

BJP and its Mass Fronts in Assam: A Case Study of Dima Hasao District

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BY

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**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES,
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD, HYDERABAD-500046, TELANGANA, INDIA,
DECEMBER- 2023**



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I, Rakhee Naiding, hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis entitled “**BJP and its Mass Fronts in Assam: A Case Study of Dima Hasao District**” is carried out by me under the supervision of **Prof. Arun Kumar Patnaik**, Professor, Dept. of Political Science, University of Hyderabad for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science. The thesis is an original work of mine to the best of my knowledge, and no part of this thesis has been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I also declare that this is a bonafide research work which is free from plagiarism. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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Parts of the thesis have been published the following publication:

1. “The Rise of BJP in the Hills of Assam: A Case of Dima Hasao District”
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2. “Party Politics in Dima Hasao District of Assam: Shifts and Continuities” in the 59th All India Political Science Conference and International Seminar on

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Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfillment of coursework requirement for Ph.D. was exempted from doing coursework (recommended by Doctoral Committee) on the basis of the following courses passed during his M.Phil. program and the M.Phil. degree was awarded:

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List of Abbreviations

AAGSP	:	All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
ABVKA	:	Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram
ADSU	:	All Dimasa Students' Union
ASDC	:	Autonomous State Demand Committee
AGP	:	Asom Gana Parishad
AIUDF	:	All India United Democratic Front
ADR	:	Association of Democratic Reforms
APHLC	:	All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference
AASU	:	All Assam Students' Union
AGSP	:	Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
ABSU	:	All-Bodo Students' Union
AJP	:	Assam Jatiya Parishad
AITUC	:	All India Trade Union Congress
APCC	:	Assam Pradesh Congress Committee
ADSU	:	All Dimasa Students' Union
APSC	:	Assam Public Service Commission
AIDMK	:	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
ASI	:	Archaeological Society of India
AIR	:	All India Radio
BSP	:	Bahujan Samaj Party
BPAC	:	Bodo People's Action Committee
BPPF	:	Bodoland People's Progressive Front
BPF	:	Bodoland People's Front

BJMM	:	Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha
BJS	:	Bharatiya Jan Sangh
BIP	:	Bamboo Industrial Park
BJP	:	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJYM	:	Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha
CAA	:	Citizenship Amendment Act
CM	:	Chief Minister
CPI(M)	:	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI	:	Communist Party of India
CEM	:	Chief Executive Member
CSDS	:	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
CAB	:	Citizenship Amendment Bill
CPI(ML)(L)	:	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation
DoNER	:	Development of North Eastern Region
DMA	:	Dimasa Mothers' Association
DMK	:	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
DNSF	:	Dimasa National Security Force
DHD	:	Dima Halam Daogah
DRDC	:	Dimaraji Demand Revival Committee
DHD(J)	:	Dima Halam Daogah (Jewel)
DHD(D)	:	Dima Halam Daogah (Dilip)
DHATC	:	Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council
DSU	:	Dimasa Students Union
EITU	:	Eastern India Tribal Union

FDI	:	Foreign Direct Investments
GIC	:	Guaranteed Investment Certificate
GDDP	:	Gross District Domestic Product
HAD	:	Hill Areas Department
HPC-D	:	Hmar People's Conference- Democratic
HSDP	:	Hill State Democratic Party
HAD	:	Hill Areas Development
INC	:	Indian National Congress
INR	:	Indian Rupee
IPF	:	Indigenous Peoples Forum
IMDT	:	Illegal Migrants Determination Tribunal
ISI	:	Inter-services Intelligence
INTUC	:	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IRDA	:	Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority
ISKCON	:	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
IPF	:	Indigenous People's Forum
J&K	:	Jammu and Kashmir
JD(U)	:	Janata Dal United
JNH	:	Jadikhe Naisho Hoshom
JVS	:	Janajati Vikas Samiti
KSA	:	Karbi Students' Association
LIC	:	Life Insurance Corporation
LJP	:	Lok Janashakti Party
MLA	:	Member of Legislative assembly

MP	:	Member of Parliament
MAC	:	Member of Autonomous Council
MoU	:	Memorandum of Understanding
MoS	:	Memorandum of Settelement
NCP	:	Nationalist Congress Party
NDA	:	National Democratic Alliance
NES	:	National Election Studies
NRC	:	National Register of Citizens
NCHAC	:	North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council
NDDP	:	Net District Domestic Product
NEHU	:	Northeast Hill University
NCHSF	:	North Cachar Hills Students Federation
NSCN-IM	:	National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak Muivah
NIA	:	National Investigation Agency
NGO	:	Non-governmental Organisation
NEDA	:	Northeast Democratic Alliance
NPP	:	National People's Party
OBC	:	Other Backward Class
PM	:	Prime Minister
PTCA	:	Plains Tribal Council of Assam
PDF	:	People's Democratic Forum
PWD	:	Public Works Department
PYF	:	Presbyterian Youth Fellowship
RSS	:	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RDX	:	Research Department eXplosive
RD	:	Raijor Dal
RJD	:	Rashtriya Janata Dal
SC	:	Scheduled Caste
ST	:	Scheduled Tribe
SRC	:	States Reorganisation Commission
SEBE	:	Secondary Board of Education
SEP	:	Special Economic Package
TMC	:	Trinamool Congress
UPA	:	United Progressive Alliance
UP	:	Uttar Pradesh
ULFA	:	United Liberation Front of Asom
USSR	:	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UMF	:	United Minorities Front
UPPL	:	United People's Party Liberal
UMFO	:	United Mizo Freedom Organisation
VHP	:	Vishva Hindu Parishad

Chapter I

General Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study began as an attempt to understand the massive victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in Assam and the 2016 Assembly elections, which enabled it to form a government for the first time in the state. Much of it was credited to the all-India phenomenon of BJP's much-discussed resurgence (Palshikar et al., 2017) and Narendra Modi's mass appeal as opposed to Rahul Gandhi's lack thereof, which drew many votes for the BJP. Many observers have seen the emergence of the BJP in the state of Assam as simply an electoral victory common in any given multiparty political system. (Goswami & Tripathi, 2015) The primary factor leading to the victory was said to be the anti-incumbency sentiment against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Many commentators have concluded the electoral victories as the entry of Hindutva into the region (Gohain, 2016), while others contended that BJP's victory was that of identity politics rather than Hindutva (Misra, 2016). The 2016 Assam Assembly victory of the BJP and its allies brought to the fore its ability to stitch alliances with regional forces that ensured electoral success and the party's endurance in the state polity. The General Elections of 2019 and then the Assembly Elections of 2021 made it clear that BJP had become the state's only political party to be reckoned with, and other regional parties had either been successfully co-opted or wholly annihilated. The Grand Old Party, the Indian National Congress, which had been invincible in Assam even through the turbulent times of the Emergency or during the coalition days at the national level, had been replaced by the BJP. The 2019 and 2021 victories were interesting in the state since, during this time, the state started seeing upheaval and controversy related to updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Bill (now Citizenship Amendment Act in short CAA). BJP's victory despite massive protests against the Bill, which the party openly supported at the risk of alienating voters, points to two things- one, that the party very capably was able to carry out damage control after the Bill's passage, and secondly, that issues such as the NRC and the CAA did not affect the people of Assam equally, so much as to dissuade them from voting for the BJP. This study follows the BJP and its growth in one such district of the state where the impact of the citizenship debate could be said to be least and the party's electoral fortunes to be quite immense.

Assam is divided into three regions from within on a geographical basis as well as its history and peoples- first is the Brahmaputra Valley, then the Barak Valley, and the two tribal-majority hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. While the demand for updating the NRC and opposition to the CAA were strongest in parts of Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley, especially the Bengali-dominated Cachar district's apprehension regarding the NRC and CAA was different. Many also welcomed the CAA, especially in Cachar. The response was tacit and almost ambivalent in the hill districts despite a meek show of protests by a few people from the opposition party. In the hill district of Dima Hasao, it can be safely said that the NRC debate, the CAA tensions, and protests, or the polarization along Hindu-Muslim lines as seen in many constituencies in both Brahmaputra and Barak Valley had little bearing when it came to BJP's rise in the district.

The Dima Hasao district, which is a tribal hill district administered under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, was once a stronghold of Congress and then the regional party Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in the 1980s and 90s. When the BJP first came to power in Assam in 2016 to form the government, the district saw a quick turn to BJP as well. Mostly, this was a result of the district's Autonomous Council's dependence on the changing political dynamics at the state level. But the BJP was also able to successfully bring diverse forces, especially ones demanding statehood and greater tribal autonomy, under its fold. The party has been able to organize itself even at the grassroots among several tribes and non-tribes as well. The different organizations of the Sangh Parivar working in the district for decades now aided BJP's entrenchment, if not entry.

This study is an attempt to look into the factors that aid the BJP's ability to align with forces to form a government that is not just diverse but also seems antagonistic to BJP's parent ideology *prima facie* in distant peripheral regions of the country, such as the Dima Hasao district of Assam, far away from the Hindi heartland where BJP traditionally has been most successful. Dima Hasao district is peripheral within Assam and has seen internecine ethnic conflict as well as insurgent separatist demands and autonomy movements in the recent past. The sentiment for the establishment of ethnic homelands is still very strong among different tribes in the district. It is to be noted that the district has almost 30% of the Christian population. Even in such a scenario, since 2016 and in the aftermath, the BJP has been able to win elections singlehandedly with huge margins in the district. The study interrogates the multiple factors that have enabled BJP's success and ensured its longevity as an alternative national party in the district's political system.

1.2 Review of Literature

Academic work on BJP's electoral emergence, rise, and ideological affiliations have been quite numerous and have particularly increased after 2014. However, in the context of Assam, as well as other states of northeast India, there has been a dearth of academic work. Before 2014, the BJP was hardly the central talking point in Assam's electoral politics. In the aftermath of 2014, several articles have come up, particularly discussing BJP's victory in consecutive elections in the state. There are two recent works one, by Sandhya Goswami(2020) and Akhil Ranjan Dutta(2021), with Dutta's work in particular focusing on BJP's Hindutva regime in the state. Goswami writes of the tilt towards BJP beginning in 2014 thanks to Narendra Modi's extraordinary popularity. BJP's 2016 victory, she suggests, is the outcome of the party's alliance with the regional force Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which brought in the indigenous votes. BJP capitalized on the opportunities in a society already divided on ideological fault lines. There was religious polarisation in the society, especially after the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), a party seen to be a Muslim majority party, rose to strength. The issue of foreign infiltration again took center stage alongside the state's backwardness and scope for development. This brought the non-Muslim forces and the indigenous groups together in support of the BJP. The party also successfully adopted local cults and symbols to build a strong electoral campaign that captured the masses' interest as well as goodwill. Targeted welfare schemes aided the party's popularity as well. It did not help matters that the once invincible Assam Congress had lost much of its strength, and several members of its social base had deserted it by now.

While Goswami's work is written clearly from the perspective of the party's electoral strategy and party politics, Dutta delves deeper into the ideological moorings of the Hindutva party and how this has affected the traditional politics of the state, which he calls 'saffron in the rainbow.' According to Dutta, the BJP's use of Hindutva in the state was by creating a strategy that captured the religious as well as its unique ethnic and cultural imagination. The BJP, on the one hand, reached out to the different indigenous groups of the state through several measures while continuously invoking the Bengali Muslims as being a threat to the indigenes' land, resources, culture, and religion. Meanwhile, through its affiliates in the Sangh Parivar, the party was able to widen its social base, such as among the tea tribes of Assam. Another strategy that has reaped benefits for the party is populist schemes targeted at different communities and groups in the state. According to Dutta, the party's victory in the face of the anti-Citizenship

Amendment Bill (now Act) mobilization was due to these community-specific schemes, which divided the population while consolidating the vote bank in favour of the saffron party.

This survey of literature covers books and articles specifically from the perspective of political mobilization among different social categories and election strategies of the BJP at the national level from 2014. Thereafter, it will look into the recent works on the same with particular reference to Assam. With respect to Dima Hasao, this study is the first of its kind, which looks at BJP's electoral mobilizations in the district among the local populace. However, the survey will cover articles and books available on the political history of the district in general and try to give a glimpse of the issues of the district that could ensure BJP's victory.

Paul Wallace, in the edited book *India's 2014 Elections: A Modi-led BJP Sweep*, analysed the party's victory in different states during 2014. The BJP had won 282 out of 543 seats in 2014. The Indian National Congress (INC) was reduced to 44 seats, an all-time low and less than 10% of the total number of seats. Wallace writes that the significance of this election is the change from the coalition system to a single-party majority rule under a strong leader. The author has identified three main factors that led to the landslide victory of the BJP. First is the state of the Indian economy at the time. The BJP leadership highlighted the high rate of inflation, especially the rise in food prices during the UPA regime was 400%. Secondly, corruption by the incumbent regime had become a burning issue, especially with the 2011 Anna Hazare's India Against Corruption movement in New Delhi. Arvind Kejriwal used the success of this campaign to form his Aam Aadmi Party and even became CM of Delhi for 49 days in 2014. Thirdly, the presidential-style campaign in a parliamentary system with Narendra Modi at the helm. Modi also emphasized economic development and good governance and presented the 'Gujarat model' as an ideal alternative to UPA's corruption and mismanagement. The author also comments on how the BJP, with Modi at the forefront, stepped into the role of Congress in 1980 under Indira Gandhi. In the meantime, the Congress could not field a strong contender against Modi. Rahul Gandhi, as the author quotes Ramachandra Guha, had to face the burden of being a legacy, especially when the new aspirational voters were no longer ready to take the pre-eminence of any individual or party based on ancestry. Additionally, 2014 was not entirely a clean sweep either, given the fact that South and Southeast states resisted the BJP, but the gains in the North and West, including Assam in the East, were enough to gain majority seats. The author also notes the increase in the social base of the party from 2014 to 2019, such as among the OBCs, especially since Modi himself identified as OBC. Besides that,

BJP saw gains among its core constituency, the Upper Castes themselves, women voters, rural and urban voters, and among the SCs. The party was able to attract poor voters through its Sangh Parivar affiliates, who have been engaged in different social services in remote areas.

In *Electoral Politics in India: The Resurgence of the Bharatiya Janata Party*, (2017) edited by Palshikar, Kumar, and Lodha, the authors critically analyzed all aspects of the BJP's victory in 2014, beginning from several state elections prior to when BJP had trounced Congress. The volume also looks into the impact of the 2014 victory on the state of competitive politics in the country. The 2014 Lok Sabha elections made the BJP the new pivot of national politics, as it is in power at the Centre, as well as in different regions, making it the crux whereby alliances and counter-alliances are being negotiated. Besides *Congress mukt bharat*, another less popular slogan of BJP's campaign was *shetriya mukt bharat*, which might be a distant dream, but the primacy of regional parties, especially in a coalition framework, had come under severe duress. The work also includes a detailed, incisive list of factors leading to the BJP's victory from the case studies of different states that the edited volume covers. The party's strongest and consolidated mandate came from northern, central, and western parts of India. The states in these parts together send the largest number of seats to the Lok Sabha. Bihar, Maharashtra, and UP together send 30% of Lok Sabha seats. In the south, states like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka BJP benefitted from a partnership with junior allies, which resulted in a pro-BJP tilt and secured a good number of seats. In states like J&K, West Bengal, Kerala, and Odisha, where BJP always had a weak presence, BJP won a large share of votes. In Assam and further in the northeast states, BJP's influence was clear, especially in Assam, with 7 out of the total 14 seats and 36.5% vote share. In Assam, BJP's presence had always been weak, like in Odisha or West Bengal. The anti-incumbency against Congress definitely aided the BJP's popularity as the alternative. In many states, there was 'double anti-incumbency' as the authors put it, such as in Assam itself. People were unhappy with Congress at the Centre as well as the state. In UP, as the authors note, there was 'double anti-incumbency' against Congress at the Centre and Samajwadi Party at the state level.

The mood of the nation was successfully captured by the BJP by putting Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate, a successful chief minister espousing the successful 'Gujarat model' of development. On the other side was Rahul Gandhi, who had yet to prove his credentials as a leader or administrator. It was an easy choice for the voters. The state governments under BJP were perceived as better in performance and governance than those

run by Congress. The BJP was said to have better organizational machinery as well as program and vision in comparison to the Congress. The party's campaign was also strengthened through social, print, and mass media. The use of technological tools was maximized in order to disseminate party propaganda, which yielded success in the 2014 elections for the Narendra Modi-led campaign. *Chai pe charcha* chats through holograms catchy slogans such as *ab ki baar Modi Sarkar* or *acche din ane wale hai* also made an indelible impression on the minds of the general populace. Most significantly, during this election, the BJP learned from past trials and tribulations and was able to broaden its social base while also retaining its core constituency of upper castes and the urban-based rich class. BJP, while maintaining its majoritarian framework, was able to attract the backward classes, the Dalits and Adivasis, among its voters. It started mimicking the social justice parties. It promised different protective discriminations and other policies. The party had changed its stance towards Dr. B.R Ambedkar in its bid to woo Dalits. Modi himself discovered his backward class roots during the course of the election campaign, which made a considerable impact on the party's image as that of one committed to social justice. The youth were attracted to the promise of the Gujarat model of industry, business, and jobs, and the BJP under Modi seemed to be the one to deliver this aspiration. The corporate bigwigs also put faith in Modi's style of pushing industrial development unencumbered by bureaucracy.

In his 2018 article *Understanding the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party*, Satish Mishra looks into internal reasons within BJP's organizational structure besides external factors that led to the party's success. The author states that the Modi-Shah partnership, with Shah acting as Modi's lieutenant, modernized the party, ushering in a corporate style of management that changed the party's administrative style and structure. It is said that for Shah and the party, 'elections are nothing less than war.' This statement indeed stands visibly correct to date as seen in both PM Modi's and Shah's, who is presently Home Minister engagement with municipality elections as seen recently in Hyderabad or Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council elections in Assam in April 2022. Party leaders and ministers accompanied by RSS and VHP bigwigs are seen to frequent different, even remote, places more often before elections. The author also notes that BJP expanded its political base through superior electoral strategies, which its rival could not match. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then BJP president Amit Shah, the party devised electoral strategies taking into account micro details of caste, sub-castes, religious compositions, and other specifics of the constituencies while selecting party candidates. The party also did well identifying dissident leaders from rival

parties and ambitious leaders from different mass-based organizations. In Assam, in the former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's cabinet, Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is presently the Chief Minister of Assam and arguably one of the most popular leaders of the state, was admitted a year before the assembly elections in 2016, which proved critical in the BJP's win.

Another strategy that aids BJP's performance is the identification of castes and sub-castes that have not been part of the power structure and giving tickets to their members. Similarly, it allied with tribal groups that are discontent with incumbent ruling parties, such as the tribes demanding separate statehood in Tripura, and won a landslide victory in 2018. However, it should be added that the BJP does not always give a share to the yet unrepresented without electoral calculations, especially if the said group does not have the requisite numbers to make electoral dents. This shows that BJP's electoral strategies are true of micro-management, and each constituency is studied meticulously to ensure victory. The author also cites the reports from the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), which in its report cites that after coming to power in 2014, the party's income rose 44.02% (from INR 673.81 crore in 2013-14 to INR 970.43 crore in 2014-15) (Mishra, 2018, p. 8). The gap between the incomes of the BJP and Congress was INR 377.12 crore. The BJP's income of INR 970.43 crore was 51.92 percent of the combined incomes of the six national parties (BJP, Congress, BSP, NCP, CPI(M), CPI). A substantially higher income and bigger expenditure on publicity and electoral propaganda than its rivals has helped the BJP in its outreach programs. These financial resources helped the party's extensive outreach to the electorate. The party also greatly increased its social base. The party, an upper caste, elite, and urban educated party, also reached out to the OBCs, SCs, and STs. Despite its open anti-Muslim tirades and its parent organization, especially RSS' antagonism with Christian missionaries, the party is open to Muslim voters, even if in significantly small numbers. The party has Minority Morcha in all states and districts, which Muslim or Christian members often lead. Of late, the BJP is even seen to be cashing in on the cleavages in the Muslim society, especially the Pasmanda Muslims, the lower caste Muslims.

In 2015, BJP claimed that through its membership drive, which included something as simple as giving a missed call and registering and uploading contact details on their official website, it had become a party with more than 11 crore members, 2.2 crores more than the Chinese Communist Party. The author also points to the network of RSS-backed organizations working in different tribal areas for decades, such as Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Ekal Vidyalays, Sewashram, Sewa Bharti, etc. The party could utilize the networks these institutions had built

over the years to influence the electorate. Furthermore, the author notes that the next factor that has helped the BJP's growth is the centralized decision-making structure under the joint leadership of PM Modi and then BJP President Amit Shah. The party is governed along the lines of Hedgewar's *ek chalak anuvartitva* (follow one leader). The author cites the internal operation of the party from his interview with Yashwant Sinha, who had joined the BJP in 1993 and resigned in early 2018, while in the pre-Modi Shah era, there was a discussion-based consensus that guided the party's decisions and policies, presently all decisions would be taken at the level of the Prime Minister and the party president. According to the author, Amit Shah operated a vast patronage system to ensure the patronage of middle and lower-ranking party leaders. On the other hand, senior leaders such as LK Advani, A.B. Vajpayee, and Murli Manohar Joshi were sidelined in the decision-making process and made members of the newly created Marg Darshak Mandal or an advisory committee. This new style of functioning also made the party effective in making swift decisions and implementing policies. The author also notes how the party's leadership chose to select, at times handpicked, leaders who are young and Hindutva hardliners such as Biplab Deb in Tripura, Raghobar Das in Jharkhand, or Devendra Fadnavis in Maharashtra. However, it should be noted here that that is not always the case. For instance, in the case of Assam, Sarbananda Sonowal, former CM of Assam from BJP, was already a popular face. He was at the forefront of repealing the contentious Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act when a young leader in the regional Asom Gana Parishad earned the monicker *Jatiya Nayak*. The party then brought Congress dissident Himanta Biswa Sarma in. Neither can be said to be Hindutva hardliners if their past political connections are taken into consideration, nor were they members of the RSS. This article by Mishra is key to understanding the internal machinations of the party and the overall electoral strategies of the BJP under the leadership of PM Modi and Amit Shah since 2014.

After 2014, in the 2016 Assembly elections, the BJP won a decisive victory and formed the government for the first time in the state. The 2017 book chronicling the first time that BJP formed government in Assam in the 2016 Assembly elections, *The Last Battle of Saraighat: The Story of the BJP's Rise in the North-east* by Rajat Sethi and Subhrastha, is an insider account of not just the party but RSS' work in the Northeast region, particularly Assam. The book is hardly nuanced in its approach to understanding the factors leading to the 2016 Assembly elections but reads as a chronicle of its own exploits and success. Anyhow, the book reveals interesting insights into the BJP's self-understanding of the region and its electoral pursuits in the state. According to the authors, in the run-up to the 2016 elections, the BJP made

it a point to address several historical issues and insecurities of the people of Assam in its campaign, such as Delhi's discriminatory attitude towards the region, especially under Nehru. Interestingly, in the book, the authors collate two very critical events of Assam's cultural and political history. First, as the name suggests, the battle of Saraighat, where the Ahom general Lachit Barphukan defeated Mughal forces. Secondly, the 2016 Assembly victory of the BJP was also equated with 1985 when Assam's regional party, Asom Gana Parishad, was able to oust the Congress government in the state, forming the government after a long mass movement, the Assam Movement. According to the authors, the central plank of BJP's electoral campaign rested on the state's past, a past of betrayals and indifference by the Congress establishment, which the BJP would rectify if given a chance. The authors then elaborate on the work done by the Sangh Parivar organizations in the state, which also aided the victory of the BJP. The authors emphasize the *sewa* carried out by the RSS during the Assam earthquake in 1950, which won the admiration of the people of Assam. By 1975, there were RSS shakhas in all the districts of Assam, although it was only in 2014 that a prantpracharak from Assam, Baisistha Bujarbaruah, was appointed for the first time. The authors note the sacrifices of the RSS workers from outside the region adapting to local customs and food habits to serve the local populace. The pracharaks also had to sacrifice their lives; for instance, two pracharaks, Sukleswar Medhi and Pramod Dixit, were killed by the ULFA.

However, as mentioned by the authors, the RSS was largely seen as a religious and socio-cultural organization for the most part. The authors add that the RSS was seen as a Krishna Bhakti Movement in Assam, and the local people could not see beyond the bhakti parampara (devotional activities). "As an extended arm of Sankardeva's tradition, teachings, and bhakti, the organization remained a spiritual—a cultural force to reckon with for very long." But this perception was to change and RSS during the Assam Movement. Interestingly, in the book, the authors claim that it was the RSS that turned the *bahiragota* or outsider angst to *bidexi* or foreigner and soon turned it into an anti-Bangladeshi Muslim agitation. According to the authors, in the 1980s, when the Assam Movement was at its peak, and the foreigner issue was burning the state, the RSS had opined that Hindus from Bangladesh were *sharanarthi*s (asylum) seekers and Muslims were *anupravesha*karis (infiltrators). The Muslims had come to India in search of better economic opportunities, and the political establishment had left this migration unabated to fulfill the political agenda of nursing and protecting a vote bank. The Hindus from Bangladesh were political refugees who, being a minority in a Muslim-dominated country, had fled their land and had come to India to follow their religion and live a life of

dignity. Not much light is shed as to if and how the RSS was able to propagate this idea among the people of Assam, but the book adds that “the then prominent ideologues of the RSS like Atal Bihari Vajpayee boldly took the Assam concern to the national fora, publicly and emphatically supporting the Assam Movement, in turn gaining popular sympathy and foothold in the state.” Another aspect of the BJP’s victory in Assam in 2016 is that the authors take up the media campaigns. The book looks into the social media wars, especially on Twitter and Facebook, which boosted the morale of the party workers during the campaign. On social media, then, CM Tarun Gogoi was bombarded with questions on Twitter on corruption, misgovernance, and incompetent leadership. As the authors note, these pointed questions and rebuttals were backed with evidence, data, statistics, and often crowd-sourced information from different constituencies. The questions that Congress could avoid answering otherwise were being asked on social media. Besides this, the authors critique how Congress caricatured the PM, from his newfound expensive sartorial sense to his trips to foreign countries at the cost of the public exchequer. Tarun Gogoi attacked PM Modi, which was seen as unbecoming of a veteran, while the relevance of attacking the PM in an assembly election sent a confused and hostile message to the electorate.

The BJP electoral machinery in the state, headed by Ram Madhav, General Secretary of BJP and then in-charge of Northeast, decided to steer the campaign to a united and positive theme of unity of diverse communities, religions, and ethnicities. Hoardings with such images of unity amongst all communities were then followed by caricatures of Tarun Gogoi with the smiling, affable image of his famous and critiqued recognizable words *baad diya he* or let it go or ignore it while the state was reeling under different issues such as floods, unemployment, etc. A fascinating take by the authors here is how BJP took uncomfortable issues of ‘illegal immigration mainly of the Muslim population,’ which is seen as politically incorrect. It immediately got accusations of harboring communal or xenophobic sentiments and took them head-on. The party turned it into a political and economic question arising from the people’s insecurities reeling under intense resource competition alongside population explosion. According to the authors, the polarization in Assam on religious lines was not the handiwork of the BJP but that of Congress and the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). AIUDF chief Maulana Badruddin Ajmal’s open call to support the immigrant Muslims, which had polarised the society and Congress, added fuel to the fire with its vote bank electoral mobilization each time. During 2016, the BJP stood for the unity of all concerned while questioning ‘illegal immigration’ without bringing up the religious identity of these

immigrants. The party stood for the cause of the *khilonjiya*, or indigenous, against the ‘others.’ The BJP took these issues head-on without the baggage of political correctness. The BJP called out the alliance between Congress and AIUDF as political opportunism. The authors also add that BJP is highly accommodating as opposed to the allegations by its detractors, as exemplified by its ability to build alliances with forces such as Shiv Sena or the Asom Gana Parishad.

Sandhya Goswami’s *Assam Politics in Post-Congress Era: 1985 and Beyond*, published in 2020, gives the readers a bird’s eye view of the political scenario in Assam. The book is essential to this study as the title suggests it stresses the political scenario of Assam after the end of the ‘Congress system’ at the national level. However, until 2014, Assam was still considered a Congress state. The author discusses the long-term and festering issues of the state since independence. It also gives a glimpse into that Assam’s political scenario has undergone ‘two fundamental changes: a fragmentation of the party’s political space and the explosion of ethnicities in the arena of politics.’ (Goswami, 2020) In this scenario of fragmentation and diverse social groups asserting themselves politically, it is interesting to note how BJP has brought varied forces and voices under its wing while also preaching a divisive ideology and entrenching itself as an alternative to Congress and other regional parties. She further notes that there is a multiplication in the number of parties and politicization of multiple identities, which makes it easy for the BJP, a national party with power at the Centre, to assume the space vacated by Congress and bring the multiple and contesting identities together under its fold.

In Akhil Ranjan Dutta’s *Hindutva Regime in Assam: Saffron in the Rainbow* (2021), the author discusses the rise of BJP in Assam- the issues of the state and the strategies employed by the party beginning from the 2014 Lok Sabha to the 2021 Assembly elections. The book also investigates the BJP’s rule in Assam from 2016, when it first gained power in the state, and whether it has been able to fulfill the promises it made during elections. The book’s focus, however, is primarily on the Brahmaputra Valley and the electoral dynamics and issues in that part of the state. In 2016 Assam, there was anti-incumbency and general discontent after 15 (2001-2016) years of Congress rule under the chief ministership of Tarun Gogoi. Popular discontent was on the rise against large river dams, land entitlements, and corruption. In the Brahmaputra Valley, illegal immigration issues, with the unprepared National Register of Citizens(NRC), are also talking points. The failure to prepare the NRC by the Congress regime made it untrustworthy. BJP being at the Centre also had a great impact on the minds of the people. This was the new party of promise at the state level as well. Congress was also suffering an organizational crisis at the state level. Himanta Biswa Sarma, who was a trusted aide of CM

Tarun Gogoi, broke away from the party with his own group of Congress MLAs and joined the BJP in 2015. The party created a 'rainbow alliance' in the state by bringing together all major tribal and ethnic groups and AGP. BJP focused on local culture and icons and even projected Sarbananda Sonowal, a Sonowal Kachari (Scheduled Tribe), and achieved a landslide victory in Assam in 2016. The local media, as well as intelligentsia, also sided with the BJP. After the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019, now the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the protests that ensued when the Act was passed in December 2019 seemed to augur the collapse of the BJP in Assam. As also pointed out in the book, the aftershocks of the protests were seemingly absorbed by various multi-pronged strategies employed by the BJP. Additionally, the absence of a credible force to represent the voice of dissent against the BJP, consolidation of the RSS and affiliates at the grassroots, and targeted populist schemes contributed to the BJP's successive victories in 2019 as well as 2021.

As mentioned earlier, the works on BJP's rise and regime in Assam since 2014 mainly speak from the perspective of the Brahmaputra Valley. The focus of this study is the Dima Hasao district of Assam, one of the hill districts of Assam. There is currently no academic work on the rise of BJP in the district, which happened in the aftermath 2014. Dima Hasao is a tribal-dominated district. The population consists of Dimasas, Naga, Hmar, and Kuki tribes, as well as other non-tribal populations. Arkotong Longkumer's *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast* (2020) is a work that resonates well with the tribal-dominated Dima Hasao. The minority in question in the Brahmaputra Valley are the Muslims. However, in the case of Dima Hasao, the minority is primarily the Christian tribes who incidentally were also engaged with other tribes, mainly the Hindu Dimasas, the dominant tribe in the Dima Hasao district. In his work, Longkumer discusses how Hindutva negotiates with tribal communities, both animist (Hindu professing) and Christian tribes. Longkumer's work resonates significantly with the tribes of Dima Hasao. BJP has used electoral, cultural, and social strategies to mobilize the population of Dima Hasao and has been greatly aided by its cultural wing. Hindutva has been in action in the district since independence. For instance, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's activities among the Zemes, especially of the Heraka cult and the Hindu Dimasas, are pretty evident. It did not take much time for the districts' peoples to jump ship as soon as the BJP came to power at the center and then the state. As for the Christian tribes, many are part of the Minority Morcha, and given that the district is a majority tribal population, there is faith that any polarization on religious lines will not be the main agenda in this area, as Longkumer mentions the case of Tripura which resonates even with the situation

of Christian tribes of Dima Hasao. Furthermore, he stresses the work of RSS grassroots workers who have been working for decades mostly discreetly but whose power and activities enhanced once the BJP came to power at the center and then the state.

Pralay Kanungo(2015) in *Casting Community, Culture and Faith: Hindutva's Entrenchment in Arunachal Pradesh* speaks about Hindutva's influence in Arunachal Pradesh, another tribal-dominated state, primarily through the aggressive groundwork that RSS, its affiliates, and other Hindu organizations have been carrying out in even remote areas of the state. In fact, according to Kanungo, it was the impetus given by the Hindu cultural organizations through its educational institutions and institutionalizing the indigenous faith, especially the Donyi-Polo faith, that BJP has been able to entrench itself in the state if not established. This is also similar to the case of Dima Hasao, where similar activities have been at work since the 1950s, and yet the BJP hardly had any strength in the district. However, as soon as the saffron party came to power at the center and the state, the tide turned for the party at the district level as well, and with the activities of the Sangh Parivar institutions more open now, not just Hindutva entrenches further, it also strengthens the BJP in the district.

