour of people is generally influenced by different socio-political and economic factors. It is more common in a diverse society like India where caste and community plays a significant role in many ways shaping the mindset of the electorates during the time elections. In Assam, these factors found to be more determined in many areas among various communities. The Tea Tribes are one of such communities in the state which has been used as vote banks by political parties since the post-independent period. But gradually this traditional conception of vote bank and trend of community voting has declined as many other factors started determining the electoral behaviour of this community.

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### 1.0 Introduction:

Electoral behaviour of people in a diverse democracy like India depends on variety of factors. Some of them are socio-economic like status, education, religion sex, etc., a few are psychological like differences in drives and capacities whereas others are influenced by the political environment comprising of political structures and institutions, party system, etc. But all these factors are closely interconnected. The political behaviour of people is influenced significantly by their social circumstances. These circumstances include how individuals live, where they live, the kind of education they have, their occupation and how much they earn, and the opportunities they have for improving their lives. Social circumstances affect the level of resources available for political participation and serve to foster or inhibit the development of attitudes and beliefs that underlie various types of participation and political behaviour. Indicators of social circumstances include such characteristics as age, race, education, caste, region, place of residence, marital status, etc.

In most places, contemporary modern period systems, there are section of people who despite being given ample scope for political participation remain shy of it. To this, we can account that there are many factors apart from the directly political ones that influence political participation. Thus, a host of interacting factors influences the nature and degree of political participation and

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behaviour. Electoral politics and political participation are integral parts of democratic politics that have significant influence in society. Religion, language, caste, community, etc. are important determinates in the functioning of electoral politics in India. Economy, education, gender and age factors always influence shaping the trends of political participation of Indian electoral democracy.

For quite a few decades in India during the post-independent period, some political parties have been trying to use the issue of caste and communities to attract the voters. The political agenda was not focused on the core issues of human development of socio-economically backward communities. The electoral politics of the state of Assam is also not an exception to this. Both the national and regional parties of the state have been trying to polarize the electorates in the line of caste, community or religion.

In Assam, a remarkable number of voters are from the tea tribe community. After independence, for decades, these voters have been insisted upon by political leaders for community voting. But with the gradual improvement of socio-economic conditions of the people in such communities the traditional notion of voting has started changing. Over time, a various factors have come up to influence the electoral behaviour of people belonging to such communities.

In this article, we have tried to analyze the factors influencing the electoral behaviour of the Tea Tribes Community of Assam with the help of a field study conducted in the Mariani LAC (Legislative Assembly Constituency) where this community is considered as a major socio-political force.

## **2.0 The Tea Tribes in Assam:**

The Tea Tribe community of Assam is composed of heterogeneous, multi-ethnic groups. Within the community, there are many tribal and caste groups. This community is found mainly in the districts of upper Assam, Barak Valley and North Bank of the river Brahmaputra. They are highly concentrated in the districts of Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Nagaon, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Sunitpur, etc. There are nearly 6.5 million people of this community in the state consisting of almost 18% of the total population. Politically this community is a determining force in several parliamentary and legislative assembly constituencies.

Mariani Legislative Assembly Constituency of Assam is one of such legislative assembly constituencies which are largely dominated by the community. That is why to ascertain some of such factors that influence the electoral behaviour of Tea Tribe people we selected this constituency.

## **3.0 Objective:**

To study the Factors Influencing Political Behaviour and Participation of Tea Tribes community in Assam

## **4.0 Methodology:**

The study is based on both quantitative and qualitative research; exploratory in nature and consists of various quantitative tools. This is 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.

## **5.0 Survey Sampling:**

From the Mariani LAC (Legislative Assembly Constituency) 4 polling stations were chosen through Stratified Random Sampling (SRS) to give a proper representation of samples. During the survey-taking average of 25 respondents from each of the selected polling stations, a total number

of 100 samples were collected. The following polling stations were selected through purposive random sampling. All these polling stations are primarily dominated by the Tea Tribe population. The collected data has analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science Research) to full fill the purpose of the study.