In the chapter *Playing the Waiting Game: BJP, Hindutva and the Northeast* by Arkotong Longkumer in the book *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* edited by Chatterjee et al. (2019), Longkumer briefly narrates the case of Dima Hasao district and BJP and Hindutva's presence in the district. According to the author, the district's politics runs on the basis of what he calls the alignment of region-state-center and staying with the party in power. Since the autonomous council is dependent on the state exchequer, without the right state-centre synergy, life becomes difficult for the district. According to the author, there are no deep ideological anchors for the BJP. The more important issues for the people here are development, territorial politics, and power. The district is home to many tribes, and different tribes have their own claims and counter-claims to the territory, which makes things highly complex for national parties to maneuver. The BJP wants to prove its secular credentials in the region and the district as well, given the large number of Christian tribal voters. BJP has to cater to tribes of both Hindu and Christian faiths and the non-tribal populations, who have been the primary supporters of BJP as well as its Sangh Parivar affiliates since the beginning. The Sixth Schedule provisions of autonomous councils for the tribes also add more to the already complex dynamics. The BJP's structure brings a challenge to the safeguards provided by the Sixth Schedule, and the tribes are wary of it. As Longkumer mentions, tribal BJP workers

believe that any attempt to dilute the Sixth Schedule will benefit the non-tribals, which in this case refers to Bengalis and Biharis.

1.3 Relevance of the Research

The Dima Hasao district is a tribal majority district of Assam being governed under the Sixth Schedule provisions of the Constitution of India. The district has a 30% Christian population and, as mentioned earlier, is a tribal majority district with its own set of political issues that separate it from the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The rise of the BJP in Assam and other states of Northeast India is recent. Although the party was established in 1980, it was marginal regarding grassroots organization and social base. Thus, its performance until 1990 remained highly limited. However, from 1990, after its alliance with the Asom Gana Parishad, its performance saw some upsurge, yet the party remained in the shadows. In the 2000s, with the growing relevance of the party at the national level, BJP's name was indeed making rounds in the political arena as an alternative force to the Indian National Congress. The party's star in Assam rose in the 2014 General Elections when, for the first time, the party could win the majority in the 14-member Parliamentary seats. The anti-incumbency wave against the Congress-led UPA aided the party's victory, as seen from the general mood of the people yearning for change (*acche din ane wale hain*). In 2014, the Dima Hasao district, a joint parliamentary constituency alongside the Karbi Anglong hill district, returned a Congress victory. It was one of the few constituencies to do so.

However, in the 2016 Assembly elections, a wave of *poriborton* or change had also descended on the district. For the first time in the history of Assembly elections in the district, B.B. Hagjer of the BJP won the seat with a margin of 8285 votes. In June 2016, there was a change in leadership of the Autonomous District Council, which had been seeing internal flux since 2013. Debolal Gorlosa, an ex-insurgent who joined the BJP sometime between May and June 2016 while winning the election on an independent ticket in 2013, was unanimously appointed as Chief Executive Member (CEM) in a Special Session of the Council convened by then Governor P.B. Acharya. The sitting MLA is from the BJP, and the state BJP, which had just won a massive victory at the state level, influenced this switch. After that, it was observed that in December 2017, the anti-defection law was passed and implemented in the council. The council members claimed that the council was the first to pass the law in the country. In January 2019, the 12th Autonomous Council Election was held in the district. By this time, BJP's strength and influence became visible in the electoral performance that ensued. The earlier

elections were fraught with hung verdicts, frequent defections, and changes in party leadership in the district. In 2019, BJP won majority seats, a total of 19 seats, while Congress won 2, AGP 1 and 6 seats were won by independent candidates. Later, the six elected independent candidates and the lone AGP candidate joined the BJP after the election results. One of the elected Congress candidates, Joysing Duroung (of Garampani constituency), also joined the saffron brigade last year, leaving only one member as the Congress representative in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council(NCHAC). Following this, in the 2021 Assembly elections, despite an anti-incumbency mood against the district BJP, the constituency saw a landslide victory of the BJP MLA candidate with one of the highest margins in recent council elections.

These developments over five years have largely been neglected in the mainstream discussion over politics in Assam. The district's historical, geographical, and cultural segregation from the Brahmaputra Valley has led to a different trajectory of political development. The district's main political issues were tribal autonomy through strengthening the powers of the autonomous council, the creation of a separate homeland from Assam's mainland, inter-ethnic conflict, and insurgency. Of late, these questions are relegated to the background, as exemplified by the BJP's victory, which has been accused of proactively trying to dilute the Sixth Schedule's autonomous provisions. Furthermore, the district's political movements were centered on a politics of difference, be it the tribal autonomy movements or ethnic homeland insurgency. These causes have seemingly been assimilated in the Hindu nationalist BJP-led development in the district. This study will be the first of its kind to understand these questions in the context of the Dima Hasao district of Assam. As discussed in the survey of the literature, despite BJP's growing vote share in the district and due to factors unique to the region, there is yet to be undertaken focused study on the factors for such rise, and this becomes the primary reason why this research is relevant.

1.4 Research Questions

The primary research question that this study seeks to understand is the rise of the BJP in the tribal-dominated Dima Hasao district of Assam, administered under the Sixth Schedule provision of the Constitution, with a history of autonomy movements and demands for an ethnic homeland.

The secondary questions are as follows:

- i. What are the electoral strategies that the BJP deployed during successive elections?

- ii. What are the political mobilization strategies carried out by the BJP to consolidate the diverse and antagonistic ethnic and religious groups in the district?
- iii. What are the changes that a party like BJP, with its core ideology of Hindu nationalism, has brought to the political discourse, especially regarding tribal autonomy in the hills?
- iv. Has the BJP also imbibed cultures and discourse of local politics within itself in its engagement with the hills?

1.5 Methodology and Chapterization

This study is a case study and is an in-depth study of the BJP's rise in a tribal-dominated region where its sustainability, given its ideological stance, is presumably shaky. This study is not a sweeping statistical survey but a micro and narrowed-down study of a vast field, that of BJP's mobilization, currently a matter of national and global discussion. This case study also tries to answer the primary question of whether the BJP and its ideology are operating in the same manner in Dima Hasao as in other parts of India, specifically other tribal belts of India. This study is, however, a contextual analysis of Dima Hasao and will remain limited to it but in larger reference to Assam. The point of this is to differentiate it from the discourse of Brahmaputra Valley while also looking at similarities or impact. Since this is a very recent phenomenon, the subject matter being studied here, a qualitative method of gathering data through detailed and probing interviews has been used. The interviewees varied from party functionaries in the district of the BJP, Congress, the regional party Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), and independents regarding electoral and mobilization strategy during 2016 Assembly elections, 2019 Autonomous Council elections and particularly 2021 Assembly elections. The questions also focused on their parties' understanding of the key issues of the district and their parties' perceived strengths, weaknesses, and hopes.

A field study involving engagements with civil society members, local notables, and intellectuals belonging to different communities such as the Dimasa, Naga, Bengali, and Nepali and the umbrella organization spearheading several demands and agitations consisting of different non-Dimasa tribes called the Indigenous Peoples' Forum (IPF) in the district has been undertaken with questions focused on issues taken up by BJP with respect to the 2016, 2019 elections and 2021 in particular and their mobilization strategies in general. Interviews have been conducted with local tribal representatives of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh as well.

It is believed that this case study, albeit micro, will add a new perspective to the existing knowledge on BJP's mobilization strategies away from its center in mainland India and far-flung corners of Northeast India. Besides this, the study has made ample use of secondary data in the form of literature available in the study area. The study also borrows heavily from newspaper reports and social media posts collected over the years as secondary sources of information.

The second chapter, titled **Rise of BJP in Assam: Political Scenario (1980-present)** deals with the history of the political dynamics of the state, which aided the rise of the BJP in Assam. This chapter covers the extant literature from 2014 onwards, covering the performance of BJP in different parts of Assam, especially Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. It sheds light on the BJP, its political ideology, Hindutva, and its growth in the state. In doing this, the study also briefly covers the trajectory of other parties in the state in comparison with the BJP. The Hindu Mahasabha had early ties with several Assamese cultural and political organizations before independence. The RSS's involvement with the Assam movement and their apparent role in the BJP's victory in the state will also be analyzed. Besides the INC or Left or other regional parties, this chapter also looks at the role of AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), led by Badruddin Ajmal, in Assam's electoral politics. The AIUDF in Assam is seen as a Muslim party catering particularly to the Muslims of East Bengal origin (people whom the indigenes see as threats to their land, community, and hearth). The threat of the Muslim others whose votes have supposedly consolidated under the AIUDF under Ajmal's leadership has been used by rival leaders in the state to polarise voters. This, in the recent past, has benefitted BJP greatly

The third chapter, titled **Dima Hasao District: A Political Profile**, deals with the political profile of the Dima Hasao district of Assam. The district has its own history within Assam, beginning from its participation in the hill state movement in the early years after independence led by the All Parties Hills Leaders Conference (APHCL) to the autonomy movements under the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), a left-led movement in the 1980s to become an assertion of tribal autonomy in the twin hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. Thereafter, the era of insurgency from the 1990s with the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), rebel force's Dimaraji or Dimasa state has been discusses. The inter-ethnic conflict of the 2000s has been described in detail by secondary sources as well as local media and publications. The current political churnings and the various political issues that ignited the district at the end of the insurgency and ethnic conflict have also been discussed in detail. The

chapter also narrates the history of elections in the district. There is a dearth of literature on this aspect, and primary sources from the local government, documents, and souvenirs have been collected to build this chapter. The district has been governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which gives autonomous provisions to the Autonomous District Councils to govern the hill tribal area in their own way. However, there are definitely disagreements about the quantum of autonomy that the district council exercises, especially when it comes to financial autonomy and outside influence through the state government and the Governor's powers in relation to the council. The party politics in the district, thereby, has always seen great influence from the state and central government. The chapter describes the elections at the level of Lok Sabha, Assembly, and particularly at the level of the Autonomous District Council. The trajectory of the parties in the district mimics the Centre more than the state governments in its dominance of Congress in the early era with ASDC's rise in the 1980s and now in the 2000s especially, with complete control being in the hands of the BJP. However, it is to be noted again that the district's electoral politics suffers greatly from unhealthy party politics caused by interference from the state and excessive competition within the council. Over the years it has been observed that a lack of ideological politics, rather a personalistic form of politics has been encouraged in the district's party politics.

The fourth chapter is titled **BJP's Mobilisation Strategy in Dima Hasao District** and deals explicitly with the methods of BJP's electoral mobilization strategy in the Dima Hasao district starting with the capture of power at the level of the North Cachar Autonomous Council (NCHAC). The political and economic issues of Dima Hasao, which the BJP took up, have been analyzed, and this chapter is completely based on the field notes, especially the interviews with the BJP party functionaries. This chapter's focus is on the party's internal and organizational strategies to attract voters. The party's organizational structure and the cadre-building process are discussed in detail followed by other strategies such as influence from national and state-level leadership. The party's unmatched financial resources have also led to an unfair advantage for the party in the district. Presently, the district's autonomous council has no member left who is not a member of the BJP. The BJP actively stymies the existence of opposition parties in the district by allegedly denying schemes to opposition party supporters. The populist policies of the state as well as the council BJP establishment in the wake of their forming the government in 2016 is also analysed. The final strategy of the BJP to mobilise people in the district discussed is social media mobilization through the use of WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook to maintain a personal touch with the electorate.

The fifth chapter is titled **Social Mobilisation Strategies of the BJP in Dima Hasao**, which particularly deals with the social mobilization process that the party undertook through its mass fronts- the different *Morchas* or wings among the different communities to expand its social base in the district. This chapter is based on discussions with executives of the different *morchas*. The chapter also looks into the mobilizational activities of the RSS and VHP such as its social work-oriented work in the district. It also discusses how the RSS and VHP have been over the years been present in the religious activities of the district related to the temples, religious festivals, *yatras* etc The VHP and the RSS also played a role in party ticket distribution. The role of the *morchas* in the engagement with the local civil society groups is the main focus of this chapter. The chapter also discusses the co-option of the social and icons of the Dimasa and Heraka Naga communities such as Sambudhan Phonglo, Joya Thaosen and Rani Gaindinlu. It further also looks into the co-opting of local myths and customs by the current autonomous council establishment to appease the people, especially the majority Dimasa community. In the meantime, the BJP follows a very measured approach towards the Christian minority in the district whose population number around thirty percent in the district.

The sixth chapter, **Paradigm Shift From Tribal Autonomy to Hindu Nationalism?** Analyzes the data retrieved from the field study that made up the chapters **BJP's Mobilisation Strategy in Dima Hasao district** and **Social Mobilisation Strategies of the BJP in Dima Hasao**. The chapter discusses the dilution of the Sixth Schedule measures that the BJP government is undertaking followed by the increase in interference of the state government's interference in the district administration which was also causing further loss of autonomy. The chapter discusses the current status of the autonomy movements in the light of the weakening of unity and solidarity among the different communities in the district. The status of opposition parties in the council as well as the district is also discussed and what it means for the political system of the district. The discrepancies in the promises of development and change made by the BJP government and the practice is discussed with specific examples. Finally, the chapter discusses the cooption of the ethnic homeland movement itself which is now replaced by a more culturally pronounced assertion in line with the Hindu nationalist articulation rather than the rights based movement seeking self-determination.

The seventh chapter, the conclusion chapter, and are closing remarks connecting the research questions with the findings of the study alongwith the limitations of the study.

1.6 Conceptual Clarification

1.6.1 Hindu Nationalism

The Bharatiya Janata Party represents the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement which had been in the making since the 1920's in the Indian political arena. The BJP came into the limelight in 1988 benefitting largely from the polarisation and violence in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute in Ayodhya. (Jaffrelot, 2015)

The present-day discourse of Hindu nationalism as espoused in the ideology Hindutva comes from VD Savarkar's work *Hindutva: Who is Hindu?* He begins with 'a Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the Seas as his Father-Land as well as his Holy-Land that is the cradle land of his religion' (1969). This way of being Hindu is Hindutva, or Hinduness. The Hindu or Hinduness includes Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs but not the Muslims or the Christian who are not Hindus as they are not of this Land. Hindutva hereby conjoins religious and cultural identity with land. Hindu nationalism's symbols and language and ideas have equally been part of the discourse of different Congress leaders. (Gould, 2004)

The BJP's ideological stand is the Hindutva brand of nationalism. Hindutva's as well as the BJP roots can be traced back to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a cultural organisation whose object is to create a Hindu identity which is aware of its cultural heritage. Hindutva fulfils the criteria of ethnic nationalism and ethnocracy which is against the pluralist values as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Hindutva's motto is 'Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan' which is based on religious identity, common language and racial feeling. BJP's parent organisations being the RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, are its fraternal organisations. The BJP-RSS-VHP combine's politics claims to revive the glory of the past Hindu Rashtra which degenerated due to the coming of Muslim and Christian outsiders. This combination has successfully created the idea of an evil 'other' basically the Muslims among Hindu populace in India. Indian culture was to be defined as Hindu culture and minorities were to be assimilated given they paid allegiance to the symbols and mainstays of the majority as those of the nation. (Jaffrelot, 2015)

1.6.2 Ethnicity

Ethnicity has to do with the identity of an individual or a group, as an assertion against other groups. It is a social, psychological as well as political phenomenon which revolved around the ethnic group. It has to do with the classification of people and group relationships. Ethnicity is also used as an ideology which stresses cultural similarity of its adherents and draws boundaries vis-a-vis others, who become outsiders. Ethnicity is *socially relevant* when people notice and condition their actions on ethnic distinctions in everyday life. Ethnicity is *politicized* when political coalitions are organized along ethnic lines, or when access to political or economic benefits depends on ethnicity.

The term ethnicity is supposedly a new term as stated by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (2010) who pointed out its appearance in the Oxford English Dictionary only in 1972. Its usage is first attributed to American sociologist David Riesman in 1953. However the term 'ethnic' derived from the Greek *ethnikos* is older and originally meant heathen or pagan. It referred to 'racial' characteristics during the mid-fourteenth to mid-nineteenth century and during the Second World War it stood for a polite term referring to the Jews, Italian, Irish and others inferior to the people of British descent.

Max Weber(2010) was the first person to give any serious attention to the study of ethnicity. He defines an 'ethnic group' as "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exist". Thus Weber emphasises that an ethnic group is built around the perception of common descent which may or may not be based on historicity. It is shaped by the presence of a common culture and the idea of a shared community (*Gemeinschaft*) which is created and nurtured by the group and not vice versa.

Fredrik Barth(2010) writes of ethnicity as "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social process of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories".

Thus ethnicity is basically a relationship, a social identity based on kinship which may or may not be founded on historicity. The groups often have myths of common origin and ideologies encouraging endogamy.

Enloe(2010)stresses that, “when the communal and personal dimensions of ‘ethnicity’ are stressed here, ethnicity then refers to peculiar bond among persons that causes them to consider themselves a group distinguishable from others”.

There are also different ‘kinds’ of ethnic relations. T.H.Eriksen(2010) names a few which he considers important. He categorises them as follows:

- i. Urban ethnic minorities who have political interests but rarely demand statehood or political independence. They are often integrated in the capitalist system of production and consumption. Examples include non-European immigrants in European cities, Hispanics in the USA, migrants to industrial towns in Africa.
- ii. Indigenous peoples which basically refers to peoples associated with non-industrial mode of production and a stateless political system. They are relatively weaker than dominant sections and are not fully integrated in the nation-state. The Native Americans of USA, many of the tribes in Latin America, tribes in north-eastern part of India consider themselves indigenous peoples.
- iii. Proto-nations or so called ethnonationalist movements are groups which have political leadership and claim to an entitlement of having their own nation-state without being ruled by others. They are often large groups, territorially based, differentiated in accordance to class and educational achievement. The Kurds, Sikhs, Nagas, Palestinians, Tamils in Sri Lanka are examples of proto-nations.
- iv. Ethnic groups in plural societies. Plural society refers to states which were an outcome of the colonial system. Although the groups in the plural society are different they are compelled to participate in uniform political and economic system. India, Kenya, Indonesia and Jamaica are such plural societies constituting myriads of ethnic groups.

1.6.3 Tribal and Non-Tribal

In the context of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, the term non-tribal is primarily an economic category. In 1997, The NCHAC passed the N.C. Hills District (Trading by Non-Tribal) Regulation, 1997¹. This Rule states that the definitions of “commodity” with its

grammatical variation, means and includes the name of the trade or business item appearing in column No.2 of the schedule C. It also defined that “Licensee Trader” means a non-tribal who has been granted a trading license under this rules. It added that “Non-Tribal” means a person other than a tribal. It includes the caste Hindus, the Scheduled Castes, and the Muslims.

1.6.4 Autonomy

Autonomy emerged from the idea of individual autonomy which forms a central value in the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy. Examination of the concept of autonomy also figures centrally in debates over education policy, biomedical ethics, various legal freedoms and rights (such as freedom of speech and the right to privacy), as well as moral and political theory more broadly. Autonomy has traditionally been thought to connote independence and hence to reflect assumptions of individualism in both moral thinking and political designations of political status. Political autonomy, the ability of a group of people to govern themselves and determine their own political future, stands as a cornerstone of this desire. Yet, achieving and maintaining political autonomy remains an enigmatic pursuit, entangled in a complex web of historical legacies, global power dynamics, and internal societal struggles. (Christman, 2020)

At its core, political autonomy embodies the principle of self-rule. It grants communities the freedom to establish their own political institutions, formulate their own laws, and chart their own course towards development and prosperity. This self-governance can manifest in diverse ways, ranging from independent states to various forms of regional autonomy within larger political entities. The tribal regions of Northeast India have seen different autonomy movements over the years. The autonomy movements are based on politics of difference, recognition. Over time several have turned violent and spiralled into attacks on the state as well as inter-ethnic conflict.

The concept of tribal autonomy is multifaceted and diverse, encompassing a range of possibilities. It can range from decentralized governance models that grant local communities greater control over natural resources and decision-making processes to self-governing territories with greater autonomy over internal affairs. The specific form of autonomy that is most suitable for a particular tribal community will depend on their unique historical, cultural, and political context. In this study, tribal autonomy specifically refers to the Autonomous Councils under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in particular and understanding of political autonomy in general.

1.6.5 Mass Fronts

During field study the author saw the epicentre of BJP social mobilization lay in the party's mass fronts or mochas such as the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), Kisan Morcha, Mahila Morcha, Scheduled Caste Morcha, Scheduled Tribe Morcha, OBC Morcha and Minority Morcha worked alongside the party district committee and carried out the parties activities in the district. These mochas also engaged with local civil society organizations for joint programmes. Several times it was observed the membership between the two overlapped, that is members of students bodies or literary bodies of the communities would also be members of the party units. Mass fronts are the lifeline of any social movement which propel the movement. The BJP's multiple affiliates such as the RSS or VHP and others operate in discreet manner. In the Dima Hasao region, many people didn't know the association between BJP and RSS or VHP. The party units however are the backbone of the party in terms of the party's organization and activities.

1.7 Conclusion

BJP's presence in Assam before 2014 was minimal, and its votes and social base remained limited. In the Dima Hasao district, it did not enjoy popularity and struggled to retain members. Congress had ably appeased major ethnic groups over decades through populist measures and retained its power. BJP has now ousted and outdone the Congress with the same populist measures, which has led to its growth. Due to its internal crisis and lack of ideological moorings, Congress has lost its sway over these big groups. The Left in the state has not been able to gain stronghold in elections for some years now, and revolutionary forces were turned into chauvinistic ethnic-based groups and insurgents by Congress' policies. In such a lacuna where the Left has never been able to keep up a mass movement, revolutionary aspects turned communitarian, and Congress' internal fissures and crises, BJP's rise was imminent. However, the BJP stands in stark contrast to the Congress as a party that believes in the firm ideology of Hindutva. Whether Hindutva has made a great dent in other ideologies is still to be studied and may take time to observe. However, calling BJP's win as Hindutva's victory in the state was fraught with mistakes and premature. The sizeable Muslim population in Assam had for long been a breeding ground of communal politics. As several commentators pointed out BJP's Hindutva creatively adapted to all such existing divisions, and in a time where opposition

parties were weakened and divided, BJP emerged as the sole winner. The ethnic mobilization and assertions in different parts of the state, such as in the Dima Hasao district, for now, have been co-opted or brow-beaten by the larger majoritarian politics of the BJP or so it seems. All the same, the ethnic sentiments are long away from being done away with and the aspiration for an autonomous state is still alive. Added to these are the different ethnic homeland demands of the people in the region which are also often antagonistic as several different claims of homeland and territoriality are seen to be made on the same space of land. As such, the fate of these assertions in the form of autonomy demands, whether completely wiped out or re-emerge, is a study that makes for an interesting analysis for days to come.

Chapter II

Rise of BJP in Assam: Political Scenario (1980-present)

2.1 Introduction

The BJP's emergence in Assam with a particular focus on the Brahmaputra Valley has been well documented in recent works by eminent academics of Assam. (Dutta, Goswami, Tripathi, and Sarma et al). In this chapter, I intend to highlight the same borrowing from the works mentioned with a focus on the critical political issues of the state and electoral dynamics present. The chapter will also investigate the mobilization strategies the BJP in Assam devolved, which led to its meteoric rise in the state. In doing so, I would also like to show how contemporary works have failed to take the case of the tribal-administered regions such as the Dima Hasao district. The district's historical and political trajectory while being part of Assam has also been separate. Hence, some of the state's core political issues, such as NRC, the CAA, or the *khilonjiya* discourse of the Brahmaputra Valley, have a lesser bearing in the district. At the national level, if one looks at the meteoric rise of the BJP by 2014, several factors worked towards the party's advantage. Firstly, it was the generally accepted reason for the anti-incumbency tide against the Indian National Congress-led UPA alliance, which had seen two consecutive terms from 2004 to 2014. The slogans of 'party with a difference' and an appeal to the voters to give the party a chance had captured the electorates' minds. The UPA II regime suffered popular discontent with allegations of scams, high inflation levels, policy paralysis, and unemployment. The Vajpayee government of 1998 to 2004 also established the BJP as a reliable alternative to the Congress. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, BJP in Assam won for the very first time a total of 7 seats against the total of 14 with 36.86% votes polled (Election Commission of India). In 2016, the BJP won the Assam elections and formed its government for the first time in the state. Congress's image had taken a brutal hit at the national and, by extension, at the state level. BJP won 60 of 126 seats with 29.8% votes. It had contested 89 seats. Prior to 2014, the BJP's fortunes in the state seemed to depend on an ally like Asom Gana Parishad, who also often left the party in the lurch. However, from 2014 and successive elections after that, in 2016, 2019, and 2021, the party and its ideological affiliates in the Sangh Parivar have entrenched themselves in society and the government.

2.2 Political History of Assam: Brief Background

The Assam state of today is territorially, socially, and culturally divided into three separate entities of its own- the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley, and the hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. At the time of independence, the territory of Assam also included present-day Meghalaya (then Khasi-Jayantiya and Garo Hills), Nagaland (Naga Hills), and Mizoram (Lushai Hills). It was a multiethnic state; needless to say, even after multiple reorganizations when the states mentioned above were carved out of Assam, it continues to be highly diverse regarding ethnicity. This diversity has led to the growth of different movements and counter-movements in the state over decades of Assam's existence as part of the Union of India. The several political conundrums that the state finds itself in today also go back to its colonial past. For instance, in 1946, when the Cabinet Mission proposed the idea of two groups of provinces for independent India-one Hindu and one Muslim, the public opinion in Assam was that of great agitation. The Mission's proposal included Assam as a part of Bengal, which meant the Assamese 'being incorporated into Bengal- The perennial Assamese fear.' (Baruah, 2001, p.84) Bengal was also part of the Muslim group of Cabinet Mission's proposal. So, the fear of becoming part of the 'Muslim province' of today's Bangladesh or then East Pakistan was also inherent. The Assam Congress was vehement in its opposition to this proposal, and a delegation went to Delhi to express their concern. With MK Gandhi's backing, the Assam Congress successfully forced the Congress to change its position.

The attempt would soon, however, lead to the Partition Refugee debacle, which remains another bone of contention in Assam's politics. After the Partition, another round of tension arose between the Assam Congress and the Centre. At this point, Assamese sub-nationalism had already started gaining ground within the Assam Congress, which locked horns with the pan-Indianism of the Congress. The issue that arose was the settlement of the Hindu Refugees of East Bengal. The then Assam Premier Gopinath Bordoloi argued that Assam could not accommodate many refugees, while the pan-Indian Congress leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru are said to have responded to Bordoloi's concerns with derision. Nehru not very subtly threatened that if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then Assam's claims for financial help will obviously suffer. (Ibid., p. 85).

Nevertheless, the refugees were accommodated and settled in different parts of Assam over time, such as Barak Valley, which already had a large Hindu Bengali population with or without the state's intervention, which would create cause for virulent movements in the future.

In the region, it has been an uphill task to track the movements of migrants or immigrants, and such uncertainty has led to fears of loss of land, resources, and identity to ‘non-indigenes’ and ‘outsiders.’ This fear would blow up later as nationalist movements in the state grew stronger.

In the 1960s, the diversity of linguistic groups and hegemonic aspirations of Assamese nationalists, making the Assamese language its force majeure, led to a new set of confrontations. On October 10, 1960, the then-chief minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, proposed the Official Assamese Language Bill in the Assembly. This Bill provided for two official languages, Assamese and English, for an interim period and was passed on October 24, 1960, between the passing of the Bill notorious Language Riots marked by violent conflicts between the ‘ethnic Assamese’¹ and Hindu Bengalis.

The Bill was met with significant opposition not only from the Hindu Bengalis alone but also from the different tribal leaders of the state. In June 1960, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Garo Hills District Council Williamson A. Sangma, called a conference of all the hills leaders of then Assam. This conference finally took place in July, and a new outfit, the All-Party Hill Leaders’ Conference (APHLC), was born. Here, the demand for dropping the Language Bill was made. The demand was made on the grounds that passage of the Bill would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, leading to the assimilation of the hill peoples, which would gradually lead to the disintegration of their identities, which is protected under the Constitution of India. Secondly, it would burden the learners of the hill peoples, who would now have to study Hindi, English, and Assamese, which had three different scripts. Thirdly, it would also hurt the job opportunities in the government services. Fourthly, with less than 50% of the total population of Assam-speaking Assamese, the conference leaders questioned the rationale behind introducing such a Bill. The Bill had already been seen to create discord among the different communities, which could lead to security lapses in a frontier region like that of Assam, especially given the Chinese aggression of 1959. Lastly, the conference leaders concluded that in a state as diverse as Assam, which they compared to a mini India in terms of diversity, Hindi should be the proper official language, and until the time that India was ready to adopt it as an official language, English should continue in its stead. (Chaube, 1999, p. 128-129)

The turmoil ended with a compromise initiated by Lal Bahadur Shastri, who proposed that the Assam Official Languages Act be amended, one to give local bodies the authority to alter the official language of their area by a two-thirds majority and second, to allow communication

between the state capital and Cachar and the hill districts to continue to be in English and third, at the state level to continue the use of English along with Assamese and fourth, to incorporate stronger provisions for the protection of linguistic minorities. (Baruah, 2001, p. 105) The Assam Language Act formally recognized the special position of English in the hills and of Bengali in the Barak Valley.

The Language Riots, although on a smaller scale, had another run in the state in 1972 when Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the language of undergraduate education in its affiliate colleges. This controversy soon came to an end through a compromise formula proposed by DK Baruah, who was then minister in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's cabinet. The formula allowed for the continuation of English and removed any compulsion on the matter of colleges switching to Assamese. (Ibid., p. 106)

Assam had, since colonial times and after independence, seen many ethnonationalist movements whose demands vary from autonomy provisions and statehood to secession from the Union of India. In December 1963, the state of Nagaland was inaugurated. The new state consisted of the Naga areas of the Naga Hills district in Assam and the Tuensang district of the North-East Frontier Agency. This was a response to the Naga insurgency movement, which had begun immediately after independence. The Assam Assembly did not have much voice in the matter. (Ibid., p. 108)

In 1966, the Mizo National Front launched an insurgency in the Mizo Hills of Assam. In its wake, the Government of India appointed Pataskar Commission floated the idea of the Constitution of the Mizo Hills District into a Union Territory. In July 1971, the Government of India accepted this proposal. There was mixed response among the Mizos; some welcomed it, and others, such as the Mizo Students' Convention, opposed it. (Chaube, 2012, p. 178)

Following the 22nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, on December 24, 1969, Parliament created history by passing the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Bill simultaneously in both Houses of the Parliament in order to create an 'Autonomous State of Assam' comprising the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district as defined in the Sixth Schedule. (Ibid., p. 141). According to Chaube, this created a 'new tier in India's state structure, similar to the autonomous republics of the former USSR.' Meghalaya would soon attain separate statehood in January 1972, thus completing its separation from Assam.

Following these separations, Assam would soon see greater unrest, followed by the rise of its own subnationalist movements. The six years between 1979 and 1985 were the years of the Assam Movement. The movement was a campaign protesting what was alleged to be a de facto Indian government policy of admitting and enfranchising “foreigners.” (Baruah, 2001, p. 115) There have been numerous commentaries on the Assam Movement since the beginning of the movement itself till today. Several scholars, such as Hiren Gohain, called the movement chauvinist, while Amalendu Guha famously called it ‘little nationalism turned chauvinist.’ Other scholars, such as Sanjib Baruah, have been more sympathetic and contextualized the movement in the state’s colonial and post-independence changes and the Assamese people’s quest for self-determination in response to the Government of India’s pan-Indianism.

Monirul Hussain (1993), in his study of the movement from a class perspective, concluded that the movement was a mass movement arising out of the frustrations of the Assamese people in a region with lopsided development in comparison to its mainland counterparts. In the pre and early colonial era, Assam was a thinly populated region with abundant land, which was soon to change with the coming of the British rule. The new rulers brought in a new spate of immigrants to the land in large numbers, such as the tea-garden communities as laborers in the booming tea-estates, Muslim peasants from East Bengal, and the Bengali western-educated middle class. In an economically, socially, and demographically changing landscape, the people of Assam found themselves in a precarious situation. The capitalist mode of development that independent India followed despite a large public sector added to the widening socio-economic disparities and to the people’s woes in a peripheral region. The simmering discontent ultimately erupted in the forceful mass-based movement from 1979. The movement was, however, led by the dominant Assamese castes and class. However, according to Hussain, the leaders of the movement wrongly attributed the cause of Assam’s lack of development only to continuous immigration from across the border. Additionally, since 1971, due to the rise of low-caste leadership in the Congress party, the upper caste factions’ power was on the decline. Hussain notes that the emergence of the Left political force as an alternative to the Congress-Janata formation also greatly alarmed the upper caste faction. Thereby, the popular unrest created an opportunity for this faction to create a new ideology suited to their own class interest.

With the Assam Movement, the explosive issue of immigration, dormant for nearly four decades, returned to Assam’s public agenda. This time, the issue acquired a constitutional and legal dimension due to the Partition in 1947 bringing in the debate of ‘citizen’ and ‘foreigner,’

especially that of an illegal immigrant. The trigger point of the Movement was the by-election to the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency in Assam in 1978. The constituency has a heavy concentration of Muslim voters of Bengali descent. The papers were flushed with numerous reports of fresh immigration from Bangladesh to Assam, following which thousands of complaints were lodged during the revision of electoral rolls challenging the citizenship of voters on the list. The movement was led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), who, on June 8, 1979, sponsored a twelve-hour general strike with the precise demand for "detection, disenfranchisement and deportation" of foreigners. (Baruah, 2001, p. 121)

The other leading face of the movement was a coalition of different political and cultural organizations, including the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP), which was formed in August 1979. The movement's methods of protesting were massive protest calls and actions like bandhs, boycotts, processions, satyagraha, blackouts, and squatting. The movement saw grave confrontations between the government, both at the state and center and the movement leaders and participants, which led to a breakdown of law and order in the Brahmaputra Valley. It is to be noted that the districts in the Barak Valley, such as Cachar and the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, remained aloof. During this period, elections with short-lived government formations followed by President's rule continued. Massacres such as the Nellie and Gohpur further marred the movement. By this time, cracks were beginning to take place within the movement, and internal contradictions of the Assamese society were laid bare. The movement entered a phase of negotiations in mid-1984, and the now famous Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985. According to the accord, illegal aliens who had entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for ten years, and those who came after March 1971 would be deported. An amendment to India's Citizenship Act was passed in November 1985, providing that non-citizens entering Assam between 1961 and 1971 would enjoy all rights as citizens except for the right to vote. Additionally, the state government formed in 1983 would resign, and fresh elections based on a revised electoral roll would take place in December 1985. (Ibid. p. 139)

By the time of the new elections, two new parties emerged in Assam: the Assam Gana Parishad on October 14, 1985, in Golaghat, formed by the student leaders of the Assam Movement, and the United Minorities Front on November 10, 1985, in Hojai, formed by the dissident Congress I leaders who were either Bengali Hindu or Bengali Muslims. The AGP's main demand was the implementation of the accord, while that of the UMF was to repeal it. In December, the

AGP won elections, albeit without an absolute majority, and formed the government with the support of some independents. It joined the National Front. (Chaube, p. 249)

The newly formed government, high on expectations and promises, failed to meet the expectations of the people. The AGP was also wrecked by factionalism and failed to overcome it. A section of its leaders were opposed to the Assam Accord, and from it emerged the separatist militant United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). However, ULFA was born in 1979 during the beginning of the Assam Movement in Sivasagar, and a foundation ceremony was symbolically held at none other than Rang Ghar- a palace of the Ahom kings. ULFA's goal, it claimed, was the restoration of

Assam's lost independence. During the Assam Movement, it remained at its fringe and was to distance itself from the immigration issue. ULFA's address, as seen from its messages to its cadres and followers, was to the 'people of Assam' and not to the Assamese, who consider Assam to be their motherland to prepare to fight for the land. (Baruah, p. 148) ULFA terms Assam's relation with the Indian state colonial. Several of its earliest ideologues made and popularized the colonial exploitation discourse through their writings in local dailies as well as books and novels. Most noted amongst them was Parag Kumar Das, who was later assassinated in 1996. Das, in his writings, made a case for the independence of Assam such as *Swadhinotar Prostab*, *Swadhin Asomor Arthaniti*, *Mok Swadhinata Lagey*, where he wrote about how benefits from the state's natural resources such as oil, natural gas or the tea industry were being siphoned away by the Centre and the people of Assam were being deprived. An old refrain of the Assamese public life also resurfaced, such as the relative absence of local people in the state's major enterprise.

The most significant impact of the Assam Movement was how it ruptured ties among the multiple ethnic groups in the state. Firstly, the Hindu Bengalis and the Muslims of Bengali descent, being the main targets of the anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner polemics of the movement, were estranged from the movement. Tensions also arose between the Bodos and the ethnic Assamese heightened during this time. For instance, the Gohpur massacre ensued from a dispute over the occupation of land in the area. Gohpur was an assembly seat where the Plains Tribal Council of Assam was contesting election in 1983. The PTCA had also begun demanding a separate "plains tribal" state called Udayachal, and parts of Gohpur fell into the newly envisioned state. The PTCA's moderate old guard in the face of the radicalization of

Assamese politics would soon lead to the Bodo Agitation for separation from Assam on the claim of being ‘original settlers.’

In the meantime, in 1985, a People’s Democratic Front was formed to work for an autonomous state of which Meghalaya 1970 was the precedent- for the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills district within Assam by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. It was set up in Haflong, the headquarters of NC Hills, and its leaders predominantly belonged to the Karbi tribe. This organization was renamed the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) on May 6, 1986. With this began the long and continuing demand for greater autonomy to the district councils in the Sixth Schedule areas.

2.3 Electoral Politics and BJP’s rise in Assam

Immediately after independence, as was the case in other parts of India, the Indian National Congress’s dominance in politics in Assam was absolute. The dominance of the Congress in Assam politics was unabated from 1952 to 1977, when it faced crucial trials during and after the Assam Movement. It was only in 2001 that the party was able to return with a resounding majority and continued with three consecutive terms. Thereafter, with the coming of BJP in the Centre in 2014, in 2016’s Assembly Elections, BJP came to power in the state for the first time and continued its term for the second time in 2021.

Table 2.1 BJP’s Performance in Lok Sabha Elections

			BJP	
Year	Total Seats	Turn Out	Seats	Vote
1991	14	75.3%	2	9.60%
1996	14	78.5%	1	15.09%
1998	14	61.1%	1	24.47%
1999	14	71.3%	2	29.84%
2004	14	69.1%	2	22.94%
2009	14	69.5%	4	16.62%

2014	14	79.9%	7	36.5%
2019	14	87.7%	10	36.05%

Source: Election Commission of India

The above table shows the votes polled by the BJP since 1991 when it first started contesting in Lok Sabha elections in Assam.

Table 2.2 BJP's Performance in Consecutive Assam Assembly Elections

			BJP	
Year	Total Seats	Turn Out	Seats	Vote
1991	126	74.7%	10	6.55%
1996	122*	78.9%	4	10.41%
2001	126	75.1%	8	9.35%
2006	126	75.8%	10	11.98%
2011	126	75.9%	5	11.47%
2016	126	83.9%	60	29.5%
2021	126	86.2%	60	33.21%

Source: Election Commission of India

*Elections to 4 constituencies were held later that year.

The above table shows the votes polled by the BJP since 1991 when it first started contesting in Assembly elections in Assam.

From the above table, it can be assumed that BJP's rise in the state is meteoric from 2014 onward. Yet the party had a significant presence prior to 2014 as well, especially if one looks at the vote percentage in the Lok Sabha elections. BJP was formed in 1980 and made its presence felt in Assam during the Assam Movement, being the only national party of the time to support the cause of the Assam Movement agitators. According to Hiren Gohain (2007), the movement received support from the BJP at the all-India level because the movement

represented Hindu communalism as well as age-old prejudices. (p.1013) In the 1990s, the decline of Congress led to the rise of BJP in the state. Additionally, the rise of regional and ethnic parties in the state also aided the BJP's rise in Assam. The BJP flagged the importance of immigration issues in all elections since 1980 alongside the AGP. (Goswami 2020). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has also been working constantly to raise the issue of immigration, and it was the RSS that time and again highlighted it as a threat to national security. According to Goswami, BJP had little support in the Brahmaputra Valley initially, yet the party's tenacity in highlighting the concern of immigration ensured its place in the minds of the Assamese middle class, the ones who were the flagbearers of the Assam Movement. The party began to resonate with the demands of the AASU and AGP after it came to power in the Centre in 1998. (Ibid., p. 143) Thereby, the party was able to make a dent for the first time in the General Elections in 1999 and gradually expand its support base. Over time, the BJP was able to project itself as the only party willing and capable of solving the issue of immigration in the state after the AGP proved to be a failure in this regard. On the other hand, Congress was seen as a party to be encouraging immigration rather than stopping it.

In the 1991 Assembly elections in Assam, the anti-Assam Movement forces rallied behind the Congress. The support base of the movement, especially among the SC, ST, OBC, and Assamese Muslims, had eroded. Spurred on by battle fatigue and a strongly growing awareness about the hegemony of the upper-caste Assamese Hindus, especially Brahmins and Kalitas, these movement supporters from the marginalized groups came to realize that their role in the movement was more or less confined to the supply of muscle power. (Nandy, 2001, p. 2616-2617) Congress came to power in 1991, but BJP, in its novel elections in the state, was able to win two seats with 9.60% votes and ten seats with 6.55% votes in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections, respectively.

Ratabari, Patharkandi, Karimganj North, Karimganj South, Hailakandi, Silchar, Sonai, Dholai, Katigora, and Dhubri were the Assembly constituencies where the BJP won in 1991. In the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won Silchar and Karimganj. These constituencies are all in the Barak Valley except for the Dhubri Assembly constituency. Additionally, all these districts have a greater proportion of Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims. In the Barak Valley, the influx of a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees following the partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War and the presence of a large number of Muslim populations had proven a strong ground for the BJP. During the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which coincided with the anti-Bengali riots in the Northeast, the BJP could gain serious clout with the Hindu Bengalis in the

Barak Valley. (Srikanth, 1999) The party, soon after its win in the state, also announced in its national executive meeting in Bhopal in mid-1992 that it would carry out a 'rath yatra' to highlight the problem of illegal Bangladeshi nationals in Assam and other parts of north-eastern India. The party had resolved to start its yatra at Parashuram Kund in Arunachal Pradesh and end in Delhi, which harked the party's long-term plans for Assam and the region as a whole. (Kamroopi, 1992) In the 1996 elections, the BJP was able to retain Karimganj in the Lok Sabha elections, while in the Assembly elections, the party retained Ratabari, Patharkandi, Silchar, and Katigora and lost others.

In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP was able to win only one seat in Silchar, but its vote share was 24.47%, while in 1996, it was just above 15%. The BJP's 1998 manifesto for Assam and Northeast as a whole offered an attractive package. It spoke of the dangers of illegal immigration and vowed to intercept illegal infiltrators. It said the party would detect the already settled infiltrators and delete their names from the voters' list. It promised to repeal the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983 [IM(DT)] Act, which had failed to detect illegal immigrants as it put the onus of proving that the accused was an illegal immigrant. It assured the people that it would strengthen the existing immigrant laws and rules. It talked about the National Register of Citizens and identity cards for all legal citizens. These promises went down very well with the Assamese middle-class Hindus, especially in the urban areas. (Srikanth, 1999) In 1998, the National Democratic Alliance formed the government at the Centre. AGP, who had failed to win even a single seat, failed to join the alliance in fear of losing its minority votes. The BJP national leader hence started giving special attention to Assam in his speeches, and then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Home Minister LK Advani visited Assam to check immigration and sanctioned 90 crores as a special package from the central government. The then Governor, Lt Gen SK Sinha, also took special initiatives that won the favor of the Assamese elite. In the Parliament, the BJP leaders, without antagonizing the AGP directly, started mirroring the AGP's demands. The fall of the NDA government in the Centre was also met with dismay in Assam, especially among the urban middle class, who had come to sympathize with and respect Vajpayee. The Kargil issue, where soldiers from Assam also lost lives, saw a surge of patriotism, much to the chagrin of forces like ULFA, who until then had claimed Assam's national consciousness as distinct and separate from India. The state BJP leaders elevated Vajpayee's reputation as a national hero capable of dealing with infiltrators.

In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, BJP won 2 seats in Nagaon and Gauhati while it managed to get a vote share of 29.84%, the highest up until the party's resurgence in 2014. This win for BJP was important not only because of the high vote percentage but also because this was the first time the party made inroads in the Brahmaputra Valley with Nagaon and Gauhati in contrast to its earlier victories in the Barak Valley. In hindsight, Assam, having a huge Muslim population as well as a Christian population, was always fertile ground for its brand of politics. However, initially, the Hindu Assamese caste in the Brahmaputra Valley viewed the BJP only as a Marwari party. (Srikanth, 1999) BJP's policy of being hard on the Muslim immigrants while having a soft approach on the Hindu immigrants also did not sit well with them, who, as already mentioned, were wary and had been in competitive politics since colonial times. AGP was routed in the 1999 elections when BJP became the Opposition to Congress. By this time, disillusionment against AGP had completely seeped into the people, who felt the party was incapable of solving not only the immigrant issue but also issues of underdevelopment, industrialization, unemployment, etc. AGP seemed to the people as corrupt and inefficient as Congress. Factionalism had also wreaked havoc within the AGP. During this time, the news of active ISI operatives in the country, as well as the region, had started making rounds in the national as well as regional media. In June 1999, there was a blast at the Jalpaiguri railway station. The Indian army blamed the ULFA for colluding with ISI to carry out the blast, which severely injured the outfit's image. During the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, as the dates for polling were announced, the news of the arrest of many ISI agents with bags full of RDX started during the rounds. In Assam, the security forces claimed they had busted the ISI network and arrested 4 ISI leaders and around 27 agents. (Srikanth, 1999, p. 3413)

The regional press came out with reports of Islamic groups operating in the state to radicalize the Muslim population, which were aided and abetted by the ISI. The AGP, including then CM Prafulla Kumar Mahanta presiding over a press conference, announced the busting of the ISI network. He publicly alleged that the madrassas in the border districts of Assam were playing an important role in recruiting Muslim youth for ISI-sponsored organizations. Knowing fully well what such statements would have on the Muslims of Assam, the CM chose to gamble to win the Assamese Hindu votes. The state BJP wasted no time adding that AGP was realizing the truth only now when it was the BJP who had been saying the same for years. He added that the rise of Islamic organizations in the state was the global plan of Muslims and appealed to the people to rise above party politics and fight for their own survival. Such statements had highly polarizing effects on Assam on communal lines. On one hand, the Hindus' support for

the BJP galvanized, which compelled the Muslims to rally behind the Congress. With this, the Congress was able to retain its ten seats while BJP lost its Silchar seats with minority votes shifting Congress. But as mentioned earlier, BJP won the prestigious seats of Nagaon and Guwahati in the Brahmaputra Valley, and given its vote percentage, it became the main rival to Congress. This disproved the popular belief that regionalism and identity politics would continue to dominate the politics of Northeast India. (Srikanth, p. 3414) ULFA had made calls for the boycott of elections, but the 1999 elections proved that people were no longer in favor of violence in the name of autonomy and identity. Secession from the Union of India was not a popular claim as the outfit had claimed. On the other hand, left parties such as CPI and CPI (M) also lost an opportunity to unite the people to wage any democratic struggle and, in forging an alliance with the AGP, alienated themselves from the masses. It was in this context that the BJP, with the support from the Bengali Hindus and the caste Assamese Hindus, rose as a force in the politics of Assam way before the second coming in 2014.

In the 2001 Assembly elections, BJP aligned with the AGP at the eleventh hour despite opposition in the BJP state unit, even the resignation of senior BJP leader Hiranya Bhattacharya to float his own Assam BJP. According to Goswami (2001), there were fears that this alliance would give a Hindutva thrust to Assamese nationalism. On the other hand, AGP was deserted by its former allies- CPI, CPI (M), and United People's Party (UPP), which represented the minority interest. The AGP-BJP alliance interestingly had come to an understanding with the All-Bodo Students' Union- Bodo People's Action Committee (ABSU-BPAC), with which BJP had a previous alliance in 1999, and the Holiram Terang faction of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The alliance led to a crisis within the state BJP. As the party failed to retain its support base, the cadres questioned the party's acceptance of a poor deal in the distribution of seats. Mahanta, they claimed, was allowed to put up candidates in places where the BJP had built a strong base in the last three years. There were complaints that AGP workers did not work for BJP candidates and that Mahanta's poor record in government, especially in regard to the state's development and the anti-incumbency factor, rubbed off on the BJP. All senior leaders at the Centre conceded that the alliance should have been forged earlier or not at all. (Editorial, EPW, 2001, p.1662)

In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, there was a triangular contest between the Congress, BJP, and the AGP. During this election, Bhupen Hazarika, the most famous icon of the state, joined the BJP to contest elections at the last moment. However, he suffered a terrible loss. The party's vote share declined during these elections. The party's mass base was still weak, and with no

popular face for a leader, the party could not do as well in comparison to the Congress and the AGP, which saw a revival during this period. The BJP had tied up with the Janata Dal (U) in one constituency, Koliabor, and had supported the ABSU-led independent candidate in Kokrajhar. The ruling BJP laid its focus on the illegal immigration issue and the IMDT's repeal. Yet this time, in a post-poll survey that was conducted, 54% of the population seemed to be ignorant about the IMDT issue. (Goswami, 2004) As for the voter base, in a National Election Survey that was conducted, it was seen that the Hindu upper castes were the primary vote bank of the BJP. It also had the largest vote share among the OBC communities. The Muslims overwhelmingly voted for the Congress, about 65%, while only 7% of votes went to BJP and 18% to the AGP. (Ibid, p. 5526)

In the 2006 Assembly elections, Congress returned to power once again with 53 seats and 31% vote share with an alliance with Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF). The Congress' vote share, however, had a sharp decline, and although there was much hype about Tarun Gogoi's second innings as CM, the Congress' votes declined throughout the Brahmaputra Valley. (Goswami, 2006) The state also saw a new force in the form of the new party, Assam United Democratic Front (now All India United Democratic Front), founded by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal and primarily appealing to the Muslims of East Bengal origin. The BJP improved, although marginally, both in terms of seat and vote share. The BJP advanced its reach in the Brahmaputra Valley, such as the Duliajan constituency, and wrested the prestigious Dibrugarh seat from the Congress. In both these constituencies, the major vote-base comes from the tea tribes. (Goswami, 2006)

In the Lok Sabha elections in 2009, the BJP and AGP formed an alliance again to stop any split in their votes. The expectation was that this alliance would sweep the Hindu votes in the state, but the desired outcome did not see fruition. In these elections, it was again seen that the BJP had made inroads into certain constituencies at the cost of AGP's vote share, such as in the tea garden areas. (Goswami, 2009). However, the AGP-BJP combine lost 13% of its vote share among the Assamese Muslims. Among the Assamese Hindus, almost 60% of votes went to the AGP-BJP combine.

In the 2011 Assembly elections, the Congress was voted into government for the third time. BJP contested the elections on their own, this time breaking away from their ally AGP. The main issues during this election were the peace talks with different insurgent groups in the state and development, which definitely benefitted the Congress.

However, the past trials and tribulations faced by the BJP all changed in the 2014 General Elections, which, as many have commented, remains a watershed moment in the state's elections. During this election, the traditional social base of the Congress had all but shifted to the BJP. It also reflected an absolute decline in the AGP. Narendra Modi addressed huge gatherings in Guwahati and Silchar in 2014 and was able to make a positive impression in the minds of the people with regard to the Gujarat model of growth and development. The BJP also reiterated its stand on the issue of illegal immigration and how it would deport the people back to Bangladesh if voted to power. During this election, BJP gained from all its slow yet steady advances among different sections of people in the state. There was great anti-incumbency rising in the state as well. BJP's votes were consolidated across different social communities and categories. Firstly, there was a consolidation of all Hindu votes in favor of the BJP. In 2009, the alliance with AGP had cost the BJP the Bengali Hindu votes, which went in favor of the Congress. This time around, with the BJP going on its own with its steady position on the illegal immigrants and the Modi wave, the BJP was able to gain the votes of both Hindu Assamese and Bengalis, leaving the AGP high and dry. Assamese-speaking communities such as the Ahom, Moran, Matak, and Sonowal Kachari, who have traditionally voted for the Congress support, also swung to the BJP as earlier dispensations had failed to address many of their demands, such as their demand for ST status. The Janagusthiya Akya Manch, an umbrella organization of these communities, played a significant role in this regard. (Saikia, 2015)

The BJP had also made inroads into the tea-tribes who earlier voted for Congress. The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, an affiliate of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), had a major influence in mobilizing the voters among the tea tribes. We had observed the BJP making inroads in the earlier elections, but in 2014, it swept the constituencies where these communities are concentrated. BJP had successfully brought many youth leaders of the community under its fold. The emerging elite within the community had become disillusioned with the Congress as the President of the All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Union commented that they were only used as a vote bank by previous parties with little in terms of any development ever gained. They have also been demanding ST status and were unhappy with the Congress' apathy. In 2014, Adivasi, a leader from BJP Rameshwar Teli, defeated Union DoNER (Development of North Eastern Region) Minister Paban Singh Ghatowar, a heavyweight and 4-time MP. In Jorhat, Kamakhya Prasad Tassa defeated six-time Congress MP and former minister Bijoy Krishna Handique by more than 1 lakh votes. (Ibid, 2015)

During this election, religious polarization became acute in the state. In the 2011 Assembly polls, 42% of Bengali-speaking Hindus and 10% of Assamese-speaking Hindus had voted for BJP as per the CSDS post-poll survey. The NES 2009 survey shows that 23% of the Assamese-speaking Hindus and 25% of the Bengali-speaking Hindus had voted for BJP in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls. The 2014 figures show a massive jump of 40% and 37% votes, respectively, since 2009. (Sharma, 2014) As per the NES survey 25% in the state wanted to see Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister as opposed to 17% of people who wanted Rahul Gandhi as Prime Minister. While the Muslims, constituting 31% of the state population, did not vote with the same intensity for Congress as did the Hindus for BJP. Muslim votes were divided between Congress and AIUDF, 42% for Congress and 39% for AIUDF. According to Sharma (Ibid), this consolidation of Hindu votes and division of the Muslim votes was the key reason for the BJP's victory in Muslim majority constituencies and the overall spectacular performance of the party in the state. The AIUDF and BJP, with opposing political ideologies and catering to different communities whose votes do not overlap, were the major beneficiaries of this religious polarization that became evident in 2014. In the meantime, Congress and AGP were both undergoing severe organizational and leadership crises. There was dissidence growing in Congress while AGP's leaders had started joining BJP way back in the 1990s. This trickling of leaders would turn into a flow with Modi's elevation as PM candidate. (Sharma, 2014, p. 233)

In the 2016 Assembly elections, the BJP, in another landslide victory after 2014, was able to form the government for the first time in the state. In the 2016 elections, according to Goswami (2020), religion and development played a central role in mobilizing voters. In this election, the BJP had successfully brokered an alliance with regional and ethnic-based parties. This election had ended the hegemony of Congress in the state. (Ibid., p. 149) Unlike several mixed verdicts of the past, there was a clear mandate in favor of the BJP and its allies during this election. During this election, the party promised change, good governance, and development, which, according to BJP, other parties had failed to deliver. The party had also successfully adjusted its Hindu nationalist discourse to a local variant. It was able to co-opt local religious icons such as the medieval Assam saint and scholar Sankardev and utilize them for electoral mobilization. In February 2016, PM Modi attended the 85th conference of the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha held at Sibasagar, the erstwhile capital of the Ahom kingdom. Interestingly, as mentioned previously, even the ULFA had laid its foundation in 1979 here at the Rong Ghar in Sibasagar, the capital site of the Ahom kingdom, as a symbol of their nationalist ideology

countering that of Indian nationalism. The BJP claimed that the legacy of Sankardev was under attack from illegal immigrants. The Ahom general Lachit Barphukan was also successfully co-opted by the BJP during this election. BJP's chief ministerial candidate, Sarbananda Sonowal, a popular AGP leader who had joined the BJP in 2011, compared the state election campaign to the historic battle of Saraighat, where Ahoms had defeated the Mughal army under Mir Jumla in 1671. Sonowal called the elections 'the second battle of Saraighat.' The BJP also set in motion a realignment of different ethnic forces with not just varied but contradictory interests during this election. The party was able to broker a 'rainbow alliance' with forces such as AGP and BPF (Bodoland People's Front). The seat adjustment was also well chalked out by the party, with BJP contesting 84 seats, AGP 24, and the BPF 16. The BJP won 60 seats, and its vote share was 29.5%.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, BJP's resilience was tested as it went to elections in the face of huge anti-Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016(CAB), now Citizenship Amendment Act 2019(CAA) protest and mobilization in the state. Both its alliance partners in the state government, AGP and BPF (Bodoland People's Front), publicly opposed the Bill. Nevertheless, the BPF refrained from removing itself from the alliance, while AGP did so for a short period of time. (Basu & Das, 2019) Another issue is the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that the Assam government has been undertaking since 2014, which was to be published in 2019 and had created a lot of distress in the state. At the national level, the debates around the Demonetisation and the national security concerns post-Pulwama also had varying impact on the party's performance in the state. Yet, it was observed that despite these apprehensions, the party was able to gain two more seats in comparison to the previous elections while losing 0.81% of the vote share. AIUDF's vote share had gone down by 7%, and BJP's allies AGP and BPF had failed to win even a single seat. Congress' seat share had remained static at 3, and its vote share went up by 5%. According to Basu and Das (2019), the BJP's strength and victory lay in its capability to consolidate and deft political maneuvering. Additionally, BJP's support for the NRC, on the one hand, placated the indigenous communities over Bangladeshi infiltration while the CAB was 'dangled to the NRC-distressed Hindu migrants with a promise that they would not be rendered stateless.' (Ibid. p. 17) Its alliances helped send the message that it was not against the interest of the sons of the soil.

In the 2021 Assembly elections, the BJP had one of its toughest political battles yet since its ascendancy in the state in 2014. The Congress-led alliance- the *Mahajot*- comprising the AIUDF, BPF, Left political parties, and a few other smaller regional parties posed a formidable

challenge to the BJP-led alliance- *Mitrajot*. A third alliance was formed by the newly formed parties- the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and the Raijor Dal (RD) in the aftermath of the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act and the tumultuous protests that happened in its wake. Both PM Modi and Home Minister Shah massively campaigned in the state. BJP continued its 'rainbow alliance' (Dutta, 2021) with AGP while ousting BPF and bringing the new Bodo party United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) in its stead in the alliance. In this election, the BJP contested 92 seats, offering 26 to the AGP and 8 to the UPPL. During this election, there was maximum polarization on religious lines as well. The CSDS data shows that 67% of Hindu votes had been cast in favor of BJP and its allies, which is 10% higher than the 2016 elections. These votes cut across ethnic and linguistic lines.

2.4 BJP's Ideological and Electoral Strategies: Compulsions and Convictions

BJP's performance in Assam cannot be understood without a larger study of its own evolution over the course of more than three decades, which finally led to fruition in 2014 when it captured power at the Centre with an overwhelming majority, which aided its dramatic rise in Assam Assembly in 2016. BJP was formed on April 6, 1980, in the ashes of its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh. In the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, the Janata Party won the elections in which BJS had 93 seats out of the Janata Party's 295. After the controversy of 'dual membership' of BJS' members being affiliates of RSS, Vajpayee, then Minister of External Affairs in the Janata government, had emphasized that the Jana Sangh no longer existed. (Chakrabarty & Jha, 2020, p. 207) When the Janata experiment failed, and Congress returned to power in 1980, the BJS members formed the BJP with Vajpayee as President and Advani, Sikandar Bakht, and MM Joshi as general secretaries. The new leaders claimed that the party would now be a mass-based organization and not like a caste-based rigid structure. (Ibid, p. 208) The new party also pronounced Gandhian socialism as its new objective, unlike the BJP. The commonality between Gandhian socialism and Deen Dayal Upadhyay's integral humanism was also emphasized by the new party in an attempt to attract the masses as well as bring in anti-Congress and anti-Communist elements. Advani had commented thus:

We wanted to know that the concept of socialism, like the concept of secularism, has Indian roots and that only the Indian way of achieving economic and social justice would ultimately succeed. We wanted to affirm that all the great thinkers and social reformers in the Hindu tradition, including Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, in the modern era, had been votaries of what can be termed as

‘Spiritual Socialism’. The neglect and neglect of the spiritual dimension of man had rendered the Communist experiment in country after country in Europe and Asia is utterly dehumanizing. Therefore, the BJP adopted Gandhian Socialism as a positive alternative to communism. (Ibid., p. 210)

In BJP’s first convention, the party also asserted its five commitments: first being nationalism and national integration; second was to democracy, third to ‘positive secularism’ based on *sarva dharma samabhava*, fourth to Gandhian socialism but through the integral humanist approach and fifth was to pursuing politics based on values and not self-seeking or lust for power. Electorally, though this revamped BJP made little success, in 1983, the party made its mark in the Karnataka Assembly, winning 18 out of 224 seats but lost elections in the Jammu region, a traditional stronghold of the BJS where Indira Gandhi was now seen as a savior of Hindu interests. In 1984, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, Congress’ victory and BJP’s loss, which it later claimed to be one of the greatest lows for the party, winning only 2 out of 220 seats it contested, definitely brought a pall of gloom to the party and its supporters. The party’s vote share, however, was not that dismal. Both Vajpayee and Advani had contended that the party had retained its BJS base.

Since early 1985, the party set up a 12-member committee led by Krishan Lal Sharma to work out a long-term plan of action for the next five years on all facets of the party’s functioning-ideology, organization, agitation, constructive activities, and electoral strategy. Some of the issues of the party since its Jana Sangh days were the abrogation of Article 370, the illegal immigrant issue in Assam, and the uniform civil code. The Shah Bano case’s episode was in sharp contrast to the Hindu code bills of the 1950s, which Advani referred to as ‘surrender to minorityism’. Advani, who had just taken charge of BJP’s President, in his address, had called the Shah Bano case an attack on the Constitution and had strongly advocated the implementation of the uniform civil code in the country. This would lead to BJP’s support and bolster the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign of Ayodhya in 1989, which had been called by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. BJP likened this movement to the Somnath Temple movement of 1951. BJP also started building the image of Ram, who had become highly popular through the TV serial Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana*, as one of national unity, identity, and integration. BJP’s election manifesto in 1989 included rebuilding the Ram temple in Ayodhya, appointing a commission that would study personal laws of different religious communities in India, and evolving a draft of a uniform civil code taking all equitable aspects of the different religions while also demanding the abrogation of the Article 370 and the influx issue in the Northeast.

This time, the BJP polled 11.4% votes and won 85 seats, thus emerging as the third largest party after Congress and Janata Dal. It emerged as the single largest party in 1996, decreasing in 2004 and 2009, only to resurge spectacularly in 2014.

The Eleventh General Election in India (1996) catapulted the BJP to the position of the largest political party in India. The election performance was not linked directly to the militant propagation of Hindutva as in the case of the 1991 elections. For the first time in 1996, the BJP increased its share of representatives in the Lok Sabha through a relatively moderate campaign and limited alliances with regional parties. (Hansen & Jaffrelot, 2001) Since the 1990s, the BJP has shifted from the ethno-religious mobilization of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement towards a softer policy. The main reason for this shift was the fear of party leaders that the extremist voices of Vishwa Hindu Parishad would overshadow the BJP, and it would lose control of the Hindu nationalist political agenda. The second reason was also the fact that the BJP, with its militant Hindu nationalist tenor, had failed to attract the Hindi belt and had lost elections in these states in 1993. During the 1996 elections, the moderate face of the BJP, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, instead of the militant leading face of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, LK Advani, became the leading campaigner for the party. The party also entered into new alliances with parties with no ideological affinities with Hindu nationalism, such as the Samta Party in Bihar and the Haryana Vikas Party of Bansi Lal.

‘The segmentation and protracted collapse of the edifice of the once mighty Congress party since the mid-1980s have in many ways been interwoven with a broader diversification of political actors and political stances in the states, along with the proliferation of distinct regional political dynamics which have circumscribed the potential space and authority of dominant political parties at the national level’. (Hansen & Jaffrelot, 2001) The 80s and 90s saw the growing strength of regional political voices all over India with their distinct political cultures and vernaculars. Regionalization of politics had come to roost following the linguistic reorganizations of the 1950s during the 80s and 90s. Outside the Hindi belt, a large number of lower castes and minorities had entered the Congress, whereby the party strove to consolidate these groups as stable constituencies of its own. This laid the grounds for the autonomous politics of the OBCs in the 1980s.

The OBCs and Dalits had risen as a political force on their own thereafter who had tired of the paternalistic and clientelistic mobilization of the masses by elites. The democratization process led to competitive mass mobilization of notions of equality between social and cultural groups

in terms of entitlements to be claimed from the state. The lower caste mobilization and rise of various regional parties cost Congress its dominance. On the other hand, the upper caste Hindus, urban middle classes, and upwardly mobile groups in northern and western India had become a major constituency of the Hindu nationalist politics of the BJP. The BJP's agitation for the Ram temple and against the Mandal issue consolidated the upper caste communities of the Hindi belt. For the urban middle class and other upwardly mobile groups, it was the party's insistence on efficient and corruption-free governance that was appealing. The BJP had also cultivated an image of integrity and asceticism amongst its cadres and most popular leaders. However, the BJP gained the best when it created alliances with regional forces, such as with the AGP in Assam in the 1990s. Through such partnerships, it gained entry into the constituencies of these parties. It gained 'local interpreters' of their general idiom of Hindutva, which could 'generalize Hindu communalism into local vernaculars and local symbolic inventories to help the BJP overcome its upper-caste bias and northern image. Just as Shiv Sena did this for BJP in Maharashtra, the AGP did the same in Assam. BJP has constantly diversified and specialized its strategies within the Hindu nationalist movement as part of its electoral compulsions. (Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2001)

In 1998, the BJP leader Vajpayee was elected the PM of India. In 1999, when the BJP formed government at the Centre again, the party significantly broadened its geographical as well as social base. It had MPs from 18 states and 1 Union Territory (Andaman and Nicobar Islands), 25 SCs, 21 ST MPs, and 15 woman MPs. Kushabhau Thakre, President of BJP, stressed after the 13th General Elections that BJP was an all-India party because some of its candidates had been returned from Andamans to Kashmir and from Gujarat to Assam. (Ibid., p. 318)

The BJP had to severely curtail its Hindu nationalist agenda. In 1998, the National Democratic Alliance evolved a 'National Agenda for Government,' and it was on this basis that Vajpayee formed the government. Mainstays of the Sangh Parivar's programs, such as the building of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya, abolition of Article 370, and establishment of the Uniform Civil Code, were not included in the agenda. In 1999, the NDA manifesto continued with this agenda whereby the alliance promised a 'moratorium on contentious issues.' The NDA also committed itself to upholding a 'genuine secularism' in line with the Indian traditional values of *sarva panth samadaro* (Ibid., p. 341). The party had also distanced itself from Swadeshi's economic protectionist stance and was keen on supporting Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). In November 1999, the BJP's national executive passed a resolution welcoming financial and fiscal reforms and greater foreign investment. The Vajpayee government also introduced the

Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA) Bill in December 1999, which provided entry to Indian private and foreign investment in insurance, ending the monopoly of LIC and GIC. By February 2000, the ceilings on foreign investments had been enhanced to 8 sectors such as pharma, mining, and film industry. BJP pushed the idea of ‘good governance’ as part of its core objective and made serious attempts to undo its communal image. BJP’s nationalism and patriotism were also another key part of its new image and the Kargil war immensely aided its nationalist stance when the nationalism was pointed only against foreign aggressors. The BJP had turned into a liberal, patriotic striving for good governance for all.