**Table 1: Name of the Polling Station and total voters**

Constituency	Name of Polling Station	Total Voters
Mariani	18 no. Katonibaril.p school (left)	976
	47 no. Dhopatbaribagichal.p school	784
	85 no. Nakachari higher secondary school (left)	1188
	Selenghat higher secondary school	859

Source: Field Survey

## 6.0 Political Background of Mariani LAC since Independence:

While approaching any socio-political analysis about a particular territory regarding the political behaviour of its people one should know the Socio-political background of the same. Therefore a brief discussion on Mariani's socio-political situation since independence is presented below.

Mariani is a trade centre and also a tea garden area. As a result, tea garden voters dominate Mariani politics. Most of the contesting candidates in this constituency thus come from the tea garden community. Mariani has a cosmopolitan culture with many communities speaking different languages and living in harmony for decades. Moreover, the constituency shares a remarkable length interstate border with Nagaland where there have been long-standing border disputes. It is very interesting to observe that the election results of the Mariani Constituency show a unique trend. Since its inception except on one occasion, the Congress Party won all the elections. It reveals the truth that the traditional vote bank concept is very much present in the constituency though it has been gradually declining in terms of the congress party's vote share. This has given a special character to the electoral politics of the constituency compared to others. The constituency shows the natural growth of voters which fluctuates between 5 per cent 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. Since the year of its creation, the electors in this constituency increased more than two and a half folds from 41466 in 1951 to 106715 in 2016. As regards the casting of votes, the table shows that leaving aside the exceptional year i.e. 1983, in all other elections polling percentage was more than 50. In fact, in the majority of elections vote polled was more than 60 percentages. The highest votes were polled in the election of 2016, which is 84.88 percentages. In the table below the details of winners and runners up, candidates of the Mariani constituency is presented. The constituency has been the bastion of Congress since its creation. Out of the 11 general elections, Congress won the seat 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. It may be observed that people in the constituency had also made an effort to cast vote in favour of the candidates having good images who fought election independently.

It has already been discussed that the constituency is very much dependent on the tea garden voters. The garden community is always aware of their valuable votes and therefore during the time of election they attempt to extract as many benefits as they can from the politicians. However, usually, they vote in blocks. The politicians from the garden community are also active and they have been contesting the election right from the beginning. All the winning candidates so far belong to the tea garden community except for once and that is in 1983. Although in most of the elections in Mariani Constituency Congress became the winner but the margin with the runner's