In 2003, the BJP had won massive victories in Chattisgarh, MP, and Rajasthan, which gave it the confidence to prepone Lok Sabha elections by six months. However, several important allies of the BJP in the NDA deserted the party, such as the DMK, the Lok Janashakti Party, and the National Conference. BJP launched slogans such as ‘India Shining’ and ‘Feel Good Factor,’ claiming that the country had become progressively prosperous during its regime. NDA’s manifesto started with the punchline ‘an agenda for development, good governance, and peace.’ It is evident that going forth, development would become the main plank for the party’s elections and image at the cost of the dilution of its Hindu nationalist ideology. It stated that there was peace in the Indo-Kashmir issue as well as within Kashmir. The party remained silent on Article 370 as well as the uniform civil code. On the Ayodhya issue, the party stated that it would rely on dialogue and discussion while building mutual trust and confidence. BJP was trying to woo Muslim voters through this approach. It targeted Sonia Gandhi’s possible PM candidature with the slogan ‘India to be ruled by Indians’. The results of the 2004 elections gave a severe jolt to the party. The party won only 138 seats out of 364 it contested. In UP, it won only 10, Bihar 5 and 1 in Jharkhand, which reversed its gain in Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. The party’s post-results analysis stated that it could not attract Muslims to UP, while Brahmins, Thakurs, and Bania’s votes had also shifted. The Lodh votes promised by Kalyan Singh had also failed to materialize. (Chakrabarty and Jha, 2020, p. 226)

It was clear that BJP’s soft Hindutva failed to convince the Muslims, and on the other hand, its overtures towards backward communities such as the Lodhs also drove its upper caste constituency away. A CSDS report showed that in UP, the BJP could garner only 3% Muslim votes. VHP leader Pravin Togadia blamed the BJP, saying it had betrayed the Hindus by moving away from its Hindutva ideology. Ashok Singhal blamed Advani and Vajpayee for curbing the Ramjanmabhoomi Movement. RSS spokesperson Ram Madhav added that the grassroots RSS workers did not approve of this new image of the BJP and had developed

resentment against the party leaders. He also added that failure to build alliances in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu was another factor leading to the party's ouster. (Ibid., p. 226-227)

In 2009, the party attempted to bring back its Hindutva approach in the elections while also asserting the goal of good governance and development. The party issued its manifesto with the slogan- 'good governance, development, and security.' Article 370 and its abrogation were reiterated, as well as the uniform civil code. It also resolved to facilitate the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. However, the party's debacle only got worse, with BJP's seat share reducing further to 116 seats with 18.80% votes. NDA's combined tally fell to 159.

During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the party underwent a thorough transformation at several levels. The anti-incumbency against Congress rule had reached its head and opened an opportunity to the BJP, which it did not lose this time. According to Mishra (2018), since Modi's coming, the party has been operating like a 'well-oiled electoral machine.' The author cites the following factors leading to the party's victory and resilience since 2014- Modi-Shah partnership, growing financial resources, expansion of its mass and electoral base, a centralized decision-making procedure, emphasis on young and Hindutva hardliners. When Narendra Modi became the PM, he brought in his colleague from Gujarat as the national President of the party. This was against a long-held convention that the PM and the party president should be from different states. But Modi was able to do the same tactically. With the coming of Shah, he quickly brought changes in the party's mode of functioning, modernizing the set-up and ushering in a corporate style of vertical heads for programs and not horizontal. Shah also developed better relations with RSS workers, which has made the party strong organizationally.

Table 2.3 BJP's Performance in the 2014 General Elections

States	Total Seats	Seats won by BJP	Poll%
Andhra Pradesh	42	3	8.52
Arunachal Pradesh	2	1	46.62
Assam	14	7	36.86
Bihar	40	22	29.86
Goa	2	2	54.12

Gujarat	26	26	60.11
Haryana	10	7	34.84
Himachal Pradesh	4	4	53.85
Jammu and Kashmir	6	3	32.65
Karnataka	28	17	43.37
Kerala	20	0	10.45
Madhya Pradesh	29	27	54.76
Maharashtra	48	23	27.56
Manipur	2	0	11.98
Meghalaya	2	0	9.16
Mizoram	1	0	Did not contest
Nagaland	1	0	Did not contest
Odisha	21	1	21.88
Punjab	13	2	8.77
Rajasthan	25	25	55.61
Sikkim	1	0	2.39
Tamil Nadu	39	1	5.56
Tripura	2	0	5.77
Uttar Pradesh	80	71	42.63
West Bengal	42	2	17.02
Chattisgarh	11	10	24.83
Jharkhand	14	12	40.71

Uttarakhand	5	5	55.93
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	1	48.19
Chandigarh	1	1	42.49
Dadar and Nagar Haveli	1	1	49.77
Daman & Diu	1	1	54.66
NCT of Delhi	7	7	46.63
Lakshadweep	1	0	0.43
Puducherry	1	0	Did not contest
Total	543	282	31.3

Source: Sharma (2018) p. 4

Following the 2014 victory at the Centre, the party made significant advances in Assembly elections held in Maharashtra, Haryana, Jammu Kashmir, and Haryana. It formed a government in Maharashtra with its ally Shiv Sena and formed its first government in Haryana as well. In Jammu and Kashmir, too, the party formed a government by joining hands with the People's Democratic Party. In Jharkhand, the BJP, again relying on the coalition with the All Jharkhand Students' Union, formed a government, and for the first time, a non-tribal, Raghubar Das, became the Chief Minister of the state. In 2015, the party lost in Delhi and Bihar. In Delhi, it lost despite polling 32.19 percent of the vote share. In Bihar, the Mahagathbandhan of RJD, JD(U), and Congress trumped the saffron party. In 2016, the BJP won in Assam while failing to make headway in Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal. In 2017, the BJP formed government in Manipur and Goa despite not being the single largest party. It came to power in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. In 2018, the BJP won in Tripura and successfully ended 25 years of CPI (M) rule by winning 35 out of 60 seats in the Assembly and polling 43% votes.

According to Mishra (2018), the party's main tactic for electoral victory was its financial superiority over other parties. A report by the Association for Democratic Rights said that the

party's income within a year after coming to power had sky-rocketed by 44.02 percent. In terms of the party's expenditure for elections, in 2014 alone, the party spent 913.01 crore, followed by Congress's 765.02 crore, a difference of 148 crore. (Ibid. p.8) Such income and expenditure pooled into elections aided the party's mass outreach, publicity, and electoral propaganda. Its outreach programs have been massive, even in far-flung areas of the country.

The social consolidation of the party has also improved greatly. Unlike earlier, where the party was a cadre-based party sourced especially from RSS and other Sangh Parivar affiliates, BJP has now launched a membership drive among the citizens. In 2015, it claimed to surpass the Communist Party of China in membership. In 2014, not only did the largest proportion of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) vote at the national level in favor of the BJP, but it also constituted the largest share of the vote received by the BJP. The party also received a substantial amount of Dalit and Adivasi votes in different parts of the country. (Palshikar & Suri, 2014, p. 42) This was significant as the party's voters had before 2014 remained confined to the upper caste and upper-middle-class urban voters. However, the process of wooing socially diverse groups had begun in the 1990s, although there were tensions within. RSS strategist KN Gobindacharya called the process of promoting backward class leaders as 'social engineering.' Lodh leader Kalyan Singh was made the face of the Ramjanmabhoomi Movement, and Uma Bharti and Vinay Katiyar were brought to the forefront. Venkaiah Naidu, of Kamma caste, became party president, and so did Dalit leader Bangaru Laxman, both from Andhra Pradesh. This strategy had fizzled out thereafter, only to resurge in 2014 with the coming of Narendra Modi. Modi had all the characteristics of a plebeian rising to the high level of becoming the chief minister of an important state. (Ibid,p.43) His humble beginnings as a tea seller were emphasized, and he referred explicitly to his backward class background more fervently as the electoral campaign progressed. In 2014, he emphatically claimed that the BJP was no longer an upper caste party and the next decade belonged to the backward classes and the Dalits. As the 2014 elections approached, Congress had failed to inspire confidence among the OBCs. On the other hand, parties such as Rashtriya Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party, and Janata Dal (United) also had reached a dead end in their OBC politics. BJP had now come to occupy this space vacated by erstwhile heavyweights. Thus, in 2014, we see that a huge shift of votes took place in favor of the BJP, which cut across caste, class, religion, and linguistic lines. Besides the OBCs, the BJP consolidated its votes among the Dalits and tribes as well. Additionally, unlike the past in 2014, the growing preference for BJP among the backward sections did not lead to its vote share among the upper castes. In Bihar, two-thirds of the upper

caste votes went to BJP, and in UP, three-fourths of the votes of upper castes were cast for BJP. Here, another facet of BJP's mass outreach needs emphasis. The party reached out to castes, subcastes, and social groups that had earlier been neglected by other parties. For instance, the BJP's strategists cleverly picked leaders from non-Yadav backward castes or non-Jatav Dalits. Presently, the BJP is reaching out to the Pasmanda Muslims, the lower caste Muslims who are also demanding SC status. This strategy, part of political compulsions as well as a natural progression in the path of the democratization process, which BJP has been able to pursue better than its present counterparts, makes the party attractive to voters.

The tribals in different parts of the country, especially the Hindu and other indigenous faith-professing tribes, have also started voting for the BJP since 2014. The RSS has been working even in remote tribal areas, establishing Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams, Ekal Vidyalaya, Sewashram, and Sewa Bharti. Although their influence in the past was meager when BJP came to power in 2014, these ashrams and Vidyalaya have not just become training grounds for new grassroots workers but also a medium through which local aspirants of political leadership's connection to the corridors of power at the upper echelons.

2.5 Role of BJP's Sangh Parivar Allies in its Electoral Victory

The Hindu nationalist character of BJP's political ideology, Hindutva, basically comes from its association with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The members of the BJP come from the cadres of the RSS. Prominent leaders of the party of the past, as well as present Prime Minister Modi, are cadres of RSS. Among the leadership of Assam, there are no names who can be said to be RSS cadres. Yet BJP's rise in the state can be attributed to the groundwork done for decades by Sangh Parivar affiliates.

The RSS sent three *pracharaks* to Assam in 1946 who established themselves in Guwahati through the wealthy and influential Marwari businessmen in the Fancy Bazar area of Guwahati. From there, they would soon start work in Shillong, Dibrugarh, and Sylhet. (Bhattacharjee, 2007, p.49) They also got in touch with the Assamese intelligentsia in Guwahati and Nagaon. For instance, Radhikamohan Goswami of Nagaon was one of the earliest supporters of the Sangh's activities. Goswami was also the editor of a local Assamese daily *Aalok*, which was run by *swayamsevak*s or RSS cadres. Similarly, Giridhar Sarma, former principal of a reputed college of Guwahati, also strengthened the RSS in the state by introducing the organization to his circle of notables. Sarma also later became *prant sanghachalak* in 1974. However, its reach remained limited and did not proliferate among the masses. In the event of Gandhi's

assassination and RSS being banned, its image had been tarnished severely, even in the state. However, the Sangh kept bringing in *pracharaks* from Maharashtra and established new *shakas*(units) with the support of a few notables and the Marwari businessmen. Even Golwalkar visited Guwahati in 1950. The RSS gained some faith from the people in 1950 after the devastating Assam Earthquake and ensuing floods. The RSS organized relief camps with help from the Marwari Relief Society of Calcutta, which helped its image makeover. In 1952, during the anti-cow slaughter protests, RSS had only 12 *shakhas* in Assam, but by 1957, the number had risen to 308 as seen in the first regional camp of RSS held in Nagaon. The RSS also provided aid to Hindu Bengali refugees fleeing to India into Assam during the 1959-60 riots in East Pakistan. The Hindu Bengalis had since then been loyal to RSS and later BJP. In 1968, during the Karimganj Riots between Hindus and Muslims in the Karimganj district with large Bengali Muslim and Bengali Hindu population, RSS' support to the Hindus further made the Hindu Bengalis the RSS ally in the region.

The RSS, as Sethi & Subhrastha (2017) claims, is also responsible for turning the anti-foreigner angst of the Assam Movement into an anti-Muslim immigrant stance. In 2005, Mohan Bhagwat addressed a gathering at Nalabari in Assam, where he claimed the two burning issues of Assam were infiltration and conversion. (Bhattacharjee, 2007, p. 53) In doing so, the Sangh had also conveniently ascribed a religious identity to the infiltrator, who, in this case, became the Muslim. Interestingly, in 1951, Golwalkar had written to the Prime Minister about the influx of East Pakistani Muslims to Assam and the imminent threat it posed. *Aalok*, the daily mentioned earlier, had continuously highlighted the grave dangers of Muslim immigrants and the conspiracy to turn Assam into a Pakistan. (Ibid.,p.55)

During the Assam Movement, the RSS and BJP leadership continued to support the movement when other parties had termed it parochial and communal. The RSS also targeted the Christian tribals in Assam. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad was created by Golwalkar in 1964 and *pracharaks* were deputed to tribal areas to counter the Christian missionary and their evangelical mission. Its Assam branch was established in Guwahati in 1966. The VHP holds *sanmelans* in the region to unite the Hindus under a common platform. The VHP also worked closely with the Vaishnavite sattras and have learned the local language and culture. It has also been able to introduce practices and rituals of North India. For instance, Bhattacharjee mentions that Janmashtami has recently been introduced in Guwahati, which was traditionally not part of Assamese culture. In fact, in recent years, Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussehra is being celebrated in the state, which was not the case even a decade back. According to Sethi, RSS took shelter

to grow in Assam under the Satra tradition established by Sankardeva. Later, in 2000, RSS cultural artists and activists played an instrumental role in getting the Sattriya dance form the national honor of being recognized as a classical dance form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. In fact, the Sethis have gone on to claim that the cult of Sankardeva has been kept alive by the RSS and his teachings imparted via Sankardeva Shishu Kunjas. The VHP, just like RSS, also carries out social services in the remote villages of Assam. It runs *ekal vidyalayas* in tribal areas where the single teacher imparts Hindu *sanskars*.

The VHP's earliest headquarters was, in fact, in Dima Hasao's headquarters, Haflong, where it established a residential school with a hostel for about 60 students. It is still popularly called the Ramakrishna Mission or Hindu Mission in the town and has young tribal students as boarders of interior villages and poor homes, mainly of the Hindu Dimasa and Heraka Naga tribes. Similarly, the Sangh also runs its Kalyan Ashrams in other tribal areas.

The most successful RSS-run institutions are its myriad private schools under the Vidya Bharati. Created by RSS in 1977, according to its website, it runs 12,065 formal schools in the country. The Shishu Shiksha Samiti under the Vidya Bharti was established in Assam in 1979, and its first school was the Sankardev Shishu Kunja. It was established on the *tithi* of Sankardev in Guwahati. The medium of instruction was Assamese, which attracted a large number of Assamese students besides the name Sankardev. The same schools in Bengali-dominated districts of the Barak Valley are Bengali medium, and in Bodo-dominated areas, the medium is Bodo. The subjects taught in these schools are yoga, music, Sanskrit education, Veda Maths, Swadeshi etc. Most of the teachers are former RSS cadres, and they teach Sanskar and Sanskriti. (Bhattacharjee, p. 74) All of these organizations have aided the rise of the BJP as they have always been doing propaganda work for the party. For instance, VHP and other affiliates have been very vocal about the infiltrator issue in Assam. The VHP has conducted the highest number of *sanmelans* to unite all Hindus in Assam and the northeast region. They undertake pamphleteering campaigns against Muslim and Christian designs in the region and how unless all Hindus unite, none would be able to win against the designs. The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh had also done remarkably to bring the chah-mazdoor (tea tribes) especially to vote for the BJP, whereas earlier, the tea-garden laborers under AITUC voted for Congress.

The party's 2016 election mission was called Mission 84. BJP party created Mandal in-charges, district in-charges, booth in-charges. BJP's membership touched 3.1 million in less than eighteen months, exceeding the expected targets. The party also started the Maha-Prasikshan

Abhiyan (Grand Training Programme), which trained its booth-level functionaries to spread the good work done by the central government led by Modi. They were delegated specific responsibilities of reaching each household once a week with a different message. (Sethi & Shubrashtha, 2017, p.41)

Phase 1 of the polls in 2016 were held in Upper Assam (the eastern part), the Barak valley (the Bengali-speaking southern part), and the hill areas that included Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. Sethi and Shubrastha (2017) add that each of these regions had their share of electoral distinctiveness and required micro strategies for electoral battles on the part of the BJP.

The BJP as a party had long been a minor player in Assam and lacked a cadre of its own in most parts of the state. Sethi and Shubrastha add that the BJP's cadre was supplemented by nearly 20,000 workers of the RSS and other affiliated organizations like the Lok Jagran Manch. The RSS also utilized the network of Ekal Vidyalaya teachers, who have a tremendous influence among the local populace, especially in the Bodo areas on the north bank. Through such strategies the party was able to win the Assembly Elections in 2016. Thereafter, we can see that there has been no looking back for the BJP.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have basically discussed the rise of BJP's electoral trajectory in Assam. The BJP since its formation in 1980 has been active in Assam but it was not able to make much way in the electoral arena. Its presence was limited to the Cachar district for some time. However, the party had started making steady gains over the years both at the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections. The fortunes of the party changed in 2014 with the coming of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre. The party was able to stitch alliances across different groups in the district to form the government in 2016. The party formed the government again in 2021. During the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and Assembly Elections of 2021, Assam was in turmoil owing to the debates around the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and before 2021, the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2020 protests. There were apprehensions that the BJP would lose due to the high tensions especially before 2021. However, the party managed to turn the tide in its favour with Himanta Biswa Sarma fulfilling his long-cherished goal of becoming the Assam chief minister. The chapter discusses the growth of BJP as a party and its compulsions between treading the ideology line of its parent organization RSS and taking a moderate stance to appeal to different sections of the people. The moderate stance of the party

that it had taken at times, especially with AB Vajpayee at the helms has in many ways as we will see in the later chapters also added to the party's appeal. The chapter also has discussed some of the mobilization with which the RSS and the VHP could aid the saffron party's victory. The RSS and VHP's mobilisations in the whole of Assam still lack much academic research. The RSS and VHP's social mobilization through its varied programmes such as in the education or through its religious activities and propaganda needs more study in the context of Assam.

Notes:

1. The term 'ethnic Assamese' as a category is used by Sanjib Baruah in *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999) to denote peoples within Assam distinguished from the 'immigrant communities' and the indigenous 'tribal communities.' (p.xvii-xviii)

Chapter III

Dima Hasao District: A Political Profile

3.1 Introduction

The Dima Hasao district of Assam is a tribal majority district governed under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The district came into existence on 19 April 1952. The name Dima Hasao in the Dimas language means the ‘land of the Dimas.’

The district has only one Assembly constituency, the Haflong ST constituency. As for the Parliamentary constituency, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong share one Lok Sabha constituency- the Autonomous District (ST) constituency. Demands have been ongoing, as in the upcoming delimitation proposals that the district be given its separate parliamentary constituency and increase the number of Assembly constituencies. As mentioned in this chapter, as in others, the district is governed under the Sixth Schedule, allowing local tribes to govern themselves through the autonomous district councils. The autonomy provision has been in place since 1952, and as such, the district is among the oldest among the tribal areas of the region to have autonomous arrangements for power sharing. However, since the beginning, the hill leaders of the areas governed under the Sixth Schedule have questioned the authenticity of the so-called autonomy. Soon after Independence, leaders of the Dima Hasao district (then North Cachar) and other hill leaders started demanding a Hill State. The movement had its ebbs and flows but finally gave way to forming a separate Meghalaya after breaking away from Assam. Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong were granted the contentious Article 244 (A), which says these two districts may be provided with an autonomous state within Assam. However, it is yet to be implemented. During the tumultuous Assam Movement, Dima Hasao’s participation was negligible. However, as is visible from different memorandums, the movement’s impact on the district was high, leading to almost an existential crisis. Following the Assam Accord in 1985, youth activism led to the formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee in 1986, which demanded the implementation of 244 (A) and greater autonomy provisions for Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. This was followed by an era of insurgency and inter-ethnic rivalry culminating in the ethnic conflict of 2003, 2005, and 2009. Since the 2010s, with the surrender of major insurgent groups and their rehabilitation not just in society but also in the polity and the district council itself, there has been an uneasy peace in the district. The rise of the BJP in the district after 2016 has also been spectacular, while the Sangh Parivar organizations have been active and working alongside the tribes for decades.

The primary goal of this chapter is to narrate a political history of the district since its pre-colonial days, which impinges on the district's polity to date. It will highlight the political issues of the district and give a background to the factors that could lead to the growth of the BJP in the district.

3.2 Geography and Demography

The Dima Hasao district came into existence on 19 April 1952. The Dima Hasao district was earlier called the North Cachar Hills district of Assam and was renamed in 2010. The district is the second largest in Assam, behind Karbi Anglong, in terms of area at 4888 sq kms, while it is the smallest in population at 214,102 according to the 15th Indian Census 2011. In January 2022, the number of electors in the district stood at 149228, with 74791 male and 74437 voters. The district is still densely forested. Out of the 4888 sq kms, 268.66 is still very dense, 1455.08 is moderately dense, and 2428.18 is open, i.e., 85% of the district is still under forest cover. Geographically, the district is located between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Compared to various districts of Assam, Dima Hasao has mild temperatures and does not have any hot wind or scorching summers. The bordering regions are such that, towards the east, there is Nagaland and Manipur; towards the South, there are Barak Valley districts; towards the West, there is Meghalaya; and towards the North, there is Hojai and both the east and west Karbi Anglong districts. All the administrative offices of Dima Hasao are located in Haflong. Haflong is the district headquarters of the Dima Hasao district. Haflong is also the only hill station in the state of Assam and, of late, has been attracting an increased number of local tourists.

The population of Dimasa Hasao district is dominated by various tribal communities, although it is to be noted that there has been a significant growth in the population of communities other than the tribes. The social composition is majorly tribal.

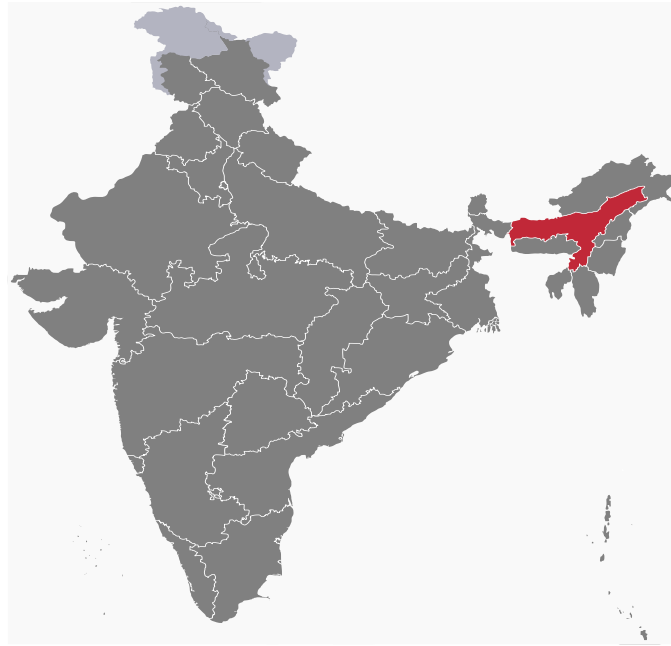


Figure 1 Assam marked in red in the map of India; Source: WikiCommons

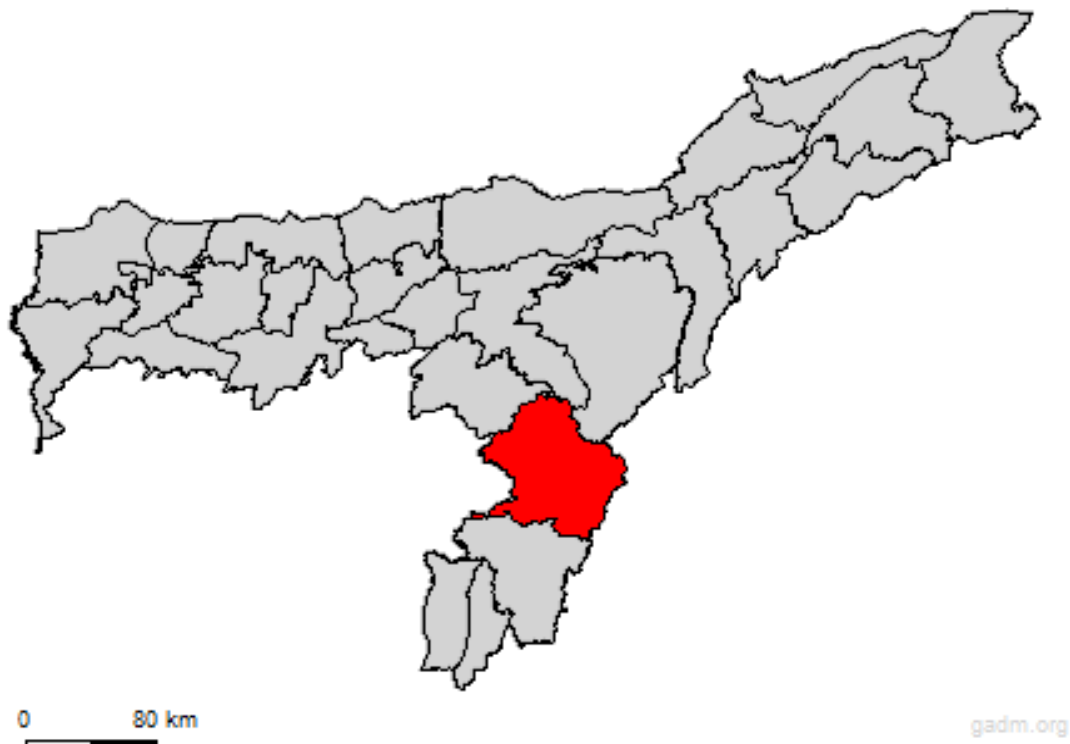


Figure 2 Dima Hasao district is marked in red in the map of Assam (<https://gadm.org/maps/IND/assam/dimahasao.html>)

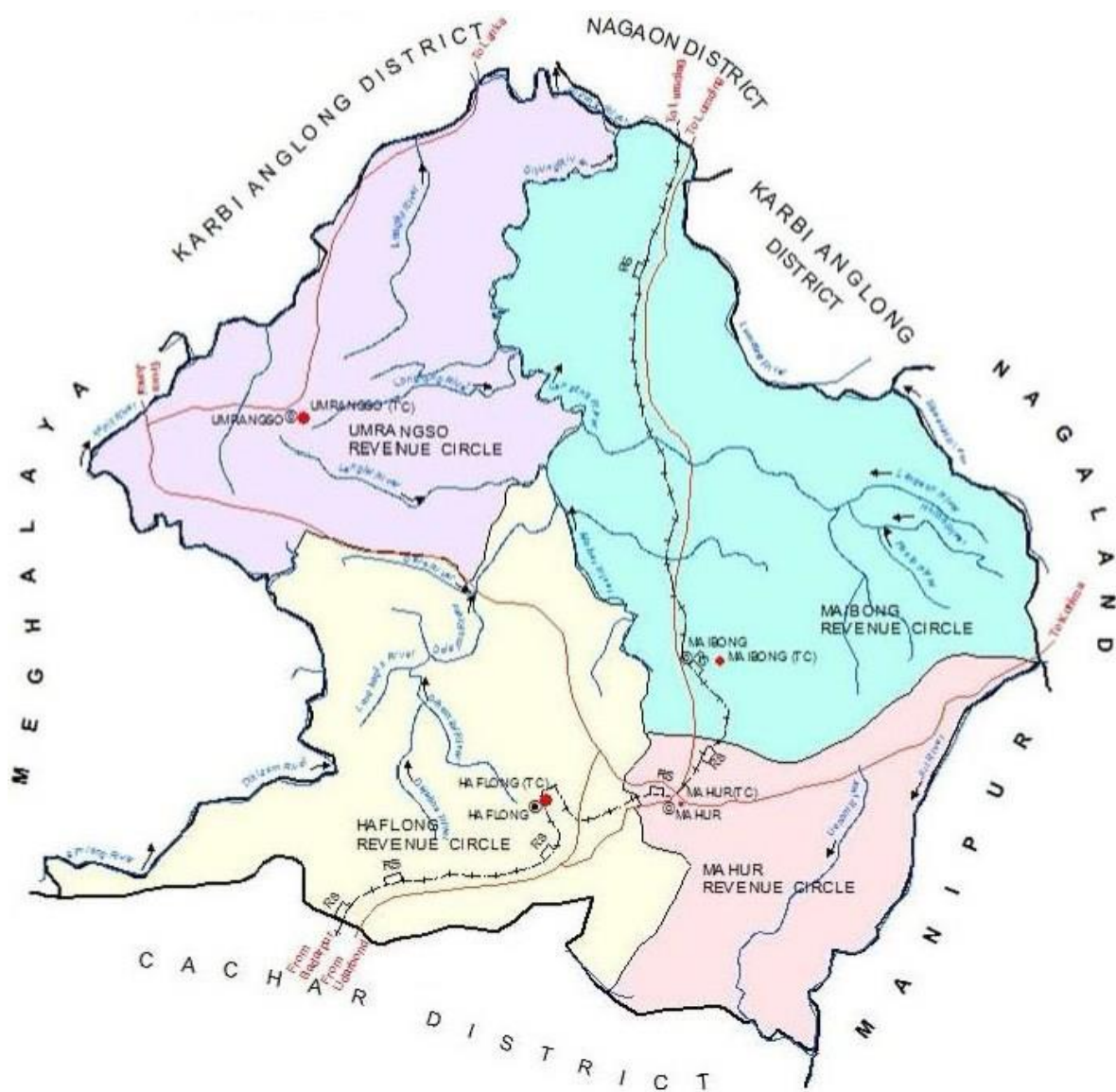


Figure 3 Political Map of Dima Hasao district with 4 sub-divisions(revenue circle) (map taken from nchac.in)

Table: 3.1 Population of Dima Hasao district according to Linguistic/Ethnic Groups (Census of India, 2011)

Linguistic/Ethnic Group	Population	Population in %
Dimasa	76494	35.73
Bengali	25264	11.80

Zeme Naga	20657	9.65
Hmar	16375	7.65
Nepali	13615	6.36
Kuki	10940	5.11
Hindi	9926	4.64
Karbi	9542	4.46
Khasi	4139	1.93
Assamese	4057	1.89

Barring the Bengali, Nepali, Hindi speakers, and the Assamese, all other ethnicities/linguistic groups stated in the table above come under the Scheduled Tribe (Hills) in Assam recognized by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The Dimasas, Zeme Nagas, and a few Rongmei, Hmar, Thadou Kuki, and other tribes of the Kuki-Chin family, such as Vaiphei, Hrangkhal, Biate, all come under the ST (H). The Khasis, the Jaintias of the district, and the Karbis are also included. The ST(H) category enjoys a separate share from the Scheduled Tribe (Plains) in Assam. The Sixth Schedule provision was initially designed by and for the hill tribals alone in the early years of Independence.

Bengali and Nepali speakers are the district's second and third-largest non-tribal population. As seen in the above-given data, they constitute almost 19% of the total population. The Bengali population in the district is mainly traders, and their population is concentrated in the urban areas of the district, such as the headquarters of Haflong and other emerging towns, Maibang, Harangajao, and Hathikali. According to census data, the Bengali population had seen a decline from 2001 to 2011, as high as 7.53%. The reasons for such decline are not clear. However, the author's conjecture is that beginning in the early 2000s for a decade, the district was reeling under insurgency and inter-ethnic conflict, which could have triggered a flight of the Bengali population to safer territories. After the peace accords and some security coming back to the region, it is probable that the Bengali population might have returned again. The Nepali population in the district has seen a sharp increase from the 2001 census, an increase of 9.76%. The Hindi-speaking population also increased to 13.83% while the number of Assamese

speakers sharply declined. The district has a small Scheduled Caste population of 4337 people as per the 2011 Census, mainly belonging to the Hindi-speaking groups.

Table: 3.2. Religious Demography (Census of India, 2011)

Religion	Population	%
Hindu	143593	67.07
Christian	63310	29.57
Islam	4358	2.04
Sikh	207	0.10
Buddhist	680	0.32
Jain	70	0.03
Tribal faiths	1170	0.55

The district is a Hindu majority district since the Dimasas and the Herakas (faith propounded by Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu) Nagas are Hindus while maintaining their indigenous faith system. The Bengali, Nepali, Hindi-speaking groups and Assamese population are predominantly Hindu. The Nagas (almost half the Zeme are Heraka and the other half Christian), Kuki groups, Hmars, Khasi, Jaintia, and Karbis are Christians. The Christians constitute the second largest religious group, constituting almost 30% of the total. This Christian population is predominantly tribal. Muslims are very low in number, mainly migrant laborers from nearby Cachar plains, and a minuscule population are traders in Haflong, Maibang, and Harangajao urban centers, etc. Several respondents interviewed by the author during the study noted that the Muslim traders had grown in strength of number and hold of the local markets in the last two to three years. This created certain apprehensions among the respondents who belonged to the tribal communities since the lack of control over the market transactions has been a concern of the tribal communities in the area.

Table 3.3 Population Growth of Dima Hasao district (1901 to 2011)

Year	Population
1901	40812
1911	27296
1921	28913
1931	31844
1941	37361
1951	39663
1961	54319
1971	76047
1991	150801
2001	188079
2011	214102
2022*	250583

***The projected population as of 2022 is 250583, according to indiastats.com**

The Dima Hasao district's headquarters is located in Haflong. The district is divided into four subdivisions- Haflong, Mahur, Maibang and Umrangso. Here, the Haflong sub-division is the largest population-wise. According to 2011 census data, the Haflong sub-division's population is 76721, followed by Maibang 53570, Umrangso 49952, and Mahur 33859. These four are also the main towns in the district.

The district has 5 Community Development (CD) blocks: Diyung Valley, Jatinga Valley, Harangajao, New Sangbar, Diyungbra, and 695 villages. The population is primarily rural-based. According to the 2011 census, 70.81% of the population are rural, while 29.19% are urban. The population density is 44 persons per sq. km. (2011), with rural density at 31 and urban density at 2870. The sex ratio was 932 females per 1000 males in 2011, 948 at the rural and 894 at the urban level. The decadal growth of the population from 2001 to 2011 is 13.84%.

The percentage of the child population (Aged 0-14) is 33.50%, the economically active population (Aged 15-59) is 61.18%, and the aging population (Aged 60 and above) is 5.27%.

The literacy rate of the district in 2011 was 77.54%, with 83.29% literacy among males and 71.33% literacy among the female population. However, it is to be noted that the population of people with a graduate degree and above was only 5551 in 2011. The district has about 1073 schools offering primary-level to secondary to higher secondary education. Schools offering primary education (from 1-V) stand at 801; the rest are a handful of schools offering primary to higher secondary (XII) level education. The enrollment for the medium of instruction is highest in English at 39579, followed by 5103 in Bengali, 670 in Hmar, 560 in Assamese, and 100 in Hindi.

3.3 Economy of the District

With the district being governed by the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council(NCHAC) under the Sixth Schedule, the developmental sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, forest, Public Works Department, education etc– a total of 30 departments are under the control of the NCHAC. In 2006, the Government of India declared the Backward Regions Grant Fund, which Dima Hasao also figured in the list of the most backward districts of India.

Table 3.4 Employment Details of Dima Hasao

Type of Work	Total	Male	Female
Main workers	68,297	49,811	18,486
Cultivators	35,375	23,693	11,682
Agricultural labourers	1,833	1,367	466
Household Industries	750	517	233
Other workers	30,339	24,234	6,105
Marginal Workers	16,731	6,512	10,219
Non-Working	129,074	54,479	74,595

Source: Census Data 2011

The district is primarily agrarian and rural-based, and shifting cultivation (slash and burn) is also practiced mainly by the tribes of the district. Nevertheless, yields have not been

satisfactory as tools and methods still range on the primitive, and few have upgraded themselves to modern tools and technology. Irrigation attempts have been tenaciously unsuccessful in the hilly terrain despite abundant natural water sources and rainfall in the rainy season. Hence, the cultivators primarily are subsistence farmers only. Industry has been stunted in the district due to the district's inaccessibility on account of inadequate roadways and highways. The district's long-drawn political disturbances and precarious law and order situation also added to its lack of investment from industry. The district's revenue mainly comes from taxes collected on professions and commerce. The district's Gross District Domestic Product (GDDP) in the year 2018-19 is 396394 Lakhs and is one of the lowest among other districts in the state. The per capita income of NDDP (Net District Domestic Product) is Rs. 136485. Since the beginning of the millennium, transportation has improved in the district with the beginning of the ongoing highway project in India. The East-West Corridor work began in 2004, and the highway project is underway in Assam. The easternmost point of the highway in Assam is Silchar in Barak Valley. The highway cuts across the Dima Hasao district's headquarters of Haflong. National Highway 27 has dramatically improved the district's connectivity.

In 2015, the Northeast Frontier Railway introduced the Lumding Silchar broad gauge line in the district, uprooting the earlier meter gauge line introduced during colonial rule in the hills. The broad gauge line, similar to the highway, cuts across the district with a new station at New Haflong, which was introduced in 2015. The roadway and railway connectivity has improved travel and communication to and fro from the district to other parts of the region. However, roadways within the district, mainly interior villages, remain dismal. Another revenue source of the district is its forest resources. Sand, coal stone mining, etc., are massive revenue sources for the district. The tourism sector has also seen fast development in the last two to three years, a trend that is mushrooming across the Northeast region. However, details remain limited presently on the revenue being generated and the success of this sector as it remains very new. Despite all these, the district depends on the centre's grants-in-aid and funds for its developmental activities.

3.4 Dima Hasao District Before Independence

The present-day Dima Hasao district used to be part of the Kachari kingdom, which had its border with the Cachar district (hence called North Cachar), Karbi Anglong district, Nagaon district, Nagaland, Dimapur, Kohima Road. The present-day Northeast Frontier was the past

domain of small tribes governed by chieftains. Over time, medieval states emerged from these chieftainships, such as the Kacharis, Jayantiyas, Koches, and Ahoms. By the time of the advent of the British in the Northeast Frontier, the monarchies of Manipur, Brahmaputra Valley, and Cachar were on the decline. When David Scott was appointed political agent of the Governor-General of the Northeast frontier, he took up the mission to bring the region under British administration through varied means. The British occupied Sylhet in 1765, and they came across the Kacharis in the process of collecting revenue under the East India Company. The Burmese invaded the Cachar region in 1824, leading to the last Kachari King, Govinda Chandra, signing a treaty with the East India Company at Badarpur. The terms of this agreement were that the British would help Govinda Chandra protect his kingdom from enemies. After 1826, when the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed, Assam was brought directly annexed to the British territory while Cachar, Jayantiya, and Manipur were restored to Raja Govinda Chandra, Ram Singh, and Gambhir Singh, respectively, as tributaries to the British. In 1830, Govinda Chandra was assassinated, resulting in the British taking complete control of the South of the kingdom (parts of modern-day Cachar included). The North Cachar hilly region, also under the king, went under the leadership of Tularam Senapati, the Dimasa Kachari General. The British approved the administration and sovereignty of Tularam Senapati. However, later, a portion of Tularam's territory lying west of the Diyung River and between the Mahur River and the Barail range was further annexed to the British Empire and constituted a sub-division of Nowgaon district in 1839. In 1854, with the death of Tularam, succession to his kingdom by his son was denied, and the remaining portion of his territory was finally annexed to the British Empire and added to the Asalu sub-division.

The N.C. Hills district was created in 1867, and shortly afterward, it was tagged to the Cachar district as its sub-division. In 1867, the Asalu sub-division of N.C. Hills district was abolished and apportioned into three parts among the Cachar, Khasi-Jaintia, and Nowgong districts. The district was placed under the management of the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar. Again, in 1880, this portion of the N.C. Hills district was constituted into a sub-division of the Cachar district with headquarters at Gunjung and was placed in charge of an Assistant Superintendent of Police. Nevertheless, in 1882, Sambhudhan, a Dimasa Kachari rebel, burnt the Gunjung headquarters, resulting in the death of the District Officer, and consequently, in 1895, the headquarters of the sub-division was again shifted to Haflong. Since then Haflong continues to be the district headquarters.

When Assam was made a province of its own, separating it from Bengal in 1874, it consisted of the following districts: Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Cachar, Khasi-Jayantiya and Naga Hills to which Sylhet and Lushai Hills were subsequently added. It is to be noted that Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, Khasi-Jayantiya Hills, and the North Cachar Hills sub-division in Cachar and Mikir Hills sub-division in Nowgong were designated Hill Tribal Areas and were classified as Scheduled Districts under the Scheduled District Act of 1874. This act empowered the government to declare the laws to be enforced in the Scheduled districts by notification in the Gazette. The inhabitants in the hill districts and sub-divisions were considered unsuited for the elaborate rules laid down in the Codes of Procedure and similar enactments and had to be governed in a more straightforward and personal manner. Thereby, in pursuance of the Frontier Tract Regulation 1880, unsuitable laws were to be barred in these hill districts, and enactments relating to Criminal Procedure, Stamps, Court Fees, Registration and Transfer of Property, and Civil Procedure Code were never extended to the hill areas. The rules framed under the Scheduled Districts Act prescribed a much simpler system of civil and criminal administration.

By the 1920s, some of the hill districts were given representation in the Legislative Assemblies. The Government of India Act 1935 declared some of the hill tracts as Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas. Among these, the North Cachar and Mikir Hills were declared Excluded Areas. In these Partially Excluded and Excluded Areas, the village tribunal panchayats were raised with elders and headed by Gaonburahs. For a long time, the jurisdiction of the High Court was not extended over the hilly areas, and the administration was purely through the executive branch. The Government of India Act 1935 provided the final pattern of administration in India on a federal basis. In 1937, the Governor of Assam issued detailed regulations for administering justice and police in the hilly areas of Assam. Civil suits were mostly tried by the local chiefs and tribunals in open durbars in the presence of the parties and at least three respectable witnesses. The hills peoples were, by tradition, not used to paying taxes on land. Thus, except for some civil stations like Shillong, Tura, and Haflong, the hill areas were exempted from registration, stamp, and court fees. Except for civil stations like Haflong, Tura, Shillong, and Diphu, non-tribals could not hold landed property (Bhattacharjee, 1975, p.427)

N.C. Hills was administered by the Governor of Assam independently from 1937 in accordance with the Government of India Act of 1935 till India attained Independence in 1947. The Sub-Divisional officer in Haflong exercised limited civil and judicial power. As noted earlier, the

Governor ran the administration at his discretion where the ministers had no constitutional right to advise him in connection with his administration, and no act of the federal or provincial legislature would apply to this area unless the Governor applied it with some exceptions or modifications.

The traditional institutions were not disturbed, and the tribes were allowed to feel that their hereditary chiefs still governed them. However, as noted by JB Bhattacharjee, the concept of a free man was utterly lost, and the chiefs were no better than government servants. According to Bhattacharjee, the 'excluding regulations' also created gaps between the people.

3.5 Independence, Sixth Schedule, and the Autonomous District

After the Independence from British colonial rule, the Constitution of India also accepted broadly the spirit of the Government of India Act, 1935 by providing each hill district an Autonomous District Council with a relatively sizeable autonomous power under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. (Hussain, 1987, p.1329) A common understanding of the creation of the Sixth Schedule is that it was meant to provide the hill peoples with a simple administrative set-up of their own, whereby they can safeguard their own customs, traditions, and culture and provide maximum autonomy in managing their tribal affairs. (Gassah, 1997) This was also due to the fact that, as Hussain (1987) further notes by Independence, a minuscule educated elite had emerged among the tribals, beneficiaries of modern education at the initiative of the Christian missionaries who worked in the hills during British colonial rule and after. These small elite were highly influential and became agent-provocateurs of social and political change among the denizens of the hills. They were very much conscious of their distinct identity and apprehensive about the motives of immigrant plainsmen. Some of their leaders even felt that India should recognize them not as part of their subordinates but as friends with sovereign power in their internal matters within their territories. (Hussain, 1987, p.1329)

When the sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly led by the first premier of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, was investigating the possible solution for the hill tribes of the Northeast, in the case of NC Hills, a tribal delegation consisting of representatives of different tribes led by Hamdhan Mohan Haflongbar and Desondao Hojai, both Dimasa Kacharis by ethnicity raised their concerns. The demands of this delegation were the preservation of the tribal interests to follow their own culture and traditions. They also emphasized the abolition of forced labor and beggary and total prohibition on the right of the non-tribals to purchase land

in the district. (Bhattacharjee, 1997, p. 160) In 1951, the N.C. Hills sub-division was separated from Cachar district to constitute a United Mikir (presently Karbi Anglong) and N.C. Hills district as an Administrative District' according to Clause 3 of the Assam United District of Mikir and N.C. Hills (Administration) Regulation, 1951. The new district was inaugurated on 29 April 1952.

The autonomous council was formed, constituting an Executive Committee. The Executive Committee had a Chief Executive Member (CEM) and other Executive Members (EM). The first Chief Executive Member of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council was C.H. Khotlang. There were 11 other Executive Members besides the CEM and four other nominated members. It is to be noted that the members of the Autonomous Councils elect the CEM, and the EMs are appointed by the Governor on the recommendations of the CEM.

The powers and functions of the autonomous council were broadly legislative, executive, financial, and judicial.

The legislative powers of the council constituted powers to make laws on allotment, occupation, use or setting apart of lands, forest lands (except reserved forest) for the purpose of agriculture, grazing lands, allotment for residential or other non-agricultural purposes likely to promote interests of the inhabitants of any village or town.

- Management of any forest not being the state reserve forests.
- Use of any canal or watercourse for irrigation purposes
- Regulation of jhum and other forms of shifting cultivation
- Establishment of town or village councils and determination of their powers and functions. Any other matter related to village or town administration
- Appointment or succession of chiefs and village headmen
- Inheritance of property, marriage and divorce, and social customs
- Money lending and trading by non-tribals

The executive powers of the council include powers to establish, construct, and manage primary schools, dispensaries, markets, cattle pounds, fisheries, and waterways. The council also can determine the medium of instruction in which elementary-level education can be imparted.

The financial powers of the council include the power to levy taxes. It can assess and collect land revenue, levy taxes on lands and buildings, tolls on persons residing in the district, tax on professions, trades, callings, and employments, tax on entry of goods into the markets for sale, tolls on passengers and goods carried on ferries, taxes on maintenance of schools, dispensaries, and roads, licenses and leases for prospecting or for extracting minerals.

The council's judicial powers include establishing village courts where both parties are tribals. It may appoint suitable persons to be appointed as members of the village courts. It may also appoint such officers as may be necessary for the execution of laws made by the district council. The council is the Court of Appeal for all suits and cases it can try. Other courts, barring the High Court and the Supreme Court of India, do not have jurisdiction over the suits and cases under the jurisdiction of the council. (Gassah, 1997)

3.6 Hill State Demand, APHLC, and Dima Hasao

Early on, after the formation of the autonomous district councils, some of the hill leaders in the different autonomous regions realized that the autonomy stipulated in the Indian Constitution was inadequate for their development. There were repeated demands for more autonomy and direct funding from the central government to strengthen the councils' power and functions. The demands continue to this date. In 1954, two years after autonomous district councils were introduced, a conference of the Chief Executive Members (CEMs) was held at Shillong on the 6th and 17th of June 1954, where the amendment of the Sixth Schedule was raised. The most vocal in his apprehensions on the Sixth Schedule was the CEM of Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Capt. Williamson A. Sangma pointed out the loopholes leading to interference in the council's day-to-day administration, leading to disruption. The other leaders attending the conference were also dissatisfied with the council's autonomy provisions. CH Khotlang, the first NC Hills Autonomous Council CEM, a Hmar by ethnicity, had also attended the CEMs conference and supported the Garo Hills and other CEMs.

The autonomy provisions of the councils have been questioned on several grounds by its leaders and scholars alike. The prominent bone of contention has been the dependence of the council on their state governments in matters of financial allotment and assistance. The hill districts' original sources of revenue were few, such as land revenue, taxes on trades and callings, forests, motor vehicles, entry of goods to markets and tax collection from shopkeepers,

and council court fees etc. These resources were relatively meager. One of the primary sources of finance for the councils was the share of royalty accruing each year from licenses and leases granted by the state government to extract minerals within the territory of the autonomous district. One of the complaints of the hill leaders was that a due share of the royalty and taxes were denied to the district, which led to the loss of revenue and autonomy. (Gassah, 1997)

In October 1954, the Assam Hills Tribal Leaders' Conference was held in Garo Hills. Although the CEM of the NC Hills was not present, JB Hagjer, an independent MLA, a Dimasa, attended the meeting. This conference unanimously called for a 'separate state for the Autonomous District of Assam' and decided to submit a memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) formed in 1953. However, the demand was rejected as the Commission found that there were differences of opinion among the leaders of the hill. The hill state demand was strong only in the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills, while the others, such as NC Hills, preferred the status quo. (Chaube, 2012, p. 120) However, the demand was not to die down. As pointed out in the earlier chapter, the Assam Official Language Act had triggered the hill leaders' apprehensions about staying in Assam. When PM Nehru visited Shillong in August 1955, a delegation of hill leaders met him to raise their concerns and ask why only the formation of an eastern hill state would allay their fears. Another conference was held at Aizawl in October 1955, where several hill leaders, including NC Hills, formed the Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU). The EITU started contesting elections alongside local parties such as the Khasi-Jaintia National Conference, Garo National Council, and the United Mizo Freedom Organisation (UMFO). The Congress was routed in the 1957 elections in the hills. This led to the central government trying several measures to woo the leadership, such as giving Cabinet charges to some leaders and representing each autonomous district with a Deputy Minister or Parliamentary Secretary in the government. (Ibid., p.123)

Thereafter, several attempts were made to unite all hill leaders and strengthen the hill state movement, but it ended in disarray until the middle of 1960 when the Language Riots' violence broke out, giving a real impetus for the hills to unite. In July 1960, the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was born, placing specific demands (discussed in Chapter 2). The conference was a platform for the All Hills organization, not a party. In September 1960, it issued an ultimatum to the CM BP Chaliha of Assam regarding the demand of the hill state. In October, there was a strike and massive demonstration in Shillong. From 16 to 18 November 1960 the third meeting of the APHLC was held in Haflong in NC Hills, and under the

chairmanship of JB Hagjer, a Congress MP, it was resolved that the Language Bill and its passage in the Assembly was clear proof of unfair attitude and firm determination of the Assamese community to avail themselves of undue advantages and thereby enhance their domination over the hills people and the rest of the people of the state of Assam.’(Ibid.,p.130) The APHLC demanded that the only solution for the aforementioned problem was the creation of a separate hill state. The movement was successful as it led to the formation of Meghalaya out of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills. The Constitution was amended in September 1969, which inserted Article 244 (A), which states the formation of an autonomous State comprising certain tribal areas in Assam and the creation of a local Legislature or Council of Ministers or both. (Hansaria, 2005) In December 1969, the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act 1969 was passed, which created the autonomous state of Meghalaya within Assam. N.C. Hills and the Mikir Hills were given an opportunity to exercise the option to join the proposed autonomous state of Meghalaya, to be constituted with the Khasi & Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills districts. During this period, the 4 MLAs of Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills, JB Hagjer, CS Teron, Terang, and DR Rongpi, submitted a representation to the Central Government demanding a separate political unit for their districts with equal status with other hill areas. However, the Centre did not give this request heed. Since the majority tribe Dimasas of NC Hills, and the majority tribe, Karbis of Mikir Hills, are Hinduised non-caste tribals, they feared domination by the Christian tribals of Meghalaya. The Christian tribes of Meghalaya, especially the Khasis and Jaintias, were also more advanced in terms of education than the tribes of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. Secondly, the well-entrenched Congress organization in both districts did not favor joining the autonomous state. (Hussain, 1987, p.1331) In the meantime, the political leaders of Assam persuaded the tribal leaders of N.C. Hills district not to join the proposed state and to remain with Assam and assured of all possible steps to be taken to safeguard the interest of the people of NC Hills and Mikir Hills. On 2 February 1970, N.C. Hills district was granted the status of a full-fledged Autonomous District. The then Chief Minister BC Bhagawati and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) leaders also visited Haflong. Consequently, the tribal leaders, relying on these assurances, opted to remain with Assam. (Datta, 1993) In 1971, the greater number of developmental functions were conferred on the Autonomous District councils. The departments thus transferred under the provisions of Paragraph 6(2) of the Sixth Schedule were:

1. Agriculture
2. Public Works

3. Flood Control and Irrigation
4. Soil Conservation
5. Animal Husbandry
6. Veterinary
7. Fisheries
8. Panchayats
9. Community Development
10. Cottage Industries
11. Roads and Buildings
12. Education (Primary and Middle)
13. Health and Family Planning
14. Public Health

Along with these departments, their personnel and finance were also placed under the control of the council with effect from 1 June 1970. However, they remained the servants of the state government and responsible to the state government for implementing schemes transferred to the district council. (Gassah, 1997)

The NCHAC also acquired secretarial status with two Principal Secretaries and a few more secretaries to assist the administration. One of the positions is for the ‘normal’ or original subjects or departments of the council, and the second is for the newly entrusted subjects or, as it came to be known, the ‘transferred’ subjects.

3.7 Assam Accord and its Impact on the Hills

The initial enthusiasm for the transferred subjects and schemes did not last, and the leaders of North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills soon united in 1973 to demand separation from Assam. A conference of the leadership of the two hill districts was held at Diphu on 18 February 1973, and the resolution adopted by the Action Committee thus formed was to spearhead the demand for separation from Assam. In a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India in June 1973, the Action Committee based its demand on its geographical and historical background, the backwardness of the peoples in the two districts, the imposition of Assamese threatening tribal languages and culture, their abundant natural resources which had the potential to make the districts self-sufficient and separation feasible. The committee particularly emphasized the

lack of autonomy despite the recent transfer of subjects, denying them the fulfillment of their political aspirations. The memorandum stated that the schemes continued to be administered by the officers from the state government as before. It was stated that too many terms and conditions were laid down, making the procedures highly tedious. As a result, neither the powers nor the scope of development were actually enhanced. (Dutta, 1993) Indeed, the 1970 arrangement was an administrative solution and not constitutional; hence, the arrangements remained half-baked. In the meantime, the people in the hills and its leaders started feeling betrayed and harboring resentment towards the state government.

In the 1980s, the anti-foreigner Assam Agitation had begun in the Brahmaputra Valley. The response to the movement from the leaders of North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) was doubtful and apprehensive. The leadership declared that the agitation was a threat to the linguistic minority communities, including the tribal people of the hill districts, as the leaders of the agitation All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) had openly claimed to wipe out the languages and cultures of minorities as well as tribes. Their declarations in their charter of demands and public statements to remove reservations and other privileges enjoyed by the SC and ST students made the leaders of the hill further apprehensive. (Dutta, 1993) Furthermore, the unrest in the Brahmaputra Valley affected the functioning of the administration and educational activities in the hills despite not being part of the agitation. During the disruption of the Lok Sabha elections in 1980 in the Brahmaputra Valley, two nominations were filed for the Reserved Parliamentary constituency, signaling a lack of participation in the agitation of the Brahmaputra Valley.

In 1982, the leaders further reiterated their demand for separation from Assam. The Assam Movement had effectively entrenched the idea of a separate state as the only solution to the problems of the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong (erstwhile Mikir Hills). At this time, the leaders of the districts felt that the other hill districts of the region, particularly Meghalaya as well as Nagaland and Mizoram, had fulfilled their political desire for autonomy after separation. They could enjoy the fruits of their natural resources and develop their areas according to their genius, the earliest objective of the Sixth Schedule. The leaders added that despite their non-participation, the Assam Movement had led to great losses for the districts. The academic atmosphere remained uncertain while commodity prices had soared painfully. The developmental works in the districts had retarded, leading to significant impediments on districts already reeling under backwardness, segregation, and lack of communication. (Ibid)

The medium of instruction debacle created further fear in tribal communities of the districts who thought that the Assam Movement leadership if it came to power, would lead to the ruin of their languages and cultures. After the Language Riots, medium of instruction controversy had ebbed through the three-language formula. However, the Secondary Board of Education's (SEBA) imposition of the Assamese language as a compulsory language in all non-Assamese secondary schools again created doubts in the minds of the people of the hill districts. The North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong had long been demanding to join Northeast Hill University (NEHU) as the learners desired to study in English and Hindi. However, the Government of Assam had turned down this request from the two district councils. (Ibid.) In 1985, the Assam Accord was signed, and the agitation ended with leaders of the Asom Gana Parishad forming the government in the state. However, the movement and the ensuing political developments had created distrust and fear, furthering the demands for autonomy and separation from Assam in the hills.

3.8 Formation of ASDC and Wave of Youth Activism

In 1986, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), a political organization soon to transform into a regional party, whose sole demand was to create an autonomous state to safeguard the language, culture, and tradition of the hill people of Assam. Earlier, the Action Committee of the Mikir Hills and N.C. Hills Leaders Conference had submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister in June 1973, demanding separation from Assam as per Article 244 (A) of the Indian Constitution and the formation of an independent state. The ASDC reiterated this demand, creating a new momentum that would change the hills' politics forever. The ASDC was founded in Karbi Anglong, a joint venture of Karbi Students' Association (KSA), People's Democratic Forum (PDF)- a regional party founded in 1985 with close association with the radical Left movement, Karbi Cultural Society, Karbi Anglong Dimasa Youth Association, and several other tribal youth groups of Karbi Anglong.

The ASDC waged a long popular movement beginning in Karbi Anglong and soon making entry into Dima Hasao. It provided a unified platform for the Hills people to rally around their social, political, and economic problems and project them on a greater scale. The movement also differed from the earlier mode of prayers and petitions by council leadership. This was a popular movement uniting different tribes for a singular cause. The articulate young leadership and their ideas and views also went a long way in instilling a sense of the need for authentic

autonomy and self-determination among the masses, which was absent earlier in a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister on 18 May 1987 by ASDC and KSA, the young leaders made a strong case for implementing 244 (A) and creating an autonomous state comprising Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The memorandum presented the demography and history of the two hills as peoples with a separate and unique culture from the Assam plains. It also touches upon the issue of non-tribal immigration, stating that the tribal population in the twin districts at the time of their creation was 65.96%, while by 1985, it had declined to 58%. (Datta, 1993) The memorandum also states that the hills were always sovereign entities, with Karbi Anglong under Karbi chiefs and North Cachar under the Kachari king. It emphasized the colonial government's different policies and recommendations, such as the Scheduled Districts and Simon Commission's White Paper Recommendations of 1933, as recognitions of the unique culture of the hills and its people and the need for safeguarding them by granting political rights of self-determination. The Constituent Assembly debates on the Sixth Schedule were also cited to emphasize the real purpose of the Sixth Schedule, which is that of 'protecting the interests, the rights and the privileges of the tribals and also implicitly recognizing the historical right of the tribals for self-government.' (Ibid.) Thus, for the ASDC, the hill districts' being part of Assam was a 'costly historical blunder.' The relation between the hills and plains was only that of 'obligatory convenience,' the plains folk practiced a sense of superiority, looking down on the hills peoples as inferior. Additionally, the centre and the mainstream also harbored such attitudes and that the tribes did not need any patronizing but only self-determination, which would resolve the nation's predicament. The memorandum also expressed their dismay at the new state government in Assam under Asom Gana Parishad, which the ASDC and KSA accused of continuing the policy of 'Assamisation.'

The memorandum also highlighted the issue of an overflow of job seekers, contractors, and businessmen into the hills, with over 90% government job employees and 95% contractors and businessmen from the plains, which deprived the less educated local populace. It was alleged that in job appointments and contract allotments within the districts, the people of the plains were given preference by the state government. Furthermore, it stated that the state government exploited natural resources indiscriminately, which brought misery to the hill peoples. The exploitation of bamboo, timber, coal, and limestone in the hills as well as the newly introduced tea industry, were hurting the natives. While the resources were being drained, no economic benefit reached the people. The demography of the district was also changing rapidly with few safeguards despite the Sixth Schedule provisions. Land acquisition by the state government in

the name of plantation and reserved forest was also seen as a ploy to reduce the autonomy provisions. Finally, the main bone of contention concerning financial autonomy, as given in Article 275 of the Indian Constitution, is that the Central government sanctions annual grant-in-aid for developmental schemes of the areas. The funds are first received by the state government, which also plans the schemes, and then its officers implement them, reducing the councils into 'dignified cashiers.' Delays in channeling the funds, which depended on the political mood of the councils vis-a-vis the state government's politics, also created troubles and hurdles impinging on the autonomy of the council.

The ASDC made inroads into the Dima Hasao district in the early 1990s. Around May 1993, the ASDC's influence and organization markedly expanded in Dima Hasao, where Congress was still in power in the district council. The hitherto pro-Congress North Cachar Hills Students Federation (NCHSF) transformed into a powerful third wing alongside the ASDC-KSA combine (Bhattacharya, 1993). The ASDC waged almost a decade-long popular movement and successfully formed government at the council levels, winning elections at the Assembly and Parliamentary levels and defeating Congress. By this time, the Congress government realized the seriousness of the movement and invited ASDC and other organizations for talks to resolve the issue.

Several rounds of protracted discussions ensued among the ASDC, Assam government, and Union government. On 1 April 1995, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between then CM of Assam Hiteswar Saikia and representatives of ASDC, KSA, North Cachar Hills Students' Federation, and Dimasa Students' Union. An amendment of the Sixth Schedule and higher political status was agreed upon. The demand for an autonomous state as envisaged by the movement was rejected. The memorandum was a compromise forced on the leadership through political force. Additionally, the consequent amendment and the Office Memorandum that followed did not do justice to the agreements made in the MoU. Despite these developments, the demands for autonomy would fail to die down, leading to a more violent force through the following ethnic homeland demands.

3.9 Shift Towards Demands for Ethnic Homelands and Insurgency

The Northeast region was already in the grip of different insurgent movements, and it was only about time that the socio-economic and political problems in Dima Hasao would turn towards

armed rebellion. It is to be noted that the Naga insurgency movement was present in the district of Dima Hasao, given the presence of the Naga population in Dima Hasao. The Nagalim map included several districts of Assam, one being Dima Hasao, which had been a matter of concern, especially for the Dimasa tribe of the district. The beginning of ethnic homeland demands would soon lead to fissures among the different tribes and ethnicities. The unified platform of resistance of the times of the APHLC or the ASDC would break down and soon lead to violent inter-ethnic conflicts and bloodshed.

The Dimasa National Security Force(DNSF) was formed in 1990 as an armed opposition against the government consisting of youth and even former student leaders who were disgruntled with the government due to its callous attitude toward the aspirations of the Dimasa people. The Dimasas had a strong sense of national identity, which had emerged from a small intelligentsia during the colonial era. By the 1970s and 80s, the Dimasa population in North Cachar hills and scattered population in Dimapur, Nagaon, and Cachar were mobilizing culturally and demanding the preservation of the Dimasa language, archaeological heritage of the Dimasa, especially the ruins of the Kachari kings' palaces and historical monuments at Maibang and Dimapur. The tribal delegation, which had represented the Bordoloi committee under H. Haflongbar and D. Hojai, both Dimasa, had also demanded that all Dimasa-inhabited areas be included in a single administrative unit. However, this was not to be, but it would capture the imagination of future movements. 1991, the All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU) was formed, unifying different Dimasa bodies in Dimapur, Nagaon, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills, Cachar and Karimganj. The ADSU began strongly arguing for the Dimasa people and their safeguards in all these different districts. The demand for the Dimaraji (a state of the Dimasas) started taking shape, a separate state for the Dimasa people, which was to be carved out of the Dimasa-inhabited regions. (ADSU, 2007)

The DNSF became defunct within two to three years of formation when their efforts were crushed by the state security forces. (Saikia, 2011) Several of its leaders surrendered, but few did not. They rather re-organized to form the Dima Haram Daogah (DHD). Following many deliberations within the Dimasa leadership, Jewel Gorlosa, formerly of DNSF, and other student leaders such as Dilip Nunisa, Pranab Nunisa, and others decided to rejuvenate the rebel organizations and absorb more young members into the DHD. (Ibid.) The primary demand of the DHD was the formation of the Dimasa homeland or Dimaraji. The demand for the Dimasa homeland had the tacit support of the Dimasa people despite the insurgent nature of the primary

flag bearers of this demand. The Dimaraji Demand Revival Committee (DRDC) was formed in 1994, a civil society group that also raised voices for the demand of Dimaraji through petitions, protest rallies, and *dharnas*. The DRDC and ADSU submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India in 1996 which demanded the ‘revival’ of a full-fledged Dimaraji state which would be carved out of the territories inhabited by the Dimasas in Cachar, Nagaon, Karbi Anglong, areas of Dhansiri-per and Dimapur in Nagaland, and the entire area of North Cachar Hills. The memorandum also demanded an autonomous council for the Dimasas (known therein as Thangmi Barman) in the Karimganj district of Assam. A demand for a reserved seat for ST(H) in the Lok Sabha for the North Cachar hills was also placed. (ADSU, 2022)

The DHD reiterated the demands in line with the ones made by ADSU and DRDC. It was involved in several armed activities, primarily in the North Cachar Hills district. Although the group was numerically small, with a cadre base of barely a few hundred members, the rebel group was better armed than its predecessor significantly due to material aid received from the National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM). The state also launched its forces against the rebels through military and para-military forces. The common people were often caught in the crossfire and had to face atrocities from both the Indian armed forces as well as the rebels. Dimasa student body All Dimasa Students’ Union (ADSU) called for a 24-hour ‘Dimaraji Bandh’ on 8 July 2002 to protest the atrocities of the armed forces against the common people in the name of fighting the insurgents. The insurgents also soon lost enthusiasm, and by early 2000, differences between the top leadership of the militant outfit were out in the open. In 2003, the DHD disintegrated into two different militant outfits. Jewel Gorlosa, who had earlier been accused of being involved in anti-DHD activities, formed his group under the banner of ‘Black Widows’ or DHD (J) on 31 March 2003. The DHD, now DHD (D), signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government of India in 2003. The DHD (J) faction would be in force until June 2009.

The primary demand of the DHD was the establishment of a Dimasa state. This demand is not just for an autonomous state but a separate identitarian state whereby the dispossessed Dimasa can assert their identity in the public space. The DHD and its faction DHD(J) finally rested their arms in 2013, but not before ethnic violence between Dimasa and Hmars (2003), Kuki-Karbi (2003), Dimasa Karbi conflict (2005) and Dimasa Naga conflict (2009).