up candidates remained very narrow margin particularly from the 1996 election. In the 1967 election, INC candidate J. Tanti won the election with 99924 votes where independent candidate, S.P Singh got only 4467 votes. There was a difference of 95,457 votes. In the second assembly election held in 1972 INC candidate Gajen Tanti won the election with 17949 votes with a margin of 12267 votes to his opponent independent candidate Jisang Mipun. In 1978, again congress candidate J. Tanti was elected with a margin of 3480 votes to his immediate opponent independent candidate Purnakanta Phukan. In the 1983 election, Siva Buragohain of INC was elected with 4953 votes and runners up candidates from Indian Congress (Socialist) got 2503 votes. It was not a normal election in the electoral history of Assam as many organisations boycotted this poll and the law and situation were not normal in the state. Only on this occasion Siba Buragohain, a candidate from other than Tea Tribe Community won the election in the constituency. In 1985, the political scenario of Assam changed due to the emergence of the regional party Asom Gana Parisad (AGP). This party also put up Naren Tanti, a candidate from the Tea Tribe community who won the election with 19809 votes living behind INC candidates Siva Buragohain with 9806 votes. In 1991 election, INC offered candidature to female candidate Rupam Kurmi who was popular among the Tea tribes' voters for her social works to bring welfare to this community. Rupam Kurmi was elected with 21508 living behind the AGP candidate Deneswar Tasa with a margin of 15831 votes. This was the highest margin that a candidate won from the Mariani constituency. In 1996, Rupam Kurmi being the candidate of INC got 26566 votes and the runner up candidate from AGP, Bhaba Prasad Bora received 21150 votes. The margin was only 5416 votes. In 2001 INC candidates, Rupam Kurmi again won the election with 23010 votes and runner's candidates Binod Gogoi from BJP got 20177 votes. This time the difference was only 2833 votes. For the first time, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) made an entry to this constituency and backed by more than 20000 votes which was quite significant. In 2006, INC put up Rupjyoti Kurmi, Son of Rupam Kurmi as its candidates who won the election with 33471 votes living behind his immediate opponent Alok Kumar Gosh from Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), who got 30454 votes and lost the battle with a margin of 3017 votes. In 2011, INC again put Rupjyoti Kurmi as its candidates who won the election with 35754 votes and Alok Kumar Gosh from NCP got 28696 votes to remain in the second position with a margin of 7058 votes. In the 2016 assembly election in Mariani INC offered candidature to Rupjyoti Kurmi for the third consecutive term who won the election with 36701 votes. Alok Kumar Gosh, the NCP candidates received 34908 votes and remain in the second position with the lowest ever margin of 1793 votes in the Mariani constituency. It is seen that though INC could win all the election except only in 1985 the vote share has been gradually declining in respect of the party particularly from the 1996 assembly election. On the other hand, AGP, BJP, and NCP have been able to make strongholds in the constituency. The highest number of candidates contested in the year 1991 i.e. 16.

The position of women in respect of direct political participation is better in this constituency than the others. The first woman candidate who contested the election was Smti Rupam Kurmi as a Congress (I) candidate in the 1978 assembly election. She managed to get 9.04 percentage votes and occupied the 4th position. The congress (Sarat Sinha faction) won that election. She again contested the election in 1991 and won the election by a big margin. She received 44 per cent votes while her immediate opponent got only 11.57 per cent of the total votes cast. She was re-elected in the next two elections also i.e. in 1996 and 2001. In 1996 and 2001 another woman candidate, namely Smti Mamoni Rajkumari contested the elections but could not get not even one per cent of the total votes polled.

## 7.0 Survey Discussion (Factors Influencing Electoral Participation in Mariani (LAC):

It is observed that the political participation of people is one of the most important components of electoral behaviour. Several factors influence participation during the electoral process. In the survey, equal numbers of male and female respondents were selected. It has made the survey more gender representative.

**Table 2: Breakup of the Respondents**

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Males	54	54 %
Females	46	46%
Total	100	100.0%

Source: Field Survey

Table 1.2 shows the percentage of male and female respondents in the survey. Out of 100 respondents, 54 were male and 46 were females. The percentage of males and females' respondents is 54 percentages and 46 percentages respectively.

The participation of the people is a legal mandate for an electoral process. More participation enhances the sustainability of a democratic system. There are different factors, which influence people's minds and actions during the election. Among these factors, the benefits of voting play an important role in shaping the minds of people. In this regard, we can refer to the basic logic of voting as mentioned in Downs' Theory of Rational Choice. According to this theory, voters vote as per their self-interest and the parties or candidate and the candidates who received votes are also rational because they have their interest. This interesting participation in the electoral process is not clear but always uncertain. This situation of uncertainty always becomes the backbone of an electoral system.

### 7.1 Voting Benefits:

Keeping the above theory in mind, during the field study, the respondents were requested to comment if they wanted to derive any benefits by casting votes in the elections. It is found that 37 percentages of males and 36.2 percentages of the female's respondents said that they derived some kinds of benefits by casting votes. On the other hand, 63 per cent of males and 63.8 percentages of females out of total respondents reacted negatively.