3.10 Cease Fire, Inter-Ethnic Conflict and Peace

Following the cease-fire agreement 2003 between the government and DHD (D), the group established its designated camps in different parts of Karbi Anglong, North Cachar, and Cachar. In 2004, this group submitted another memorandum to the then Home Minister Shivraj Patil and reiterated the demand for Dimaraji state in a highly critical tone. (2004) The Dimasa civil society groups welcomed the cease-fire agreement, and organisations such as Dimasa Khunang Hosom, Dimasa Mahila Samaj, ADSU, and DRDC came forward in peaceful demonstrations supporting the Dimaraj demand. In 2005, another memorandum was submitted to the Home Minister, where 14 organisations of tribals as well as non-tribals had signed, demanding the formation of the Dimaraji state. However, the long-drawn process of the peace talks had made the people restive, especially the DHD cadres (D). Meanwhile, factional killings between the DHD (D) and DHD (J) created panic, and several cadres had been killed. Extortion, killing, and kidnappings of local Dimasas and government officials were also on the rise. (Saikia, 2011) The DHD had been engaging in attacks on non-Dimasa civilians during 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 at many places in Udarbond (Cachar), Lumding (Nagaon), Balmul and Multhajao (in North Cachar). Soon, it would lead to inter-ethnic clashes and violence. On 5 March 2003, DHD extremists launched a massive and sporadic attack on two Hmar villages in NC Hills and threatened them to leave the areas. The trigger of these incidents lay in the kidnapping of three DHD rebels by NSCN(I-M) with the assistance of the Hmar People's Conference- Democratic (HPC-D) in February 2003. In the post ceasefire period, the DHD was allowed to set up four designated camps, as stated earlier. Three DHD cadres were looking for a suitable place in the Ditokcherra area of the Cachar district to set up one of such camps from where suspected HPC(D) militants kidnapped them. (Phukan Commission Report, p. 25). It is alleged that the HPC(D) was backed by the NSCN(IM). (Ibid. p.22) This led to retaliatory action against the Hmars by the DHD, which then snowballed into a gruesome ethnic conflict that killed hundreds and displaced thousands in Dima Hasao, as well as the Cachar district. On 31 March 2003, armed Hmar groups of the HPC-D attacked a Dimasa village with guns and machetes. The Dimasas struck back on 1 April near Mastul in the Cachar district. (Saikia, 2011) The conflict ended by 2004 but not before the Hmar People's Union demanded a separate administrative unit for the Hmars and other indigenous minority tribes of the district, such as the Kukis, Biates, Hrangkhols, Khelmas, Vaipheis etc, under the Sixth Schedule. The period also saw conflict between rebel groups of the Karbis and Kukis in Karbi Anglong, between the Karbis and Dimasas again in Karbi Anglong, and between the Dimasas and Nagas

in North Cachar would sour relations between the communities also. In the 2009 inter-ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the Dimasas, nearly 63 people belonging to both communities were killed. The destruction of properties of villagers also accompanied the killings. Houses were burnt down by suspected DHD and NSCN (IM) militants. The root of the clashes, analysts argue, lay in the imposition of an ethnic policy taken up by the North Cachar Hills council authority on behalf of the majority Dimasas at the cost of the other tribes.

In 2009, Jewel Gorlosa, DHD (J) leader, was arrested in Bangalore. The nexus between the autonomous council and the militants also came to light during this time. The insurgent groups and their growth in the district are also tied to rising malpractice in the autonomous council. The then CEM of the North Cachar Hills council, Mohet Hojai, former CEM Depolal Hojai, and Social Welfare Department's Joint Director RH Khan were also arrested for allegedly having links with the DHD (J) and supporting Gorlosa with financial assistance. The media was flush with reports of the '1000 crore scam' of money that was meant for developmental schemes being siphoned off. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe that followed revealed that the DHD (J) had used NCHAC representatives and government officials to siphon off crores of rupees through hawala channels.

Despite such a tense inter-ethnic environment and with the council in disarray, in April 2010, the Tarun Gogoi-led coalition government in Assam resolved to rename the North Cachar Hills district Dima Hasao district, which stands for 'Dimasa homeland' in the Dimasa language. This was communicated in a low-key official communique. Interestingly, both DHD and DHD(J) decried the move by the state government, calling it a case of misplaced priorities. (The Telegraph, 4 April, 2010)) This act has created great discontent among the non-Dimasa groups in the district, who felt their language and culture would be threatened by Dimasa's domination again. This has led to the demands for bifurcation of the district between the Dimasa and non-Dimasa. The sudden renaming, which was a face-saving move by the government after it failed to contain the violence in the district and corruption charges, saw the beginning of the Indigenous People's Forum (IPF), a group representing 18 non-Dimasa tribal communities who began demanding bifurcation of the district. (Ibid.)

In 2012, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the Union Government, the Government of Assam, and the DHD factions.

- The council would be renamed Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council.

- The district is to be re-organised into three administrative units for ease of administration and development
- Increasing the number of members in the council applicable from subsequent election
- The DHATC election would be conducted by the State Election Commission
- Additional number of subjects to be transferred
- Development councils and packages for Dimasas living outside Dima Hasao (to be decided by state government) such as Hojai, Barman for protection of culture, and heritage
- The Chief and Deputy Chief of the DHATC to have equal status as Cabinet Minister and other executive council members equivalent to the Minister of State for protocol purposes within the jurisdiction of the DHATC. Similarly, the Speaker and Deputy shall be equivalent to the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly.
- The DHATC authority will have authority over the personnel of the transferred subjects.
- The DHATC authority is to be competent to make appointments of posts in accordance with the rules of appointment made by the Governor of Assam. However, it would not cover the posts where the recruitment is made on the recommendation of the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC)

The DHD factions, as per the settlement, were to dissolve within a period of six months, and the state government would provide full support for their rehabilitation. Criminal cases registered against the cadres would be revoked, and crimes of a particularly heinous nature would be reviewed case by case by the state government. Several developmental packages and support were mentioned. A special economic package of Rs. 200 crore (40 crore per annum) over and above the Plan fund over the next five years would be disbursed. Funds would be provided through the state government for specific monitorable projects through the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources. (MoS, 2012)

Following this, which was hailed as a significant victory for the government, specifically the state government, was one that would usher in an era of peace and development in the district. In 2013, the 11th autonomous council elections were held in the district. Of the 28 constituencies, nine were contested and won by former insurgents of the DHD. These seats were contested independently. The Indigenous People's Forum also won 4 seats under the banner of the Indigenous People's Party. Presently, the 12th Autonomous Council is in place,

and its chief executive member and several executive members are former rebels who belonged to the DHD.

Since the 2000s, the internal security issue arising out of insurgency has abated dramatically. Most rebel groups are in talks with the government; several have disbanded to sign peace accords. They have been rehabilitated in society and, as seen in the case of Dima Hasao, have become part of the political establishment. The response of the public to this development is mixed and often muted. While the non-Dimasa communities have become more vocal in their demand for bifurcation, often accusing the current political establishment in the council of discriminating against the non-Dimasa tribes, there are sections among the Dimasa who are critical of ex-insurgents' capacity to run the administration. There are accusations against the current establishment of being all too eager to please the state and central government and willingly participating in diluting the Sixth Schedule provisions.

3.11 Elections in Dima Hasao: A Political System in Turmoil

In 1952, as per the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, the North Cachar Hills district and Mikir Hills district council were created. On 29 April 1952, the then-chief minister of Assam, Bishnuram Medhi, inaugurated the District Council. The council consisted of 16 members. Twelve members were elected, and the Governor nominated four new members. Twelve constituencies were demarcated to elect these 12 members. In June 1952, CH Khotlang was elected as the Chief Executive Member, who further selected Sonaram Thaosen and JB Hagjer as Executive Members.

Table 3.5: Members of the First North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC)

Sl no	Name of the member	Name of constituency
1	C.H. Khotlang	Khuonglong
2	Sonaram Thaosen	Langting
3	Debur Thaosen	Hajadisa

4	Dinomoni Kemprai	Gunjung
5	Inchekambe Jeme	Laisong
6	Kumba Kumar Hojai	Harangajao
7	T.K. Thaodou	Mahur
8	Hiranmoi Das Barman	Haflong
9	Bangkrenng Engty	Garampani
10	Shyamchand Hojai	Maibang
11	Raijon Chandra Langthasa	Kalachand
12	C.T. Thanga	Khampai

Source: Table prepared by information retrieved by author from field study

In the 2nd Autonomous Council election of 1957, the People's Union Party came to power. The newly formed District Council elected PC Langthasa as Chief Executive Member. He selected Haulung Hmar and Hori Mohan Das Barman as Executive Members. The next council election was held in 1962. A few months before the elections, Sonaram Thaosen, a council member, tabled a no-confidence motion against the PC Langthasa-led executive committee. However, following the resignations of the Chairman and Deputy Chairman, no one was to preside over the meeting called to consider the no-confidence motion on 1 January 1962. Thereafter, PC Langthasa resigned from the post, which created more confusion. The situation compelled the Governor to appoint I. Jeme as Chairperson. In the following election, SR Thaosen was elected as Chief Executive Member. A coalition was formed between the People's Union Party and the Indian National Congress. GC Langthasa of Congress and Lalvuona Hmar of the People's Union Party were selected as executive members. The fourth Autonomous council election was held in 1968, when the strength of the council was increased from 16 to 24. The elected members met on 7 August 1968 and elected Lalvuona as Chairman and Sar Milik as Deputy Chairman. RC Langthasa was elected as CEM. However, he resigned from office in 1971, and GC Langthasa was unanimously elected. In 1970, the twin districts were bifurcated into two

districts, and the fifth council elections were held in 1973. Accordingly, the North Cachar Hills sub-division was declared a full-fledged district. As noted in the chapter earlier, this had to do with the growing demands of the Hill State leaders, of which the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills were also part. In the sixth council elections of 1980, the number of constituencies was increased to 23. KK Hojai was elected CEM on 26 March 1980. After three consequent changes in the post of Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, in July 1983, the CEM Hojai resigned. Thereafter, the administration was taken over by the Governor. The Governor summoned another session in September 1983 when GC Hojai was elected as CEM. In April 1986, the Governor superseded the GC Hojai-led council government on allegations of maladministration and seized all powers from the EMs and the Chairperson. The Governor summoned the session in May 1986 when Pabitra Kemprai was elected CEM. The seventh council elections were held in November 1987 and had several hiccups before completion of the full term. These interruptions had almost become a norm in the council government. In June 1991, the then CEM GC Langthasa was inducted as Cabinet Minister in the then Congress-led Hiteswar Saikia government. Langthasa resigned, and P. Kemprai was elected as CEM. However, he was removed after a no-confidence motion in July 1994. SC Hojai was elected as CEM next, but he had to resign as he could appoint no EMs even one month after his appointment. This led to P. Kemprai's return as CEM in November 1994, but was removed again in October 1995 by a no-confidence motion. This disturbing trend haunted the autonomous council and created great instability and disorder in its administration. It is observed herewith that the electioneering in the district council was a matter of individual power contestation to grab the seat of Chief Executive Member and Executive Members. The council elections were not necessarily based on party politics with ideological contestation, nor did the elections have identitarian solid bearings. It is to be noted that after the first CEM who was Hmar by ethnicity, all other CEMs thereafter and a greater number of EMs have been from the Dimasa community. This aspect of the political representation in the council would become a bone of contention, especially after the rise of the ethnic homeland politics in the district.

With the rise of militancy in the district, the council leadership also started getting involved in rebel activities. There were accusations of several political leaders using rebel groups to threaten opposition leaders, to threaten voters, and for use in booth capturing. Accusations of siphoning of funds by some council leaders to fund rebel groups were also being made. During the term of the ninth autonomous council, the CEM Purnendu Langthasa and EM Nindu Langthasa were assassinated by DHD rebels on 4 June 2007 during the election campaign.

Deputy Chairman Ajit Bodo was also killed during the same time, and his body was found the same day. However, the tenth council election was held without interruption, where Depolal Hojai elected CEM. This election was, however, countermanded due to the killing of Congress (I) candidate D. Hmar by militants, and later a bye-poll was held in April 2008. Later, Mohet Hojai was elected as CEM of the autonomous council. But he was arrested in May 2009 in connection with the financial scam where developmental funds of the council were alleged to have been diverted to the DHD rebels. The 11th council elections were held in June 2013. This was after the 2012 Memorandum of Settlement that was signed between the DHD rebels and the government. A total of 28 constituencies went for elections. The results were as follows:

Table: 3.6 MACs elected in 11th NCHAC Elections held in 2013

Name of Constituency	Winner	Political Party
Harangajao	Amendu Hojai	Dima Hasao Dal(DHD)
Jinam	L Hmar	INC
Borail	Athong Lienthang	Indigenous Peoples Party (IPP)
Hangrum	I Pame	IPP
Langting	Debojeet Thaosen	INC
Laisong	P Riame	INC
Hajadisa	T Thaosen	DHD
Jatinga	Fleming Rupsi	INC
Garampani	Denis Teron	Independent (IND)
Kharthong	Lazosua Biate	IND
Hadingma	Debojit Bathari	DHD (J)
Dihamlai	H Kuame	IND
Mahur	K Hmar	IPP
Lower Kharthong	N Hmar	INC
Maibang East	Subrata Thaosen	IND
Dolong	S Hrangkhol	IND
Diger	S Changsan	INC
Semkhor	Ranu Langthasa	INC
Kalachand	Mihir Gorlosa (Jewel Gorlosa)	IND

Diyungmukh	Niranjan Hojai	DHD (J)
Dauthuhaja	Nirmal Langthasa	INC
Wajao	Biswajit Daulaguphu	IND
Hathikali	Kulendra Daulagupu	INC
Haflong	Lhima Keivom	IPP
Gunjung	Prakanta Warisa	INC
Dehangi	Debolal Gorlosa	IND
Hamri	Debolal Gorlosa	-
Maibang West	Debo Prasad Hojai	-

Source: nchaci.in Additional Data inputs by the author from the field study

Debojeet Thaosen of the INC was elected CEM, and the Congress formed the government when 5 Independent candidates joined Congress. In 2014, the BJP came to power at the Centre, and political churnings in Assam had also begun with Assembly elections approaching in 2016. In October 2015, it appeared that 18 of the 28 elected members had joined BJP. Subrata Thaosen joined the BJP party on 1 April, 2014. He was followed by six other Independents - Debolal Gorlosa, Niranjan Hojai, Amendu Hojai, Thaisodao Thaosen, Biswajit Daulagupu and Athong Lienthang. Then, five EMs of the Council belonging to the Congress left the party, such as Prakanta Warisa, Fleming Rupsi Shylla, Laltlansang Hmar, Ranu Langthasa and Suanthangjem Hrangkhoh and four MACs like Mihir Gorlosa, Khawvelthang Hmar, Ihuing Pame and Hlima Keivom joined the BJP on 9 October at the state party office in Guwahati. Following this, the BJP council members proved themselves to be the majority. The ruling Congress was reduced to a minority with only 11 members. The Chief Executive Members Debojeet Thaosen and Dy. Chairman Tushar Kanti Deb tendered resignation following their Congress party being reduced to a minority in the council, which Chairman Ngamrothang Hmar announced in the session. Finally, Niranjan Hojai was elected CEM on 24 October of the council after much deliberation mediated by Governor PB Acharya. However, in May 2017, the National Investigating Agency convicted the CEM Niranjan Hojai, Jewel Gorlosa, and others of diverting funds from the NCHAC to fund terror groups to wage war against the state. They were immediately suspended from BJP and are currently serving life sentences. 2016 Debolal Gorlosa, former DHD (J) and now in BJP, was elected CEM. Debolal Gorlosa was elected CEM a second time in January 2019 in the 12th council elections. This time, the BJP had won 19 seats, two by Congress, one by AGP, and six by Independent candidates. In 2016,

the BJP also won the single Assembly seat in the district Haflong (ST), which was again repeated in 2019.

3.12 Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that a personal brand of politics took center stage from the beginning of council elections. The district's intelligentsia and the political class could do little to educate the masses about the ideological politics of modern institutions in an unhealthy political system. The educational backwardness and impoverished population also could hardly participate in a meaningful way in the electoral politics of the district council, which continues to be a problem to date. Additionally, the interference of the state government also significantly marred the functioning of the NCHAC. However, the intelligentsia and the political elite's engagement with ideas of autonomy and separate states increased. On the other hand, interethnic conflict also sharpened electoral contestation on ethnic lines. In 2012, after the MoS that was signed between the DHD, DHD (J) and the Government of India and Government of Assam, the former rebels entered mainstream society again. The current political elite in the district are the former rebels. Thus, in seven decades the district's chequered history has seen great turmoil and disturbance, added to its backwardness and remoteness.

Notes:

1. The North Cachar Hills district was renamed in 2010 to Dima Hasao district as per the conditions of the Memorandum of Understanding, a tripartite agreement signed between the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), Government of Assam and the Government of India signed in 2003. The names Dima Hasao and North Cachar Hills will be used interchangeably in the study. However, only the nomenclature North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council will be used to signify the autonomous council in Dima Hasao to lessen confusion.

Chapter IV

BJP's Mobilisation Strategy in Dima Hasao

4.1 Introduction

The upsurge in BJP's electoral fortunes in Dima Hasao district is very recent, as seen in the case of Assam and other states in Northeast India. Winning the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, followed by the 2016 Assembly elections, and forming the government for the first time ensured the party's spread even in districts where it had no presence earlier. As seen in the previous chapter, the status of party politics in the Dima Hasao district remained shaky and unhealthy at best, with rampant defections leading to a change of leadership and parties within a few months. The political scenario was also highly vitiated due to decades-long insurgency demanding separate ethnic homelands followed by inter-ethnic conflict. Additionally, despite the provision of the Sixth Schedule and the district's peripheral status in the state's politics, the severe underdevelopment of the district made BJP's status uncertain. However, since 2015, the BJP has not only made space for itself in the electoral arena in the district but has also ousted all opposition. The electoral rise of the party in the district can be said to be spectacular. This chapter will focus on the methods and strategies the BJP employed to gain power in the district in such a short period. Due to the paucity of academic work focusing particularly on the district's electoral scenario, this chapter has been mainly constructed based on the field study. The contents and observations included in this chapter come from the author's collections of newspaper articles, social media information, and the interviews of party workers, leaders, activists, civil society members, and denizens of the district. The chapter is divided into the mobilization tactics of the BJP in the district, issues highlighted by the BJP, and particular strategies undertaken by party functionaries during elections. The chapter will also look into the party's modus operandi in a chronological manner, beginning from the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections, 2016 Assembly Elections, 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, 2019 North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) elections, and 2021 Assembly Elections. It is to be noted, however, that the primary focus will only be the 2019 NCHAC elections, followed by the 2016 and 2021 Assembly elections, which were both remarkable due to not just being spectacular victories for BJP but also due to vibrant campaigns by independent and opposition party candidates. Additionally, these two elections were also game-changers for the BJP, leading to the establishment and further entrenchment of the party in the district.

4.2 What entails Political Mobilisation?

Karl Deutsch has defined social mobilization as a process in which old social, economic, and psychological commitments are eroded or broken, and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior. (Deutsch, 1961) This uprooting and erosion occurs, Deutsch suggests, with urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization. He views these changes as the necessary prior conditions for political mobilization, which involves the induction of the socially uprooted into stable, new patterns of behavior and commitment. Among the most important results of the process of political mobilization are the increases in the number and membership of political and quasi-political organizations, the scope and exercise of the franchise, and the policy role and policy impact of the national government. (Cameron, 1974)

Added to this, Cameron(1974) says that political parties play an instrumental role in the mobilization efforts since it was the action of the party, as historically seen in many cases, rather than social strains per se, which laid the basis for the party's success. He states the following processes critical to political mobilization.

- i. The self-promotional activities of the mobilizing agent are critical in determining the success or failure of a mobilizational effort. In particular, the degree to which its organization and ideology are adapted to local situational factors determines its success in penetrating the existing social infrastructure.
- ii. Mobilization efforts, more often than not, represent the resistance of groups that believe that public policy discriminates against them and that they are peripheral to its formation.
- iii. The critical, independent variable that gives rise to mobilization efforts involves not the patterns of social cleavage and social change per se but, rather, the context of public policy. In other words, it is in the structures, processes, and outputs of national policy that one must look for an explanation of why mobilization first occurs.

As suggested by Cameron, the emphasis in this chapter will be on the party as the agent of mobilization superseding other social forms of organization, be it religious, language, caste, or ethnicity. We will look into the party's structure and organization in the district and its methods

of mobilization at the local level, especially during and after the elections of 2016, 2019, and 2021.

4.3 BJP's Entry in Dima Hasao's Electoral Politics: Trials and Errors

The BJP was formed in 1997 when it had only one member, as mentioned earlier. (Longkumer, 2019, p. 287) It entered the electoral arena of the Dima Hasao district in 1998. The party contested elections in the district in 1998 at the Lok Sabha elections from the joint constituency of the two hill districts Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, the Autonomous District (ST) constituency. The BJP's lone candidate, Pabitra Kemprai, the party's founding member in the district, was the only candidate from the district, while the other candidates from the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Congress and two Independent candidates were from the Karbi Anglong district. He polled 46,977 votes, a total of 11.6% votes. The ASDC candidate, Dr. Jayanta Rongpi, won the elections, and this was ASDC's third consecutive win after 1991 and 1996. Anyhow, 1998 marks the beginning of BJP's innings in the Dima Hasao electoral scenario with a well-known face like Pabitra Kemprai, who was a former EM and CEM. The party at this stage had very little presence in both districts, yet its promise and potential can be gauged from the fact that the party could attract a well-known face to counter heavyweights of Congress and ASDC. During the 2001 NCHAC elections, which was the 9th council elections, BJP's visibility in the council elections was minimal. But the party made a splash in the electoral arena by the next council elections. The 10th NCHAC elections were held in November and December of 2007. The ASDC had won 12 seats, BJP 9, and Congress 3, and the government was formed with an alliance between ASDC and BJP. Depolal Hojai was elected as the Chief Executive Member. However, a year later, the members of both BJP and ASDC joined Congress, and the party was able to capture power. Depolal Hojai was voted out, and Mohet Hojai took over as CEM in January 2009. His tenure did not last long either. As noted in the earlier chapter, Hojai was arrested in connection with misappropriation of funds, and on June 12, 2009, the Governor of Assam assumed all the powers and functions of the Council and a bureaucrat, Md. Alauddin was appointed the administrator to exercise all the functions and powers exercised by the Council and its Executive Committee, CEM, Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, and Executive Members (Goswami, 2012). During this time, the law and order situation in the district remained grim, and the election campaign remained muted and limited to politicking at the level of Council and state by the political elite. A noteworthy aspect is that despite Congress being in power

during this time, it had been reduced to 3 seats in the Council while ASDC emerged as the largest, with BJP being second. This also goes to show that, by this time itself, the BJP had made a mark as an alternative to Congress for the political elite.

The 11th NCHAC elections were held in May 2013. This was the first election after the peace accords signed that was signed in 2012. There were 162 nominees in the fray for 28 constituencies! A total of 78 Independent candidates had filed nominations. The Congress won 10 seats, Dima Hasao Dal won 3, 6 Independent candidates backed by the DHD (J) won 6, independents won 5, and the newly formed Indigenous Peoples Party won 4. The BJP and HSDP (Hill State Democratic Party) alliance won 0. This was a split verdict, and ultimately, the government formed with Debojeet Thaosen of Congress as CEM in June 2013. Earlier in the week, Assam Forest minister of Congress government Rockybul Hussain had visited the Rajiv Bhawan, the district Congress office, with the elected members and senior Congress leaders such as sitting MLA GC Langthasa and Hill Areas Development (HAD) Minister Khorsingh Ingti. Thaosen's name was finalized for the post of CEM, following which he filed for his candidature as CEM and won uncontested(The Times of India, 13 June 2013). On October 9, 2015, crisis loomed again as 7 Executive Members of the Congress joined the BJP. Seeing the political turmoil in the district, the then Governor of Assam, P.B. Acharya, sent a letter to the Chairman of NCHAC directing him to hold a session of the Council on October 17, 2015. The incumbent CEM had lost the confidence of the majority of the members of the Council. Hence, there was a request from one of the Executive Members, Prakanta Warisa, for his removal and formation of a new Executive Committee as per the rules and procedures given in the Assam Autonomous District. Warisa had claimed he had the support of 17 Executive Members to form a BJP-led council(Business Standard, 15 October 2015).

Following this, the Governor called for a Special Session of the Autonomous Council again, and Niranjan Hojai of the BJP was elected as the Chief Executive Member. 18 BJP members and six independent members had voted for Hojai. Only 3 of the 6 Congress members were present in the House. In February 2016, the Congress Executive Members tabled another no-confidence motion against the CEM Hojai. No BJP members were present at the session, and thus, the CEM had to resign(Times of India, February, 2016). On February 14, Debojeet Thaosen of Congress returned as CEM. The Chairperson of the Council declared Thaosen as CEM as he was the only candidate who had filed a nomination for the post(The Times of India, 14 February 2016). However, again in June 2016, a no-confidence motion call was brewing against Thaosen following which he resigned. Thereafter, a meeting was convened at a hotel

in the district headquarters for negotiation, which was attended by then finance minister Himanta Biswa Sarma as well as local MLA BB Hagjer. At the meeting, Executive Member from BJP Debolal Gorlosa was unanimously elected as the Chief Executive Member(The Times of India, 11 June 2016).In 2013, there was a positive attitude towards Congress in the district and state due to the CM Tarun Gogoi's efforts towards a settlement with the insurgent groups and thereby bringing peace to the district. The incumbent CM also seemed invincible. Hence, we see that with the state government ministers mediating, Congress wins over independents, forming the government. The state also selects the CEM, followed by a ceremonial election in the council session called by the Governor. In 2014, when the BJP came to power in the Centre, the party started pulling strings more vigorously at the state level. Due to dissidents in the state Congress led by none other than Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Congress establishment had become shaky. This first became apparent in the state in none other than the NCHAC. In 2014, several council members joined the BJP; in 2015, Congress lost the majority when other independent council members joined the party. 2016 was also the year of the Assam Assembly elections. The tide was beginning to turn for the BJP in other parts of the state, as well as Dima Hasao. The candidate for BJP's Haflong ST constituency was BB Hagjer. Hagjer is a former bureaucrat and the son of one of the prime leaders of Dima Hasao, former Congress Minister under Assam Government, JB Hagjer. The people of Dima Hasao welcomed his induction into the BJP. While across the country, there were general criticisms of BJP as a party of lesser educated or communal leadership, the party's choice in the district was that of an educated and moderate man, which allayed any misgivings from the minority population. Several former leaders of Congress and leaders associated with BJP had joined BJP following Hagjer. This, we will see later in the chapter, is a well-thought-out strategy of the party in the region, where BJP often tones down its communal approach to the mainland.

Once the BJP had captured the Council, which also aligned with the party being in power at the state and Centre, it was seen that the party's movements and mobilization in the district became easier. The 12th NCHAC elections were held in 2019 and went to polls on January 19. Out of the 28 seats, BJP had won a sweeping majority with 19 seats. The Congress won 2, Independent candidates won 6, and the AGP won 1. Debolal Gorlosa was elected for a second term as CEM. The AGP and the independent candidates soon joined the BJP, followed by one of the Congress members. The lone remaining Congress MAC, Daniel Langthasa, resigned from the party in August 2022, and presently, his membership of the autonomous Council stands suspended.

The following table represents the BJP's performance from 2006, when it started contesting in the Assembly constituency (Haflong ST) in Dima Hasao.

Table: 4.1 Haflong (ST) Assembly Constituency Results from 2006

Year	Candidate	Votes polled (%)	Party
2006	GC Langthasa	40154	INC
	Prakanta Warisa	32336	ASDC
	Kulendra Daolagupu	16746	BJP
	Arun Ch Haflongbar	2672	AGP
	Rajat Moni Thaosen	2559	CPI(ML)(L)
2011	GC Langthasa	38076	INC
	Kulendra Daolagupu	12588	BJP
	Mohet Hojai	10361	ASDC
	I Jeme	5732	AGP
2016	BB Hagjer	52037	BJP
	Nirmal Langthasa	43731	INC
	Mayasing Daolagupu	2893	Ind
	Neikhol Haolai	2723	AIUDF
	NOTA	1111	
2021	Nandita Gorlosa	67797	BJP
	Nirmal Langthasa	49199	INC
	NOTA	973	
	Khandan Daolagupu	826	BTP
	Longki Enghi	723	JD(U)

Source: Election Commission of India

The following table represents BJP's performance in NCHAC elections from 2007.

Table: 4.2 NCHAC Elections Seat Won from 2007

Year of NCHAC elections	Party	Number of constituencies (Total 28)
2007	ASDC	12
	BJP	9
	Congress	3
	Ind	3
2013	Congress	10
	Dima Hasao Dal	3
	BJP-HSDP alliance	0
	Indigenous Peoples Party	4
	Ind [backed by DHD(J)]	6
	Ind	5
2019	BJP	19
	Congress	2
	AGP	1
	Ind	6

Source: Table prepared by author based on information collected from field study

4.4 BJP's Organisation Structure in Dima Hasao and Cadre Building

The BJP has created a robust organizational structure with increasing membership in the last few years. BJP's national website announces that it is the largest political party. In 2015, it announced that the party had become the world's largest political party, registering 11 crore members- 2.2 crore members more than the Communist Party of China. In August 2019,

the party's national President, J.P. Nadda, concluded that the party had 18 crore members- 64 percent more than the last drive in 2015(The Times of India, 29 August 2019). According to a senior BJP worker in Dima Hasao district, when the party was formed at the local level in 1997, it had only one member; in 2012, it had 52 members. (Longkumer,2019). The party membership also saw a further rise in the 2019 Autonomous Council elections. According to the BJP Dima Hasao district committee's General Secretary, the membership has risen to approximately more than 1500, although the party functionary could not cite exact figures. The manner of joining the organization has also been simplified, such as giving a missed call or registering a prospective member's name with contact details on the BJP website. The party also holds mass joining programs at block levels, especially in rural areas, mainly before elections. The membership drives are attended by the CEM or EM themselves, which further draws people to the drives. According to the Dima Hasao district committee General Secretary, people have been joining the party voluntarily and seeing their regular party welfare activities, such as cleaning lakes, parks, hospitals, plantation drives, and awareness programs. They also conduct programs such as commemorating anniversaries of freedom fighters and particularly local icons who are lesser known nationally. According to her, the party's activities are akin to NGOs, and local people are impressed by these activities and volunteer to become party members.

In the district of Dima Hasao, BJP's organizational structure follows the same pattern as elsewhere in the country. The party's organization has become highly structured under a unified command, with directives coming from the party's central national headquarters. As is the structure elsewhere, in Dima Hasao, the party has a district committee, which a District President and 2 Vice-Presidents head. The committee has 2 General secretaries and 6 Secretaries. The committee further consists of an Office Secretary and a Treasurer. It has a separate Social Media Committee with a Convenor, 2 Co-convenors, and several members. The district committee also has an IT Cell. The committee's general secretary informed the author that earlier, the bulk of work related to social media and all technical work related to digital activities was coordinated by the IT Cell. However, a separate Social Media Committee had to be formed, with the volume of work increasing greatly. The district committee is further decentralized and has committees at the Block or Mandal level, with each Mandal having its president and secretary. There are 10 Mandals or Blocks in the district, and under each block, there are several electoral constituencies. The party also has booth-level committees of 203 booths in 28 electoral constituencies. The district committee also works in collaboration with

a total of 7 *Morchas*. These *morchas* are the critical mass fronts of the party in the district, which have successfully organized different individuals from diverse communities under the party's umbrella. These key mass fronts are the *Mahila Morcha*, *ST Morcha*, *SC Morcha*, *OBC Morcha*, *Yuva Morcha*, *Minority Morcha*, and *Kisan Morcha*. The role of the *morchas* in social mobilization will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. The district committee works mainly as per instruction of the state-level in-charge or *Prabhari*. The state-in-charge visits the district every month to review the activities and functioning of the district units and its wings. The same is the case with the *morchas* who work as per the instruction of the higher-rung *morcha* functionaries. The members of the committee are from diverse communities of the district, as membership is open to all. The General Secretary insisted that the party welcomed members across different sections and religious and ethnic backgrounds even minority groups such as the Christian tribes.

Regarding appointing functionaries to different positions, the state-in-charge, after discussion with the district president, assigns charges to the committee members. The local committee sends a list of possible candidates, and the state-level committee, based on the level of participation in party activities and perceived capacity, gives them their respective charges as office bearers. One interesting thing that the author was informed about remuneration for members or honorarium for office holders was that even the elected Executive Members of the Autonomous Council from BJP are also members of the different committees and *morchas*. Thus, these Executive Members support the committees and the party members by giving funds, schemes, and contracts. One could infer from this statement that the elected representatives' patronage through such doles would inevitably attract people in the hopes of contract work, funds etc.

Another significant aspect of the party's strategy was the party functionaries conducting workshops on booth management as part of Booth *Sashaktikaran* (management) Abhiyan and Data Management and Leverage, workshops on Organisational Elections etc. These exercises train the local functionaries in managing their local electoral booths and other technical know-how. Booth-level committees have become an essential part of BJP's electoral mobilization and cadre building. Earlier booth management was understood to be a polling day exercise where party workers acted as agents during the poll and mobilized voters on election day. In 2014, BJP had effectively improved on the booth management practice, whereby the booths have become an epicentre of active mobilization by the party around the year (Hindustan Times, 29 October 2013). The booth committee members are now not only party agents active on the

day of polling but social mobilizers for the party and ideology who constantly engage with the voters. The committees have full functional committees with Presidents, Secretaries, and other members. As mentioned earlier, the 2016 Assembly elections were the first time the BJP came to power in the district's lone constituency, the Haflong (ST) constituency. According to the former MLA BB Hagjer, who had won the elections with 50.77 % of the votes, the party then did not have the strength in terms of its current cadre. In his interview, he said that they had started organizing at the ground level in 2015 when he had become president of the BJP district committee. He said that under the BJP, the novel way of booth-level committees interacting with the citizens had begun. According to former BJP MLA of Haflong (ST) constituency BB Hagjer, the booth-level committees of the BJP during the 2016 Assembly elections would meet influential personalities of good social standing of the locality in the vicinity of their booths. The committee members discuss the local issues of the people; they discuss solutions and developmental goals for the constituency. Such visits are held regularly to give party engagement a more personal touch. This practice has continued, as also admitted by the present secretary of the party district committee. As early as 2015, youth were being trained outside the district to manage booth committees. In October 2018, in BJP's *Mahasampark* programme in Dima Hasao on the eve of the NCHAC elections, several BJP officials from the district, as well as the state, organized a 3 Day mass program in 22 council constituencies from 6th to October 8. In the *Mahasampark*, many booth committees were formed across the constituencies.

The booth committees hold regular booth-level meetings and get-togethers, and the district-level functionaries organize programmes from *Mann ki Baat* to pujas to attract locals. As Hagjer noted, this creates an interpersonal relationship between the party workers and the local populace and between the party and the voter. In June 2023, as observed by the author while attending a BJP gathering in Dima Hasao, the 'booth sammelan' programmes attended by BJP district president as well as the Council CEM, the party functionaries emphasised the role of booth committees in strengthening the party which was considered the foundation of electoral success. Grassroots-level organisation and mobilization depended on the booth-level committees, according to the CEM as well as the district president. The booth committee experiment has done exceptionally well, which is proved by parties like DMK, AIDM(The New Indian Express, 23 January 2021) and Congress now emphasizing the practice as well(The Economic Times, 16 November 2023).

4.5 Capturing the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council and the Political Elite

In 2014, when the BJP-led NDA government came to power in the Centre, the stage had already been set for changes at the state level, particularly in Assam. In 2015, the BJP had completed a coup of sorts to capture power in the NCHAC. The elected members of the autonomous Council joined the BJP one after the other, although in the 2013 council elections, the BJP had not won even a single constituency. The first to join the BJP, which happened as early as 2014, was the former rebel turned politician contesting from Dima Hasao Dol, and DHD (J) joined the BJP. By the following year, in October 2015, 26 council members had joined the BJP, and only two members were left in the Congress. The Congress dissident Himanta Biswa Sarma, who had joined the BJP in August 2015, further fueled this switch to BJP by council leaders. The remaining two Congress leaders in the Council had also attempted to join the BJP, but the move was blocked by the district BJP members (The Times of India, 28 October, 2015). In June 2016, Debolal Gorlosa, rebel turned BJP EM, had been elected as CEM of the NCHAC. He was elected at a special session convened by Governor PB Acharya in Haflong on June 11, 2016. Gorlosa was the fourth CEM in the same term of the Council elected in 2013. Thus, we see that in the Council, BJP's entry is not through elections but through political bargaining at the level of the ruling elite at the state and district.

One aspect of the new Council 2016 was that the CEM and most EMs were former rebels, which had not gone down well with many in the district, especially the local elites centered in the headquarters Haflong. The former rebels had minimal formal education, which also raised questions about their capacity to rule. At the national level, questions were coming from different circles about the BJP leadership's capacity, mainly due to controversies surrounding the educational qualifications of different BJP leaders, beginning with PM Narendra Modi. The CEM was also embroiled in the case of the alleged murder of former Congress CEM Purnendu Langthasa and Nindu Langthasa in 2007, which made matters worse for the BJP's image as well as the Council's. The non-Dimasa communities also had become restive, and the demand for bifurcation of the district had strengthened greatly. In 2016's Assam Assembly elections, BJP's candidate was BB Hagjer, who joined the party in February 2014 from Congress. The sitting MLA, GC Langthasa was a heavyweight Congress leader who had previously held ministerial positions, and anti-incumbency was strong. Hagjer was the son of illustrious Dimasa leader JB Hagjer from Dima Hasao district, who had also been an MLA and minister in the Assam government. BB Hagjer was a former bureaucrat who served as commissioner and secretary of Assam's Environment and Forest Department. In an interview with the author,

he stated that he believed in Narendra Modi's leadership and could launch the nation on a new path of progress and development. The author, during her study in the district, observed that the general hope among the masses from Hagjer was great due to him being the son of a former activist, leader and intellectual. Thus, the apprehensions created by Gorlosa's appointment as CEM were assuaged by Hagjer's place in the Assembly. Again, in 2021, the BJP's MLA candidate was a convent-educated science graduate from the prestigious Cotton College and a well-known face of the district's political and activist circle, Nandita Gorlosa. Gorlosa had, in 2019, been elected MAC from Maibang Constituency and was inducted as EM with several important portfolios such as education. Her candidature from BJP was doubly reassuring than Hagjer's for the larger populace of the district as she had a secular image and a general understanding of the people across ethnicities that a female political executive would be less corrupt than a male!

BJP had managed to enter the Centre of power in the district through the Council and had also captured the Assembly seat by co-opting the local elite. In addition to this, it was already clear before 2016 that BJP's chief ministerial candidate would be Sarbananda Sonowal, a Sonowal Kachari, a community under the Scheduled Tribe category. Sonowal was a young, popular figure among Asamiya nationalists who was earlier with Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and had won the moniker of *Jatiya Nayak* due to his success in revoking the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act of 1983. Although the response to Asamiya nationalism has been tacit in Dima Hasao and even antagonistic in the district, Sarbananda Sonowal's candidature as a tribal was taken positively by the district's local elite.

With control of the local power center, controlling the masses and shaping electoral outcomes became much easier for the BJP. In the January 2019 autonomous council elections, BJP had swept the elections with 19 constituencies out of 28. Independent had won 6, Congress 2, and AGP 1. Very soon, the independents were also inducted into the BJP and the AGP candidate. Over the years, the political elite in the district have cultivated a culture of patronage and clientelism among the masses. The patron-client politics, as Scott (1972) says, stems from a relationship where a 'dyadic (two-person) ties involving a large instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits or both, for a person of lower status (client) who for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron' (Scott, 1972, p. 92) Additionally, the relationship according to Scott also signifies three other aspects. Firstly, there is an imbalance between the two in terms of status, wealth, and

power, which also creates an imbalance in the relationship. The client becomes obligated to the patron, and at times, the patron can use force and coerce the client to do his bidding due to the superiority of wealth and power the patron enjoys over the client. Secondly, Scott also speaks of a second feature in the patron-client dyad wherein there is a face-to-face interpersonal relationship. Furthermore, he adds the exchange and expectation are backed by community values and rituals. Thirdly, since these links are interpersonal, unlike impersonal contractual relationships, the bond, which may be affectionate at a given point in time, may also sour depending on variables such as social change. (Ibid., p. 93-95) The patron-client-like relationship between the CEMs and EMs has evolved over the years in the district's violence-ridden and degenerated economic and political system. The dependency of the people on their local Member of the Autonomous Council (MAC) for money, contracts, job seeking, and other favors makes the people handicapped to make an authentic political choice. Over the years, the district council has been unable to provide regular salaries to its employees(The Telegraph India, 25 August 2018b). Earlier, salaries were diverted from developmental funds and released to pay the employees. In 2009, in the aftermath of the financial irregularities and the nexus between a few among the council authority and the insurgent groups coming to light, the government had banned any such diversion of funds. The bloated NCHAC employee strength arising from bulk appointments by council authority for electoral gains had led to the Council's inefficiency in paying employee salaries. Such financial insolvency in the district council further worsens matters for the salaried section and the poor cultivators.

Additionally, in such a scenario, national parties with deeper pockets and greater influence, like Congress or BJP, can easily co-opt the local political elite, and without any solution to these problems over the years, the patron-client relationship refuses to wither. The lack of accessible quality education among the masses also affects and restricts a healthy political environment. The social identities also have a significant bearing on the clientelist politics. For instance, constituencies with majority Christian tribal voters are also won over by different tactics at the level of the political elite; in some constituencies with a Christian majority, such as Jatinga or Dolong, the winning candidate first contested as an independent due to fear of losing if contesting on BJP ticket. Upon winning, the candidate had joined or was inducted into the BJP. Additionally, in some tribal communities, the traditional system of governance had merged with the modern system and added to clientelism, manifesting in community members voting for the traditional elite or chief. As stated by a Satminthang Khongsai from the Kuki community, some of the interior Kuki constituencies still abide by the traditional norms of their

chieftainship. There is an interesting merger of the traditional, and the modern, where the traditional Kuki chief contesting from the constituency makes it inevitable that he won owing to the loyalty of his clan members, who are bound to vote for him. In this manner, the local political elite has become part of the current larger state and central-level establishment, and all try to benefit from the structural political machinations in place.

4.6 Building Confidence among People Through Accessibility to Party Leadership

The role and influence of the state and national level leaders have also become an essential mobilisation strategy for the BJP. During 2014, anti-incumbency forces had peaked at the national level. Dissident voices were rife in the state government, and their impact was significant in the leadership change and crisis in the NCHAC. When the Modi wave swept the nation, it reached extreme corners of the country, and Dima Hasao was no exception. The ‘presidential-plebiscitarian’ (Wallace, 2020) style of the campaign both in 2014 and 2019 ensured that the Modi wave covered the length and breadth of the country through ample use of all possible resources. The younger members of the current district committee, as expressed to the author, were highly influenced by the Prime Minister’s persona more than anything else in joining the party. The district committee General Secretary narrated to the author that one of the reasons for her joining the party in 2017 after many years of youth activism in her locality was because she had the opportunity to hear Modi speak first-hand at his Varanasi campaign in 2014. She had just graduated from Banaras Hindu University in 2013 and was in Varanasi for the convocation. She also claimed to be an ardent admirer of former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his personality and charisma.

At the local level, the author observed that the CEM’s office has become highly accessible, unlike the past which is BJP’s *modus operandi* nationwide. According to party functionaries of the several morchas that the author interviewed, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, the workers are to help locals with necessities such as filling out forms, applying for official procedures, helping during accidents, etc. The general secretary also added to the author that earlier, the Congress leadership was not accessible, and meeting with EMs and CEM was equivalent to ‘seeing god.’ People from far-flung remote areas would have to wait for hours at the end, yet the local leaders would not receive them. In the case of the present leadership, they were always accessible even without an advanced appointment. This was also corroborated by the representative of the Minority Morcha, Lalropui Hmar. Hmar, whose family was earlier associated with the Congress, belongs to the Hmar tribe, which is Christian

by faith. In her experience, the BJP was highly inclusive of grassroots-level workers, whereas it was not so in the case of Congress. She claimed that she could go meet with the Central BJP leadership in New Delhi with ease. This aspect of the BJP where access of leadership by the grassroots or at least a perceived sense of access, has drawn more people to it in the district. During the 2021 Assembly Elections, Rahul Gandhi's campaign in Assam also included Dima Hasao in its itinerary (Times of India, 31 March 2021). Rahul Gandhi was to arrive in Haflong on March 30 to campaign for the Congress candidate Nirmal Langthasa. A huge number of people had already gathered at the DSA (District Sports Association) Ground in Haflong. However, last-minute cancellations of Gandhi's arrival let down the party workers as well as the public gathered. A member of the Trinamool Congress in the district who was earlier in the Congress complained to the author about the state Congress leadership's elitist mentality at the state level and its inaccessibility to grassroots leaders. Contrasted with the BJP's approach, it is without a doubt which party would be more popular among the larger populace.

The massive rallies of the BJP, frequent meetings, and visits by state and national leaders and representatives made the party more approachable and accessible. Visits by then CM Sarbananda Sonowal, with even more frequent visits by present CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's visit in 2021, besides regular state government ministers, BJP regional and state level functionaries in places in different parts of Dima Hasao district besides the Headquarters Haflong have brought a sense of familiarity and accessibility to the people of the district. In January 2022, as per the decision of the current government, Assam Cabinet meetings are being held in different parts of Assam outside Guwahati. In Haflong, the Cabinet meeting was held on January 19, 2022, which brought an entire bevy of ministers, staff, and personnel to the district (Guwahati Plus, 19 January 2022). In an interview with local news channel Hills Live, several citizens expressed that they believed this was a welcome move that would bring development to the district. A district that was earlier said to be neglected by policymakers was now being brought into the limelight through government initiatives, a citizen added.

4.7 No Tolerance for Opposition

The popular slogan *Congress mukt Bharat*, took the form *Congress mukt Northeast* as coined by CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is also the convenor of Northeast Democratic Alliance (NEDA), a coalition of non-Congress parties formed in May 2016. In Dima Hasao, the current establishment is also seen to take such digs in public rallies. The party is also alleged to follow

a complete no-opposition policy in the district. Due to the handicaps of the autonomous Council, the Council since 2016 is entirely without opposition. All the elected and nominated members from the autonomous Council to the MLA constituency to the joint Parliamentary constituted are now under the helm of BJP leaders. According to former Congress MAC Daniel Langthasa, BJP leadership during elections, particularly EMs, had ordered their constituency members to boycott Opposition party programs and campaigns. Since several MACs and EMs, including the CEM himself, are former insurgents, there remains a sense of insecurity and fear among the electorate who fear attending opposition party gatherings. Langthasa claims that Congress was not allowed to campaign in the Dihangi constituency during the 2019 council elections. During one campaign, the local Congress candidate Lokhomoni Langthasa was kidnapped for a few hours during a public meeting.

According to respondent X, who is a civil society activist but who wished to remain anonymous in his constituency, Hadingma, only BJP voters were getting schemes like PM Kisan, PM Housing, and Arunoday. The respondent also pointed to the silence of opposition leaders. According to him, in the aftermath of the 1000 crore scam and the National Investigation Agency's and CBI reports of corruption and fiscal misappropriation, any former council leader willing to question the ruling establishment is effectively silenced through threats of arrests. Daniel Langthasa also added that due to the lack of employment opportunities in the district, many youth want to enter the market, but the competition is fierce, and it creates more antagonism among the different tribes. One needs a political connection to be able to enter the market space for which the local BJP establishment has made it a rule that they have to join the BJP. Any minor connection with the opposition is also not welcome, he added.

Thus, it is seen that the voice of dissent within the Council is now completely gone. In the past, the local leadership was openly critical of the state government even when in the party. The district council had its own voice despite the state government's attempts at controlling it. Presently, the current leadership is not seen engaging in any constructive criticism of the party in a democratic manner, which is not a healthy trend. According to Langthasa, the district council functions today in a centralized and authoritarian manner, which has snuffed the district's autonomous voices and opposition leadership.

4.8 Unmatched Financial Resources of the BJP

It is without a doubt that money always plays a huge role in elections. The BJP, after 2014, has put much money into the election machinery. The party spends more than several opposition

parties combined on publicity and traveling. In 2014-15, the BJP spent INR 913.01 crore, followed by the Congress with INR 765.02 crore, a gap of INR 148 crore. The BJP spent most on advertisement and publicity (INR 471.89 crore or 51.9 percent), followed by traveling (INR 209.57 crore or 22.95 percent) (Misra, 2018, p.8). One of the former MACs (Member of Autonomous Council) of the 2019 council who was formerly in the Congress party claimed that unreasonable amounts of money were being spent during elections in the smallest of constituencies. He alleged that the amount of money spent in council elections has quadrupled, and crores are being spent on the smallest of constituencies. Respondent X from Hadingma also contended that during elections, meat, alcohol, and money were being distributed to households. He alleged that money was especially being handed to the youth on an individual level, and votes were also being exchanged for contracts. The Minority Morcha representative, when asked about remuneration for party members, had said that local BJP members were aided by Executive Members of the Council who are also members of different committees, *morchas* and *mandals* aided the workers with funds, contracts, schemes, and other material support.

It goes without saying that elections today entail huge costs, as evidenced by the expenditure data. The costs include traveling for party representatives and personnel across the country, advertising, organizing rallies, meetings, etc. The only party that has given competition to BJP in the district in the last few years, even if limited, is the Congress. The regional parties, be it ASDC, AGP, AIUDF, or NPP, have had very few takers in the last few years. TMC has just begun in the district in 2022. The disparity in resources and expenditures between the BJP and other parties shows a huge gap. In such a scenario, the BJP has presently become the only party in Dima Hasao with the necessary resources to win elections and attract more people.

4.9 Promises of Change and Development: Populist Policies

Ram Madhav, the BJP General Secretary who was credited for BJP's victory in Assam in 2014 in an interview published in says, "In Assam, we found that the people of Assam were worried about the lack of development by the Congress government. We made that one of our main issues". This remained the main plank of BJP's campaign during 2014 as well as the 2016 Assembly polls with respect to the Dima Hasao district. The promise of development is imagined and spoken in a populist manner, as seen in the district's politics today.

What does populism entail? Brubaker (2017) says that the core element of populism is its claim to speak for the people. The people here generally constitute the masses who are in opposition

to the political, economic, and cultural elite. Brubaker further adds five elements to the understanding of populism- ‘antagonistic re-politicization,’ ‘majoritarianism,’ ‘anti-institutionalism,’ ‘economic, securitarian and cultural protectionism,’ and the ‘communicational, rhetorical, self-presentational, and body-behavioral style.’ The first element of populism represents taking back or reclaiming a space that had become depoliticized and de-democratized. It also has an anti-elite aspect as it is understood to be the elite who have ruined the political democracy and are morally corrupt and democratically decrepit. The populist tone is often majoritarian, and it can be against both the elite and the marginalized, as heard in arguments against welfare policies and affirmative action. Populism acts anti-institutionalist and may remain suspicious of parties, media, or the courts until they form their own institutions, which would, however, be ‘vehicles of personalistic leadership.’ According to Brubaker, populists exploit the institutions while also trying to weaken them. The protectionism of populists entails protection of domestic markets from foreigners, protection from crime and terrorism, and protection of indigenous culture from outsiders. (p.362-366)

Before the Assembly elections in 2016, the then state party president Sarbananda Sonowal released the Assam Vision Document (2016-2025) on March 23, 2016. The Foreword from the party president Sonowal mentions that the party would work for the ‘simultaneous development of Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley and the two Hill Districts of the state.’ The focus of the Vision Document are:

- State Security
- Economic Development
- Infrastructure Development
- Public Health and Healthcare
- Human Resource Development
- Sustainable Development
- Social Justice
- Rural and Urban Development
- Agricultural Development
- Industrial Development
- Good Governance
- Judicial Reforms
- Sources of Finance

According to the Vision Document, Assam was one of the highest revenue-paying states during colonial rule, but it had turned into the fourth poorest state of India, where more than one crore people lived below the poverty line. The lack of irrigation facilities and basic amenities and the high rate of unemployment were emphasized. The document added that developmental deficiencies were due to the apathy displayed by the Congress government despite being in power for 55 years. BJP 'sees the state as full of potential' and would work to bring the state to the status of one of the most developed in India, that of '*Xarvasreshtha Axom*.' The massive corruption allegations during the Congress regime had brought untold miseries that needed *poriborton*.

There were special mentions of the Dima Hasao district in the Vision Document. For instance, developing new airports in Haflong, the district headquarters besides Diphu and Nagaon, one full-fledged university to be set up in the Hill Districts. The document states that 'the NC Hills and Karbi Anglong district councils would receive our special attention so that they can take up developmental works such as roads, education, agriculture, etc. Lack of finance should not be a bottleneck'. Settlement of land problems of Gorkhas residing in Sixth Schedule areas was also mentioned in the Vision Document.

Several respondents, especially from the party *morchas*, when asked about the main political issue of Dima Hasao, responded that it is the issue of the lack of development. In 2015, as the district started gearing up for the 2016 Assembly Elections, the party's main slogan was Poriborton at the state and district levels. Given the wave of change which had begun in 2014 at the General Elections, even at the regional level, the slogan of *poriborton* had become very important. At the district level as well slogans such as *poriborton* and *sabka saath sabka vikas* were very popular, as well as *beti bachao beti padhao* according to former BJP MLA BB Hagjer. *Poriborton* stood for two things- firstly, change in terms of political leadership since the ruling MLA GC Langthasa had been in power for three consecutive terms, just as at the state level where Tarun Gogoi had served three consecutive terms as CM. Secondly, it stood for progress and development, which the incumbent Congress could not bring. According to Hagjer, the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* and *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas* were significant to the campaign. The slogans were very popular at the district level during the time of his campaign. The main issues that the district BJP started raising in 2016 were incomplete developmental projects and water scarcity, which has been a perennial problem in the hills. The corruption,

maladministration, and redtapism were also attributed to Congress' regime. The Indian National Congress, which was the main contender for the Haflong(ST) constituency in the 2016 Assembly Elections had the disadvantage of anti-incumbency. According to Hagjer the party in 2016 was open to working with all civil society organizations in the district who also aided their campaign. When the author inquired if it meant working with the district RSS, Hagjer replied the party at that time was not necessarily in favor of RSS involvement in the election campaign as they felt that due to the large Christian population in the district, it would polarise the voters on religious lines which might be detrimental to the party candidate. The party presented itself as having promise for all and not any ethnic community in particular. It is interesting to note that the party either kept silent or chose to speak very little on the issue of 244 (A). In December 2008, the then-party president Rajnath Singh had announced in a public meeting that the BJP would implement Article 244(A) for the creation of an autonomous state in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. In March 2009, LK Advani had also announced in a public meeting in Kheroni on NDA's seriousness in implementing 244(A). Advani's statement came as a shock to AGP, the party's ally in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, and was publicly decried by AGP ideologues(Hindustan Times, 27 March 2009).

Since 2016, several new developmental projects have been announced in Dima Hasao. According to the Memorandum of Settlement signed in 2012, a Special Economic Package of 200 crores(40 crores per annum) to the Council will be granted for 5 years over and above Plan fund through the Government of Assam to undertake special projects proposed by the Council. An amount of Rs.11296. 19 Lakhs have been released to date by the Government of India against 12 projects(Assam Budget Highlights, 21-22). Besides this, the Assam Budget allocates special one-time funds and grants to the Council through the Hill Areas Department (HAD) ministry. In 2016-17, a budget 12,531 Lakhs for Dima Hasao in HAD had been allocated, out of which 6082.50 Lakhs had been released for NCHAC according to the Action Taken Report. The Assam Budget 2017-18 announced the establishment of a B.Ed college in Dima Hasao, as well as the constitution of a Commission consisting of a Retired Chief Secretary to consult all councils and devolve a new methodology for devolution of funds to the councils in Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, and Bodoland Territorial Council, as there was no plan fund(Assam Budget Highlights, 21-22) The budget further announced an allotment of Rs. 20 crore as a one-time grant in the 2017-18 Budget. As part of the Asom Mala flagship program of the Assam CM, it was announced that 130 crores had been sanctioned for the construction of roads in Dima Hasao.

However, the real issues of the district, which lie at the core of its underdevelopment, remain scuttled, according to Samarjit Haflongbar, former CEM and MLA. Direct central funding is an old demand raised by the hill districts. Funds being routed to the Council via the state government led to an increase in the cost of materials, given the remoteness of the district. Furthermore, red-tapism led to delays of two to three years and, at times, five years for transferring funds from the state to district coffers, leading to great hardship for the people.

Nevertheless, the present Council had begun work on several projects, even though in a piecemeal manner. According to the HAD ministry, the following projects had been completed in the district under the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR), which was under the Planning Commission. In 2001, it was transferred to DONER.

Table: 4.3 List of completed schemes in Dima Hasao under the NLCPR

Name of Project	Amount in Lakhs
Construction of 100 bedded Civil Hospital to 200 Bedded Hospital with the construction of staff quarters and improvement & renovation of existing building at Haflong (N.C.Hills)	1119.81
Greater Mahur Town Water Supply Scheme in Assam (NC Hills)	512.26
Constn. of Br.No. 28/1 on Dehangi Dayangmukh Road over Thaijuwari Nala & Langlodisa Nala (PWD Roads Haflong Division)(NC Hills)	355.00
Metalling & Black Topping of Gunjung-Maibong Road in Dima Hasao District.	640.80
Metalling & Black topping of Assalu to Diduki Road including WBM (Length 18km) under Mahur Road Division	639.57

Construction of RCC Multi-storeyed Auditorium Building attached to Haflong Government College at Haflong	230.21
Infrastructure Development of Haflong Government College, Haflong in Dima Hasao District.	1005.49
New Zoar Flow Irrigation Scheme in Dima Hasao District.	314.78
Construction of N.L. Daulagupu Sports Stadium with 3 Storied RCC Dormitory Building at Haflong	1611.18

Source: Website of the Hill Areas Department, Government of Assam

The following table shows the list of sanctioned projects ensuing from the Special Economic Package(SEP) agreed upon in the MoS, 2012.

Table: 4.4 List of sanctioned schemes/projects in Dima Hasao under DHATC Package

Name of the Project	Approved Cost in Lakhs
Construction of Rajkumari Dishrudi Community Home Stay and Ecotourism at Panimur in Dima Hasao District.	1794.10
Construction of Center for Ethnic Community Cultural Practice (Dilaobra Sangibra Samathuraoni Nodrang) at Haflong.	1000.43
Integrated Skill Development Centre at Dima Hasao District of Assam.	3660.00
Construction of Auditorium at Songpijang in Haflong, Dima Hasao Dist.	238.25

Construction of S.R. Thaosen Media Centre at Haflong, Dima Hasao District	816.12
Construction of Community Hall at Dehangi Bazar under PWD (Building), Haflong Division.	294.11
Construction of Community Hall at Diyungbra (Digandu,) under PWD (Building), Haflong Division.	294.11
Construction of Community Hall at Nobdilangting under PWD (Building), Haflong Division.	294.11
Construction of Community Hall at Mahur under PWD (Building), Haflong Division.	294.11
Improvement of PGHJ Road from 19 th to 74 th km (Umrangso to Dehangi) under PWD (Roads), Haflong Division.	3498.32
Establishment of Bamboo Industrial Park (BIP) at Manderdisa.	4943.00
Enhancement of rural Socio-Economy with sustainable livelihood through piggyery farming in Dima Hasao.	400.00

Source: Website of the Hill Areas Department, Government of Assam

The above two tables represent the recent developmental projects undertaken by the establishment. The first table represents pre-2012 sanctioned projects, while the second table shows projects funded from the 2012 MoS SEP. Some of the projects are yet to see the light of day even after ten years. Besides these, some of the smaller developmental work is highlighted by the council executives. The social media handles of the council executives often share images of the inauguration of works such as the construction of village approach roads, reconstruction and renovation work of roads and culverts, installation of high mast lights, construction of clubs and girls' toilets, etc.

In the 2021 Assembly Elections, the BJP Dima Hasao released a separate manifesto. This unexpected development was necessitated by a powerful campaign by the rival Congress candidate's party workers. This will be discussed further in the following chapters. The manifesto, in its introduction, mentioned several achievements of the district BJP and stated that in 5 years, the party had brought 'unprecedented development' to the district. The achievements claimed by the party included the following:

- Construction of Skill Development Centre at Kota Arda, Diyungbra
- Construction of NL Daulagupu Sports Complex, Haflong
- Auditorium at Songpijang
- Dilaobra-Sangibra Nohdrang at Haflong
- Construction of Dimasa Cultural Platforms (*baikhos*)
- Highlighting the district as a tourist destination
- Construction of ecotourism centre in Panimur
- Improvement of Golf Course at Umrongso
- Construction and Improvement of Tourist Lodges in different parts of the district
- Construction and improvement of approach roads to villages and connection to main roads
- Provision of drinking water facility through tube well boring in interior villages.

Coming back to the cultural aspect, the current BJP establishment in the district has given more emphasis on an ethnic brand of cultural politics, especially highlighting the majority Dimasa culture. The incumbent CEM Debolal Gorlosa has taken a special interest in developing the culture and identity of the Dimasa tribe through the autonomous Council. Besides the council authority is seen giving patronage to the Hindu religious institutions. For instance, in 2019, the Council announced that its budget had included the infrastructure development of the following- Hari Om Haflong Akhanda Mandali, Haflong Kalibari, Ardhagini Kali Mandir, Ram Krishna Seva Samity, Satsang Vihar and Gadain Raji Kalibari. In 2022-the CM Sarma inaugurated the Skill Development Centre at Diyungmukh, Ganesh Mandir at Umrongso, Girls HS Hostel at Umrongso, Saraswati Vidya Mandir at Langcherui, Umrongso, Durga Mandir at Hathikali. The inaugurations and foundation stone laying ceremonies are often accompanied with *bhumi puja*.

The district council authority in 2018 inaugurated statues of different cultural icons in the district, primarily of Dimasa mythical figures such as Princess Dishru and warrior figures from

folklore such as Dhemalik. Recently, the statues of Dishru and freedom fighter Joya Thaosen were also inaugurated in the district. The council authority has also sponsored films, short films depicting Dimasa history and lore. The construction of community halls and dance halls (*baikhos*) to promote Dimasa culture and art is also seen to be given precedence by the council authority. One of the demands in the MoS of 2012 and the central demand of Dimasa intelligentsia has been the protection of historical sites of the Dimasa Kachari kingdom. One site located in the district is the stone house of Maibang. The stone house is a rock-cut temple designated Monuments of National Importance under the authority of the Archaeological Society of India (ASI). The temple is said to have been built by the Dimasa Kachari kings. The council authority renovated the temple and turned the surroundings into a park. It was inaugurated with great pomp, and celebrations included different Dimasa cultural festivities. The park is now renamed Ranachandi Temple Park and houses statues of different Dimasa mythical as well as historical figures. The statues also include that of clan progenitors of the Dimasas. In April 2022, for the Autonomous Council Foundation Day celebrations, the council authority gave awards to employees and personnel in different categories. Out of the 14 awardees, all 12 were from the Dimasa community. The BJP's stance at the council level also has taken a majoritarian turn. The CEM, on different occasions during his public speeches, had remarked against Muslims as well as Christian minorities in the district according to Khongsai.

4.10 Media and Mobilisation

In 2014, Modi's presence and influence in the media had indeed attracted citizens across India. In the case of Dima Hasao, among the educated urban class who had access to television and newspapers, there was indeed some interest. As several respondents during the course of fieldwork had responded, many in the district voted keeping in mind the ruling party at the Centre. According to Samarjit Haflongbar, former MLA and seasoned politician said that at least 30% of the vote is based on the party ruling at the Centre and regional level. People had awareness among themselves regarding the district's dependency on the national and state governments. He also added that few also voted because of patriotic sentiments. Former Haflong MAC from Congress Langthasa also added that in 2019, when both Lok Sabha elections and NCHAC elections were around the corner, Pulwama was also seen to have been in the discussion among a few electorates in the urban centers. He also added that the BJP's local social media presence used to be weak, but they adapted very fast. In Dima Hasao, there were, of late, no local mass media. The AIR station has a local station called AIR Haflong with limited listeners. Presently, with internet connectivity rapidly growing, urban areas have access

to social media, and several news channels, handles, and broadcast mediums have come up on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. It is worth mentioning that Langthasa is also a very popular Vlogger and social media personality. He gained popularity at the local as well as national level in 2016 by attacking the local BJP. By 2019, when he first contested a Congress ticket for the council elections, his social media popularity was a huge draw. His activism questioning the establishment had made him the voice of opposition in the district. According to him, the BJP's social media activity had strengthened, and they adapted very fast to counter his appeal. He observed that there was an increasing number of fake accounts in Dimasa names attacking non-BJP voices on social media. However, he also added that local BJP's presence on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram was limited. He alleges that the party used WhatsApp for whisper campaigns against him and his family members. They circulated old posts of his where he had condemned the ban on the sale of beef in the Haflong market. This had happened on several occasions, and such whisper campaigns touched on highly sensitive issues relating to community and religion, the discussion of which on Facebook would have led to backlash.

The BJP district committee General Secretary informed the author that earlier, the team had an IT Cell, which had now to be branched out to a Social Media Cell due to pressure from increasing activities. In the last few years, the social media presence of political leadership across parties has increased greatly. At the district level, the BJP-led Council's presence is replete on social media, especially Facebook. It has become almost routine to take pictures and upload the administration's certain ceremonial activities, such as inaugurations and felicitations, with hashtags of the party heads and elected leaders' names and offices. The leaders are often seen attending social functions such as marriage receptions and other ritual gatherings and posting them on social media. Birthday greetings are also seen to be a common occurrence, and commendations for achievements by individuals on Facebook tagging those individuals. The party's developmental activities in the district remain piecemeal. It has hardly attempted to bring any structural changes to deal with the

4.11 Conclusion

BJP's entry into the district's seat of power, the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, was through the manipulation of the loopholes in the Sixth Schedule provision and weaknesses in the autonomous council leadership, which led to the defections and, ultimately, BJP forming a government in the Council through intervention by the state government and the Governor. In

a way, it can be said that the BJP did not win the elections; it just won over the Council. Thereafter, organizing and building the party in the district across different constituencies became easier. The party's present invincibility today also stems from the fact that the district council is left without any Opposition today. The BJP's incomparable resources, when contrasted to other parties, also make it an easy choice for the electorate and potential party workers with higher ambitions. The party has also used technology and social media considerably well. However, the party has restricted itself to piecemeal developmental activities. It has yet to address the structural issues of the Sixth Schedule and bring holistic development to the district. The areas of conflict between the Council and the state government are not being raised at all, which makes the prospect of any long-term solution grim. 244 (A) is not mentioned except before elections. The populist policies of the current autonomous council authority, especially concerning the majority of Dimasa, may assuage the people for now, but this may also create further divisions among the ethnic groups, which does not bode well for the future of the party or the district.

Chapter V

BJP's Social Mobilisation in Dima Hasao District

5.1 Introduction

The society in Dima Hasao is a diverse mix of tribal, religious and linguistic communities. Since BJP came to power in the autonomous district council in 2015 its social base has greatly expanded which is visible in the following autonomous council elections of 2019, and Assam Assembly elections of 2021. Among the tribal population, the BJP's base has grown among the majority Dimasas, and the Heraka Nagas. The Dimasas constitute the majority in the district with almost 36% of the total population according to 2011 Census data. In the case of the non-tribal population of the district, the Bengali-speaking and Nepali-speaking population who constitute more than 17% of the total population have also strengthened BJP's vote base in the district. As seen in earlier chapters, the district's political scenario had over the years been marred by an unstable political system at the level of the autonomous council coupled with corruption and maladministration, insurgency movements, ethnic conflict and severe social and economic backwardness. BJP's social mobilization strategies amidst these problems has been multi-pronged. Social mobilization and political parties have a symbiotic relationship where a political party is formed and consolidated through social mobilization. On the other hand, a political party itself could become an agent of change through its programmes, policies and leadership and shape social mobilization and change. Elections are a significant mechanism of social mobilization wherein even disparate social groups can join together in collective action to channel grievances and demands to the government. (Skogren, 2020) At the same time competing demands of the disparate social groups may also create issues for the party's social mobilization measures as they attempt to galvanize electoral coalitions with greater platforms for electoral gains. (McAdam and Tarrow, 2019) BJP's social mobilization among the different communities in the district follows both the national level pattern of its organization as a party, such as mobilization through its district committee activities and its different *morchas* or wings such as the *Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha* (BJYM), *Mahila Morcha*, *Kisan Morcha*, *OBC Morcha*, *SC Morcha*, *ST Morcha* and the *Minority Morcha*. However, the population in the district and the political competition or cooperation are based on ethnic lines. Thereby, local ethnic politics is mixed with the BJP's brand of Hindu nationalist language and mobilization makes for an interesting pattern of social mobilization. This chapter will discuss BJP's mass

mobilization exercise through its different *morchas* and their functions in the district. The different socio-cultural organisations associated with the BJP, particularly the RSS and VHP's activities in the district and their influence in aiding social mobilization will also be discussed. The chapter is based on field notes and will rely heavily on interviews of different party *karyakatas* as well as members of different civil society organisations of the different, both indigenous as well as that of associated with the BJP. The chapter also borrows from the author's collection of newspaper articles, posters, memorandums and pamphlets of different civil society organisations and social media posts. The chapter suggests that BJP's social mobilization has brought uniformity of thought and action starting from the national to the local level. All the same, the *morchas* are not equipped to act autonomously and have to follow party code which is a matter of worry. Additionally, the cooption of local myths and icons, is also increasing during the social mobilization process. A cultural brand of political articulation with parallels to Hindutva is on the rise among the tribes. The *morchas* also have weakened the role of indigenous civil society organisations in the district.