**Table 3: Individual Benefits**

	Male	Female	Total
No	63.0%	63.8%	63.4%
Yes	37.0%	36.2%	36.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Study

It has already been a fact that education plays a significant role in the political decision-making of individuals. Looking at the level of education and question of personal benefits of voting, the survey shows that 29.4 percentage of illiterate people said that they often cast their votes in anticipation of some personal benefits. 31.1 percentage of the respondents having primary level education said that they cast their votes for some kind of personal benefits. 38.0 percentage of the respondents with secondary and H.S level education expressed that they voted in the election expecting certain personal benefits and 48.8 percentage of the total respondents having degree and above level education said that they cast vote to get some kind of personal benefits. It is interesting

to observe that people with a higher level of education have more expectation to derive some kinds of benefits at the individual level by their participation in the electoral process.

### 7. 2. *Influence of Friends and community on Selecting a Candidate While Voting:*

Many people seek suggestions from friends and community become determining while choosing a candidate for voting before elections.

**Table 4: Influence of Suggestions**

	Male	Female	Total
Never	43.3%	30.3%	37.3%
Sometimes	33.5%	30.3%	32.0%
All Times	23.2%	39.5%	30.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Study

When the respondents were asked whether they took any suggestion from friends or community before choosing a candidate, 33.5 percentages of males and 30.3 per cent of female's respondents said that sometimes they took suggestions and 23.2 percentages of males and 39.5 percentages of females said that they regularly took such suggestions while choosing a candidate.

### 7. 3. *Factors influence in choosing a Candidate in Election:*

In a democracy, several socio-economic factors influence the voters' choice at different levels for a candidate while casting their votes, among them caste, clan or tribe of a candidate play a major role during the elections. On the other hand, socio-economic status, educational and political experience, capacity to render social service are also some of the other issues before the electorates consider a candidate in the election. The opinion of the respondents about these factors is presented in the table below.

**Table 5: Factors in Choosing a Candidate**

Gender	Male	Female	Total
No	.9%	0%	.5%
Clan and the tribe of the candidate	6.3%	9.6%	7.8%
Socio-economic status of the candidate	8.8%	7.4%	8.1%
Educational and political experience	18.8%	14.8%	16.9%
Social service	60.2%	60.5%	60.3%
Others	4.9%	7.7%	6.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Study

The survey shows that 6.3 percentages of males and 9.6 percentages of female respondents consider the clan and tribe of the candidate during the election. While 8.8 percentages and 7.4 percentages of male and female respondents considered the socio-economic status of the candidates in an election. 18.8 percentages of males and 14.8 percentages of females' electorates considered the educational and political experience of a candidate during the election. It is interesting to see that 60.2 percentage of male and 60.5 percentage of female voters take into account the capacity of a candidate in rendering social service work for the cause and development of society.

#### 7. 4. Factors Influencing in Selecting a Party:

Many factors shape the mindset of the people in support of a political party or a political group. During the time of the election, electorates may consider the caste and community base of a party or local support generated by a political party or group. Sometimes some people may be traditional supporters of a political party, which induce them to work for the party. Sometimes people derive or expect benefits for their families from a political party for which they become faithful supporters of the party. In many cases, leadership becomes an important motivation for voters to support a particular political party. Among other factors party agenda, program and manifesto gather a good deal of interest in support of a party.

**Table 6: Factors Influencing in Selecting a Party**

Factors that influence electorates' choice in selecting a party	Male	Female	Total
People of my caste/community-supported that party.	8.5%	14.05	11.0%
The group or the faction in the village/Mohalla supported the party.	6.6%	8.5%	7.5%
My family members are traditional supporters/voters of the party.	7.5%	7.7%	7.6%
I/members of my family have benefited, or expect to benefit from the party.	16.9%	18.8%	17.8%
The party has good leadership	42.3%	33.6%	38.3%
The overall program of the party is good.	29.5%	30.6%	30.0%

Source: Field Study

The data reveals the fact that 89 percentages of the total respondents do not select a political party for having the same caste and community support, only 11 percentages of the respondents considered a political party based on these criteria.

#### 7. 5. Role of Money Factor in Politics:

In India, there is a common perception that electoral democracy is mostly controlled by money and poor people cannot influence or determine the political course of action. In this regard, a question was put before the respondents to express their opinion on the role of money and the importance of the poor in politics.

**Table 7: Role of Money**

	Male	Female	Total
Controlled by money	41.4%	37.3%	39.5%
Poor people are important	53.3%	52.4%	52.9%
Don't know	5.3%	10.3%	7.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Filed Study

It is observed that 41.4 percentage male and 37.7 percentage female respondents believe that politics is mostly controlled by money. On the other hand, 53.5 percentages of males and 52.4 percent of females believe that poor people are also important in politics.

#### 7. 6. Factors that Influence the Choice of Electorates in Elections:

During the elections, the choices of electorates are influenced by many factors. Sometimes the political party itself or the quality of the candidate or the religion of the candidate influences the voters largely. During the survey, it was seen that 32.9 percentage male and 34.3 per cent of females were influenced by political parties. On the other hand, 67.1 per cent of males and 64.9 per cent of

females were motivated by the qualities of candidates. The role of religion in this regard was found negligible.

**Table 8: Factors Influencing the Choice of Electorates**

Factors influence the choice of electorates	Male	Female	Total
Political party	32.9%	34.3%	33.6%
Qualities of candidate	67.1%	64.9%	66.1%
The religion of the candidate	0.0%	.7%	.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Filed Study

It can be observed that the quality of a candidate is given first preference compared to political parties and other factors during the election.

### 7.7. Caste and Community Factor in Election:

The lack of demographic homogeneity causes division between different social sections based on religion, region, language, caste, and ethnicity in India. It has been a fact that caste or community is an important force that influences political decisions both at the levels of individuals and groups. This has led to rise in the commitment of political parties in their agenda to accommodate one or more social groups. The election outcome is always influenced by the diversity of the population in terms of ethnicity and social caste. To know the minds of the electorate regarding caste and community influence on their electoral behavior the respondents were asked whether they had been aware of the caste of the candidate while voting. The result is presented in the table below.

**Table 9: Caste and Community Factor**

	Male	Female	Total
No	29.8%	30.6%	30.2%
Yes	70.2%	69.4%	69.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Filed Study

The lack of demographic homogeneity causes division between different social sections based on religion, region, language, caste, and ethnicity in India. It has been a fact that caste or community is an important force that influences political decisions both at the levels of individuals and groups. Consequently this has led to a rise in the commitment of political parties in their agenda to accommodate one or more social groups. The election outcome is always influenced by the diversity of the population in terms of ethnicity and social caste. To know the minds of the electorate regarding the influence of caste and community on their electoral behavior, the respondents were asked whether they had been aware of the caste of the candidate while voting.

### 8.0 Conclusion:

It is observed from the above analysis that like many other legislative constituencies of Assam, the Tea Tribe Community plays a very significant role in Mariani LAC. But for socio-economic backwardness, the community has been used as vote banks by most of the political parties for decades. With time, the community has been gradually empowered by many policies for health, education, etc. Over the due course of time, educated youths of the community have started taking initiatives to create socio-political awareness among their community members which led to change in the pattern of electoral behaviour of the people. Today the people of this community do not confine themselves within the so-called idea of vote banks by the political parties. The electoral behaviour of the community has gradually overcome the limitations of single-party agenda and



entered into a wide spectrum of considerations of a variety of factors. As a result, the people who earlier were habituated to go with the symbol of a political party have started thinking about the performance or social responsibilities of candidates and parties, personal benefits like health, education employment, etc. Despite all these changes in the electoral behaviour of the people of the community, nearly 70 per cent of them give priority to caste and community factors while choosing their representatives through different elections.

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