The North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) has 28 electoral constituencies. It has to be mentioned that the delimitation of the constituencies is based on ethnic lines and corresponds to the tribal population residing in the said constituencies. The following table shows the number of current electoral constituencies and the incumbent elected members alongside their ethnicity.

Table 5.1 Ethnic Identity of NCHAC MACs

Sl No	Name of constituency	Incumbent Member of Autonomous Council	Ethnicity of the Incumbent
1	Haflong	Daniel Langthasa	Dimasa
2	Jatinga	Fleming Rupsi	Khasi-Jaintia
3	Borail	Ngulminlal Lienthang	Kuki
4	Mahur	Rahul Naiding	Dimasa
5	Jinam	Zosumthang Hmar	Hmar

6	Hangrum	Noah Daime	Zeme Naga
7	Laisong	Paudamming Nriame	Zeme Naga
8	Daothuhaja	Nipolal Hojai	Dimasa
9	Maibang East	Nandita Gorlosa	Dimasa
10	Maibang West	Bijit Langthasa	Dimasa
11	Kalachand	Ratan Jarambusa	Dimasa
12	Wajao	Biswajit Daulagupu	Dimasa
13	Hajadisa	Brojit Hojai	Dimasa
14	Langting	Golonjo Thaosen	Dimasa
15	Hathikali	Bimal Hojai	Dimasa
16	Diyungbra	Nabajit Hojai	Dimasa
17	Garampani	Joysing Durong	Karbi
18	Kharthong	Lalremsiama Darnei	Biate
18	Dehangi	Debolal Gorlosa	Dimasa
20	Gunjung	Nojit Kemprai	Dimasa
21	Hadingma	Debojit Bathari	Dimasa
22	Dihamlai	Ramgalungbe Jeme	Zeme Naga
23	Harangajao	Amendu Hojai	Dimasa
24	Hamri	Monjit Naiding	Dimasa
25	Lower Kharthong	Ngamrothang Hmar	Hmar
26	Dolong	Suanthangjem Hrangkhoh	Hrangkhoh

27	Diger	Samuel Changsom	Kuki
28	Semkhor	Ranu Langthasa	Dimasa

Note: The table is prepared based on data from the nchac.in website. The ethnicity of the incumbents have been added by the author based on field information.

5.2 BJP's Different *Morchas* in Dima Hasao

The BJP's different *morchas* in the district include the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), Mahila Morcha and Kisan Morcha which are General *morchas* followed by Minority Morcha, *SC Morcha*, *ST Morcha* and *OBC Morcha*. The author in the course of her study found that the BJYM and the Mahila Morcha were the most active in the party's activities in the district.

The *morchas* have full committees consisting of the following members:

- President 1
- General Secretaries 2
- Vice Presidents 8
- Secretaries, 8
- Office Secretary 2
- Treasurer 1
- Media in charge 1.

The *morcha* committees all had more or less 60 members. According to the *morcha* representatives the author interviewed, the *morcha* membership was high and sometimes it was difficult to keep tabs especially since not all members could be actively involved in party activities. The *morcha* committees also had an in-charge or *Vyavastha Pramukh* who was member of the NCHAC, especially the different Executive Members (EM) of the council. It was observed by the author that during the *morcha* activities the demarcation between a party and a government authority of the autonomous council more often than not gets blurred. It is inevitable that the people associate the autonomous council as BJP and vice versa.

Table: 5.2 The *Morchas* and their respective in EM in charge

Name of the <i>Morcha</i>	Vyavastha Pramukh (in charge)
BJYM	Debojit Bathari
Mahila Morcha	Bijit Langthasa
Kisan Morcha	Paudamming Nriame
Minority Morcha	Noah Daime
SC Morcha	Golonjo Thaosen
ST Morcha	Samuel Changsan
OBC Morcha	Amendu Hojai

Table prepared by the author based on data gathered from morcha workers

5.2.1 Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM)

During 2014 Lok Sabha elections there was an immense focus on young voters. The ECI was very aggressive in its campaign for enrolment and motivation of voters to vote on the polling day, with a special focus on the young voters who are in sizeable numbers. In order to encourage more young voters in Indian politics, the government took the initiative and has been celebrating 25 January as National Voters' Day. Almost all political parties make attempts to mobilize the youth, realizing that the young voters constitute a sizeable proportion of the total electorate. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), did not leave any chance; its leader and prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi made all efforts to mobilize the youth vote, considering that the youth. The popularity of the BJP among the youth seems to have increased sharply compared to 2009. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, compared to the 31 per cent votes polled by the BJP among the young voters, the BJP got 34 per cent votes, 3 per cent higher compared to the average vote, which in actual numbers are very large. (Kumar, 2017) Even in Assam and Dima Hasao we see, the youth mobilisation has been great for the BJP. The growing number of youth joining BJYM and the younger politicians in the district, many whose age range from 25 to 40 has also led to a growth in the number of youth joining the party. The ageing population

in Dima Hasao (2011 Census) is 11,292, 5.27% of the total while the economically active group is (Age Group 15-59) is 61.18%.

The BJYM is the youth wing of BJP which was started in 1978 in Dima Hasao . The functions and activities of the BJYM follow the BJP's philosophy and constitution as stated in the wing's national level portal. The wing also holds regular meetings which discuss the action plan of the BJYM across the country in accordance with the party's activities at the Centre. For instance, in 2021 the BJYM's resolutions include a host of activities related to the 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' celebrations, activities such as seminars, conferences, cultural events with local communities commemorating the memories and history of freedom fighters who fought for 'swaraj' over the centuries. Another resolution was to reach out to the youth across the country and contribute in 'imagining a vision for India in 2047'. The youth wing also resolved to carry out the activities of the government and ensure service delivery by organizing of focused programs(BJYM Resolution, 21-22).

The district BJYM president ³ stated in her interview that the BJYM Dima Hasao was founded in the 1979 itself and she joined the Youth Wing in 2014. She had earlier joined the party in 2013 and had served in several different positions within the party. In 2014 she was made Vice President of BJYM and in 2015 the General Secretary. In 2017 she was appointed Assam BJYM State Secretary and finally in 2020 the BJYM district committee president. She had served in two terms hence. At the speed in which the representative has gone up in the *morcha* ladder, one could infer that during the time the membership or active workers may have been low and thereby competition for position minimal.

The youth group had humble beginnings according to her and has since gained strength due to support from the elected council officials and state and national level functionaries. The present members in the Executive Committee numbered around 62 and other members she could not put a number on but reiterated that it was many. According to her the attraction of the youth to the party was great. She had at her level been able to attract many members, especially females she said to the BJYM. She claims that of 35 district BJYMs she was the only female president which boosted the number of female members joining the BJYM in the Dima Hasao. She had joined the party on a chance visit to the district office. She claims that in 2013, the discussion on BJP was everywhere, at the national as well as local level. She happened to enrol herself as member in 2013 at the district office but stayed on when she was made Vice President in 2014.

The activities of the BJYM in the district range from career counselling courses, blood donation camps, felicitating students doing well in examinations and other youth achievers of the district, to aiding the denizens of the district in different activities. In 2015 the BJYM aided people in interior villages in filling up the NRC (National Register of Citizens) forms. The flagship programmes of the PM such as the Swachh Bharat campaigns were a must to carry out and were regularly organized by the district BJYM. Hojai claims that ‘Youth Power is Nation Power’ and the party would not function without the BJYM. (sic.) The activities carried out by the BJYM are as per the instruction of the state and national level authority. The youth *morcha* committee members also participated in all India conferences in different parts of the country. The BJYM also undergo regular training on booth management. In 2015, 53 youth of the district attended a booth committee training in Guwahati which was also attended by bigwigs such as BJP MP Bijoya Chakrabarty and then MLA Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The funds to carry out the party activities in the district were given by the NCHAC EM in charge or *vyavastha pramuk*. She added that she wasn’t sure who funded the activities of the district BJYM earlier but after the BJP came to power, the EM in charge was responsible for funds. The BJYM members had to apply for funds to the in-charge producing a statement stating the purpose, nature of the activity and estimated expenditure. The BJYM was the right hand of the party (sic.) and it handled the successful conduct of all activities of the party in the district, even receiving ministers and other guests, and maintenance of protocol etc. The BJYM Dima Hasao president also added that there were some programmes that they could do of their own accord but in general activities were streamlined as per instruction coming from the top.

Although Hojai did not state as much of her ambitions in the party and politics, there are instances to show that several youth members of the BJYM District Committee joined the youth wing in expectation of a party ticket to contest elections in the autonomous council. In the past, several BJYM members have applied for the party ticket to contest elections in 2019. Monjit Naiding, present MAC from Hamri constituency was a former Executive Member in the district BJYM who won in 2019 NCHAC elections. Naiding also happens to be a former rebel of the DHD (J).

5.2.2 Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha

The Mahila Morcha is also another active wing of the district committee. The manner in which the *morcha* functions is similar to the BJYM. The membership as well as activities of the Mahila Morcha are on par with the BJYM and women from all communities were part of the Mahila Morcha according to the President Ripa Hojai. The present president of the district mahila morcha is a young woman in her 20s who believes in the party slogan for the *morcha* ‘Awaken Women Awaken Society’. According to her the Mahila Morcha organizes and participates in different activities as per the instruction of the authority at the state and national level. Their main function however was to organize women in their neighbourhood to participate in programmes conducted by the district BJP unit such as executive meetings. The activities also included mobilizing locals in *Mann ki Baat* gatherings. They mobilized women for the programmes conducted by the party such as free health camps for women and children, blood donation camps, cleanliness drive, plantation programmes etc. The *morchas* also hold programmes in collaboration with each other. The district Mahila Morcha along with the district BJYM conducted a sewing machine distribution programme in August 2022 among the women in one of the constituencies which was attended by the CEM and EMs as well. The Mahila morcha attracted women from all communities of the district. On being asked if the ethnic differences created issues among the women members, she remarked that under the party platform they kept all differences aside and worked towards the development of the district. She added that as women who worked together keeping aside religious, linguistic and communal differences, they could instill much needed change in the society and in the district. It became apparent that the Mahila Morcha members conducted the civic activities together as per the instruction and did not engage in sticky discussions which could breed ‘communal problems’(sic.)

The Mahila Morcha has drawn a great many women especially young women in their twenties or early thirties to the party in the district. In June 2016, Ranu Langthasa was appointed the first woman Chairperson of the district council since its formation in 1951. Many seem to have higher ambitions just as in the case of the BJYM members. The present Mahila Morcha President also expressed that she will be contesting the upcoming NCHAC elections due in 2023 if she gets a party ticket. One of the most illustrious members of the district Mahila Morcha is the incumbent MLA and Minister Nandita Gorlosa who on joining the BJP in 2018 had been inducted into the district Mahila Morcha. It was perhaps also an easy and natural

choice for the party as well as Gorlosa since she was earlier President of the Dimasa Mothers Association (DMA), a civil society organization of the district. Her quick rise in the party ranks from the morcha to the council as an elected EM and then MLA in a short time may be opportune but it has also inspired many younger women aspiring to be in politics to join the party. The current BJYM president in her discussion with the author recalled that she had attended the Good Governance or the BJYM Sushashan Yatra from 3rd to 6th December, 2022 in Goa. The representatives from other states were shocked to know that the district president was a woman and representatives from Haryana, UP, Jharkhand had claimed that they would also have to find means to so that young women leaders become capable of taking up the presidency of their district BJYM units. Hojai claims that she was shocked that the other units did not believe or practice the party's thrust on women's empowerment. She says that she is surprised that the PM's emphasis on women's empowerment was lost on them. BB Hagjer former BJP MLA in his interview on speaking about *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* had also claimed that in tribal societies, women generally have better status than their caste society counterparts. However, in terms of representation in modern political institutions tribal women can't boast of the same status as they claim in traditional institutions. "The slogan struck a chord with the party workers in the district", he had added. Indeed, the zeal of the Mahila Morcha members and workers seem to be highly enthusiastic. Evidently, being member of the morcha gave the young women a position in the society by being part of the political establishment.

5.2.3 Kisan Morcha

The Kisan Morcha is another important morcha in the district which consists of members from different communities of the district. The Dima Hasao district is an agrarian and rural-based economy. A distinctive feature of agricultural practices of the tribes of the district is the jhum cultivation (slash and burn method) also called shifting cultivation. However, the agricultural output of the district remains minimal due to a lack of technological know-how and tools among the agriculturalists. Of late, a demand for the declaration of the district as an Organic District is also being heard. This resulted in it being mentioned in the BJP District Manifesto 2021.⁵ Perhaps a vibrant farmer's morcha could have brought in much-needed agricultural development in the district through its farmer's unit. Ideally, the Kisan Morcha of the district also operates in the same manner as the other morchas. However, the Kisan Morcha in the district as well as the state were less coordinated in comparison to the BJYM or the Mahila

Morcha which held regular programmes and activities. Hari Ram, a member of the Kisan Morcha informed the author that their members attended and joined the party's programmes and larger rallies. However, they had few programmes they organised on their own because of the paucity of time of the members. Additionally, he added that most members and even the executives were engaged in different activities of their own which made it difficult to organise activities unlike the youth or women, who according to him were mostly unemployed.

5.2.4 ST Morcha

The ST Morcha was formed in Dima Hasao around 1998 when Pabitra Kemprai, the former CEM of NCHAC who had also started the party in the district, was the district BJP president. According to the district Morcha President, Suraj Naiding, in the Northeast region, the BJP-ASDC alliance of 2007 when it formed a government in the NCHAC was the first time the saffron party formed a government in the whole of Northeast India. The leadership of the ST Morcha is a senior leader of the district in contrast to the youth leadership of the BJYM or BJMM. According to Naiding the *morcha* functions like other units of the party and participates and mobilizes people, especially the tribal folk to attend the party programmes, meetings and activities. They work under the direction of the state and national *morcha* units. In the case of the ST Morcha, the state unit was highly active and conducted programmes in the district regularly and the district unit was particularly directed by the state unit.

According to the author, this may be because of the large and vocal tribal population in Assam whose consolidation through different civil society organisations at the state level has been great over the years. Most tribal populations in the state are demanding Sixth Schedule provision, especially after the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003. Naiding added that the *morcha* is to implement the national-level schemes and policies of the BJP which addresses the issues of tribals in the country such as lack of development. On the issue of 244 (A) and autonomous state or separate Dimas state, the present party president who was also earlier associated with ASDC and Hill State Democratic Party (HSDP), he states that "as of now the party is yet to discuss the matter. The issue is a grave one with stakeholders at the state and national level and district units are not equipped to have any discussion on it as such. At the Parliamentary level, the MP takes up the matter of the autonomous state". As stated, the ST Morcha leadership had senior people as members. The senior members had faith in the BJP leadership especially leaders such as Atal Behari Vajpayee. He mentioned that one of the main contributions of BJP past and present had been the construction of the East-West corridor which

was introduced by Vajpayee government. The connectivity ensured by the roadways and railways built through the corridor had brought a new lifeline to the district which was once cut off from the larger parts of India. He adds that the “development he had seen in Delhi or Bombay can be seen here too now. People of the district have not forgotten that”. He adds that after the coming of Modi government, Hindu people everywhere had a renewed sense of security. He adds that the BJP is not anti-Muslim or anti-Christian as people say, and nor was he. But one has to protect one’s faith when it was being undermined.

5.2.5 SC Morcha and OBC Morcha

The weakest morcha in terms of size or activities are found to be the SC Morcha and the OBC Morcha. The SC population in the district is very low. According to the 2011 census the SC population constituted only 2% of the population who either belonged to the Bengali-speaking or Hindi-speaking communities. The OBC communities in Dima Hasao mainly belong to Gorkhali/Nepali who constitute about 6% according to 2011 census. These morchas also carried out the activities as instructed by the higher state and national level morchas. However, it was observed by the author that the *morcha* activities were minimal and the OBC morcha sometimes participated in activities with the BJYM and BJMM and mobilized people for their programmes. Besides this, they mobilized in small groups in their locality at times for *Mann ki Baat* campaign or *Swacch Bharat* campaigns. It was observed that these two morchas were more active during Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. Their interaction with the MLA of the constituency was higher than that with the local MACs.

5.2.6 Minority Morcha

The BJP Minority Morcha is a critical wing of the party in the district. The district constitutes 30% Christian population. The author interviewed the Vice President⁷ of the Minority Morcha. She is a member of the Hmar community who are Christian by faith. She had informed the author that her reason for joining the party was the way it is committed to implementing government schemes. She added that she felt it is one party that gives equal opportunities to the workers and *karyakartas*. “It appears to be a party that delivers. BJP seems to be inclusive of the grassroot workers. Secondly, Congress is not in any position to be an alternative to BJP. AGP had come in the district but that’s also finished. Same with APHLC it tried but now its concentrated only in Karbi Anglong. The National Peoples Party (NPP) tried but that also did not work. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) is there now, in a nascent stage”.

As to the function of the Minority Morcha she said that “the main role of the Minority Morcha was during elections when they were to talk to community members to assuage their fears and insecurity due to the party’s image as being anti-minority. The Christian communities in the district who constitute 30% of the population were very much aware of the statements being made in the mainland against Muslims and Christians by different BJP leaders which made them very wary.

She had added that in the past two to three years the image of the party had slightly improved. “There were constituencies where the party workers could not even enter but now people had come to accept it.” The party’s image now according to her was of a party ‘that could deliver’(sic). The minority morcha usually handles things related to the religious minority and she as Vice President did not have much to do except during elections when they approached the preachers and pastors and tried to convince them to vote for the party.

She claimed that among the Christian population of the district however, there were certain misgivings against the party and she was equally critical of the majority community Dimasa party members. She questioned the nomination of MAC seats in the council, “why should it be given to Bengalis and Nepalis. Rather it can be given to unrepresented tribes like Vaiphei. It is also seen that Dimasas trust the Nepalis and Bengalis more than the other tribes. The Hmars and Kukis today feel sidelined, and a feeling of discrimination has arisen because earlier, the share for jobs was in accordance with population. But that is not the case now.” She added that the party however, if it wished could resolve these grievances because “when we are with the party, all differences are forgotten at a party meeting or programme. In that case, it is the Congress party which becomes the enemy. If the party can reconcile our differences, then that would be welcome. I am in the party, but I have very little say in the party. I have no access to the inner circle. I am in the party also because I am a politician and I need a party platform to contest elections.”

5.3 BJP and its Affiliates in Dima Hasao: Vishwa Hindu Parishad

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was established by Golwalkar in 1964. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) gained public recognition through its Ram Janmabhoomi campaigns in the 1980s it continued to grab headlines in India till the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. Thereafter the VHP stayed away from the limelight between the mid-1990s in 2013 (Katju, 2017) The VHP was formed to inculcate Hinduness and bring *sanskaar* among the tribals in

India. It looks upon the tribals as helpless original inhabitants of India whose Hindu culture is endangered. The VHP had to challenge Islam, Christianity and Communism. The VHP and its views on nationalism is exclusivist and it advocates a militant advancement of Hindutva as against a differentiated and inclusive idea of nationalism. (Ibid., p. 4)

The VHP carries out its religious activities as well as propaganda alongside its charitable or social work. Besides running these projects it is active in festivals, *melas*, religious yatras and natural calamities. They campaign against social ills and bad habits. Its religious activities like *kirtans* involve women and senior citizens. The sewa or welfare work in tribal villages focusing on the educational and health needs of tribal communities besides being extremely Hindu centric were planned to compete with Christian missionaries ultimately to overtake their work in tribal areas. The VHP takes up for its work interior areas with pathetic conditions of poverty and underdevelopment. Community meal programs are organized in tribal areas for social mingling. Tribal children are trained to recite the Ramayana and Bhagwat Geeta in local dialects.

In the first two decades of the VHP's formation, its main work was to oppose the work of Christian missionaries in tribal areas. It aimed at working among tribal communities as a welfare organization providing educational and health facilities and also took up their conversion or reconversion activities. In the Northeast VHP's activities began in interior villages of Assam and its first establishment was in fact in Haflong, in Dima Hasao in 1994. It set up a residential school for tribal children along with a hostel comprising of 60 students. (Bhattacharjee, 2007, p. 77) The residential school is still present and is popularly called the Hindu Mission in Haflong. The VHP in Haflong and other parts of Dima Hasao run several schools such as the Vivekananda Vidyalays (which is also the VHP campus), Saraswati Vidya Mandirs, Kalyan Ashrams. However, it is to be noted that most of the VHP-run schools were in decrepit conditions being in interior areas and were attended by extremely poor tribal children. In 2017, the Vivekananda Vidyalaya campus was renovated and an additional building added to it from the MLA LAD (Local Area Development) fund.

From the 1970s the VHP aggressively took up the task of Hinduising the tribals. The Ram Chariot processions were organised throughout the country in the early 1980s through the efforts of the VHP. The *Rath Jatra* is popular in the Dima Hasao and it is conducted by the Hindu Mission. The primary objective of the VHP in the Dima Hasao district was to stem the influence of Christianity. (Bhattacharjee, 2007) The VHP's main area of activity is the Hindu

Muslim and the Hindu Christian fault line. During the Dimasa Hmar conflict of 2003, the VHP claims that they helped resolve the conflict and mediated talks between the two warring groups. (Ibid.) However, the VHP in a resolution (Hindu Vivek Kendra, 2003) released in 2003 is seen to side with the 'Hindu Dimasas' who according to the VHP had become extremely insecure due to the activities of the Christian missionary and their 'militant progeny'. The VHP is an active campaigner for the BJP and it tries to mould public opinion through such propaganda especially during such conflict.

Presently, the VHP schools in the district are getting renewed patronage from the NCHAC as well as the state government. In 2021, the KS Thaosen Saraswati Vidya Mandir, Nablaidisa Vidya Bharti School and Janaring Hindu Academy High School in different parts of Dima Hasao have been set up. This year alone, a VHP school and a Hostel Building under Uttar Purbanchal Janjati Seva Samiti has been set up in the Heraka Naga village called Hejaichak. The inaugural ceremony of these schools and centres are always attended by NCHAC officials as well as RSS and VHP regional district and regional office bearers.

The VHP has also inaugurated several new temples in different parts of the district. The VHP has also of late started conducting huge Ganesh Chaturthi festivals which were earlier not part of the local culture. The Dima Hasao district has a large number of Bengali and Nepali population. Some of the earliest settlers of the Nepali and Bengali Brahmins had set up the Kali Mandir and Jagannath Bari in Haflong respectively. These temples have been conducting annual Kali and Durga puja in the district. Of late, Ganesh Chaturthi is also seen to be being conducted on the same scale as the Kali and Durga Pujas and Ganesh Mandirs have been set up in different parts of the district. Among the tribes of the Dima Hasao, the Dimasas and Heraka Nagas greatly participate in these puja festivities. Additionally, Satsang Viaharas, Hari Om Temple, Hanuman Mandir, Sitala Mandirs have come up in the district which are very recent additions to the the Kali mandirs.

In the discussion on the SC and OBC *Morchas* it was seen that their activities were the least in comparison to the other *morchas* in the district. It is to be noted that the Bengalis in the district are either upper castes or Scheduled Castes. The Nepalis/Gurkhalis are either Brahmins or OBCs. There is a consolidated 20,000 Bengali Hindu votes in the district who see BJP as their party and are seen to vote en masse for the party as informed by Samarjit Haflongbar, President, Dima Hasao District Committee. The temple activities in the district had been mainly organized by the Bengalis and the Nepalis, more so the Bengali who also control the market such as in

Haflong and also being the older settlers than the Nepalis. The Hindu Bengalis of Haflong have always been heading the Haflong Market Association. The VHP or other groups like ISKCON, Joy Guru have been closely associated with them. Three different respondents claimed that the Bengali and Nepali/Gurkhali votes had now consolidated under the BJP because of their religious affiliation. Additionally, the Hindu Bengalis and Nepali/Gurkhali population have aligned towards the BJP and its affiliates in the aftermath of the updation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Although in Assam, the NRC issue discussion revolved around the Muslims of East Bengal origin, the Hindu Bengalis and the Nepalis/Gurkhalis have been equally affected. The Hindu Bengalis of Cachar and Dima Hasao are also of East Bengal origin, speaking the Sylheti dialect primarily. The citizenship tussle in Assam has made these two groups gravitate towards the BJP besides their strong religious affiliations.

As part of its project of Hindutva to include tribal cultures and its varied traditions into one Hindu solidarity, the VHP in Dima Hasao first started working with the Heraka or the non-Christian Zeme Nagas. The Zeme Nagas are Nagas particularly concentrated in the Dima Hasao district. They constitute almost 9.65% of the population of the district. The Zeme Nagas are almost equally divided into the Heraka practising and Christian Nagas in the district. The Heraka is a religious reform movement among the Nagas of the larger Zeliangrong Naga group (Zeme-Liangmai-Rongmei). The progenitor of the Heraka was Jadonang and his more famous successor 'Ranima Gaidinlu' who has now become the symbol of tribal female leaders and freedom fighters who fought against British colonisers as well as Christian missionaries and protected Naga religion from Christianity. The Zeme Nagas of Dima Hasao have three representatives in the autonomous council presently- Dihamlai, Laisong and Hangrum. In the constituencies, Dihamlai a Heraka candidate had better chance of winning, while in case of Laisong and Hangrum, the voters are split between Heraka and Christian 50:50 with Christian population being on the rise in the past few years.

According to Longkumer (2010) the VHP and RSS ideology have now seeped into the Heraka rhetoric such as invasion of 'foreign religion and culture will bring destruction to the Naga culture-beware of this danger' and such others. In Dima Hasao, the Heraka and the Christian Nagas are often divided on the subject of conversion and the rivalry is seen in electoral politics as well. The VHP in the district claims¹⁴ that they remain aloof of the politics in the district and influential leaders both of Congress as well as BJP especially among the Dimasas are and have been members of VHP in the past.

5.4 Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

The RSS was founded in 1925 by Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar—a Telugu Brahmin medical doctor from the central Indian city of Nagpur. The RSS is the parent body which provides its *pracharaks* for the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) for tribals, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) for the Hindu religious establishment, and the Bharatiya Janata Party for politics. While the VHP's movements in the district are subtle, the RSS has been more aggressive in its display of activities in the district. Anderson and Damle (2019) write that in the past few years, RSS no longer remains a pariah 'perpetually operating under the threat of another ban'. There is a rapid growth in the number of its affiliated groups who have penetrated almost all areas of society which makes it inevitable for the RSS to take an interest in influencing government decision-making, since its affiliates are directly impacted by the public policy. This development presents the RSS with the growing challenge of coordinating the many parts of the ever-expanding *parivar*, whose members have different and often-competing interests. The fourth change is the expansion of the RSS's work to social groups among which they were previously weakly represented, such as farmers, tribals and low-caste Hindus, especially Dalits. The RSS' influence specially operates in politics through the notables who have been members of RSS and holding big positions in different offices of the government.

In Dima Hasao, the RSS mainly operates through its headquarters in Silchar, in Cachar. The South Assam office of Assam is in Silchar which shares border with Dima Hasao. RSS had a humble office in Haflong but it recently inaugurated its new office in the middle of Haflong town which has been donated by Shri Ramkui Zeme, patron of Zeliangrong Heraka Association and a social activist working among the Zeme tribal areas of the district. He is also the Vibhag Sangachalak of RSS. Zeme was also awarded the Padma Shri in January 2023 for his social activism and his active contribution to the revival and protection of the Heraka faith.¹⁵ The RSS have been present in Dima Hasao for thirty years now and its first leader in the district was KK Hojai who was CEM of NCHAC from 1980 to 1983. Its activities were however not visible in the public domain as such. Of late, RSS is seen carrying out its rallies in their recognizable white shirts and khakhi trousers. The participants are mostly members of the district BJP and students at the Vidya Mandir schools.

The RSS has been active in Cachar since its inception. Cachar has a significant number of Dimasa population. The RSS claims that in 2003 during the Dimasa-Hmar conflict, the Vishva Hindu Parishad, Keshav Smarak Samiti, Kalyan Ashram and Rashtra Sevika Samiti worked to

rehabilitate the Dimasas stuck in relief camps with the active help and cooperation of the Hindu society in general.¹⁶ Handlooms were donated to the Dimasa women in the camps and this was done by none other than KS Sudershan.

According to one respondent who wished to remain anonymous, the RSS actively attempts to remove Christian Missionary schools working in interior villages especially in the Heraka Naga and Dimasa villages. “In Riao village, the Gaonburahs and local people had invited the Cachar Hills Tribe Synod School and the school had been functioning for about 15 years. The EM of the constituency came and instructed the people to remove the school despite protests from the Gaonburahs and Mouzadars. Presently, a Saraswati Vidya Mandir is being constructed there.” He further added that the same issue happened with the “Good Shepherd School in Gunjung but with the school being older and its alumni being strong and established, they were able to stop the removal of the school. However, the RSS is now constructing a Saraswati Vidya Mandir in the nearby Asra village.” The RSS also conducts recruitments of mainly the youth, and train them in the philosophy of the party and nation-building.

The author observed that RSS’ activities however are also highly measured and local members do not claim to be RSS members outrightly. BJP morcha workers also claimed they did not work with the RSS or VHP and BJP as a party was separate from the socio-cultural organisations, both having their own set of activities. This was observed to be due to an incident in 2018 January which the Dimasa civil society organisations till date commemorate every year on 25 January, 2018. On January 20, 2018 Jagdamba Mall, an RSS stalwart working in the Northeast for many years and who has written the biography of Rani Gaidinliu came out with a proposed 'Draft Naga Agreement,' suggesting separate development authorities to be constituted in places outside Nagaland where Naga people live. Dima Hasao was also included as a part of the 'Greater Nagalim' agreement of the proposed Naga Accord. This sparked great ire amongst the Dimasa people of the district. On January 22, protestors led by the Jadhike Naisho Hoshom (JNH), the Dimasa apex body, submitted a memorandum through the DC (Deputy Commissioner) to the Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, seeking clarification about Mall's proposal. The protestors also urged Mall to come over to Haflong and tender an apology. The Dimasa civil society organisations also called a 12 hour bandh in the district and a railway blockade was carried out in Maibang railway station. During this protest the police opened fire, leading to the deaths of two Dimasa youth Mithunjoy Dibragede and Prabanta Hakmaosa. RSS office was attacked by

miscreants during this debacle. The Dimasa civil society organisations had jointly condemned the RSS after the 2018 incident. Mall disappeared from the scene but it has generated apprehensions and doubts among the majority Dimasa of the district.

In the district, however several other organisations have appeared who operate like the RSS on many counts. For instance, X informed the author about the International Gaumata Organisation where the respondent was offered membership and position of General Secretary. The organisation spoke about nation building, how Hindus were at threat from Islamic terrorism. He was offered a meeting with Amit Shah and Gadkari. He claims that such organisations from outside the region, specifically Hindi-speaking regions had mushroomed and they recruited people randomly.

In the district, overall the VHP and RSS do not outrightly participate or claim the BJP. Their activities are seen in the realm of *sewa* or social work, its schools under Vidya Bharti, conducting religious festivals, and their association with local notables. The Vidya Bharti schools however were not popular among the people as they could not provide quality education and mostly catered to the poorer sections of children. Several respondents also commented that the RSS and VHP were nationalists first and were involved in religious activities later. However, as the ST Morcha president Naiding noted who is also trying for a party ticket in the 2023 NCHAC elections, the RSS and VHP personnels had some say in the council tickets distribution. He added that their influence was higher in the Assembly constituency though. Thereby,

5.5 Co-opting Local Historical and Political Icons

The BJP's social mobilization mostly stems from the co-opting of local socio-political icons of the animist-Hindu tribes such as Dimasa who are also majority community in the district and the Heraka Nagas. Rani Gaindinliu of the Heraka Nagas co-option has been discussed earlier. This theme has been discussed at length by Longkumer (2010, 2021). The co-opting of the Dimasa social and political icons is another interesting development. The Dimasa tribe are the majority tribe in the district and their population although is concentrated today in Dima Hasao, they also inhabit the Cachar district, Nagaon, Karbi Anglong in Assam and Dimapur in Nagaland. The Dimasas and their civil society organizations across the different districts they inhabit as already discussed in an earlier have placed varied demands to safeguard their history, culture and practices. During the Drafting of the Constitution of India, the Tribal Council in

the North Cachar Hills under Hamdhan Haflongbar and D Hojai in their memorandum to the Bordoloi sub-committee had requested the unification of all Dimasa inhabited territories under one political unit. The Dimasas claim that their history has been forgotten by Assam and the Dimasas have been neglected. In a TV interview, the founding member and former president of the All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU), Lt. Prafulla Hapila claimed that the 'Dimasa kingdom and its history, who are the original inhabitants of Assam Valley did not receive the same place as the Ahom or Koch kings and history. The Dimasa freedom fighters such as Sambudhan Phonglo or Joya Thaosen who fought against British colonizers were not acknowledged. Many others who participated in the Quit India Movement have been forgotten. In Cachar, Khaspur was the last capital of the Dimasa kings but if one looks at Cachar today, Dimasa has been reduced to a micro-community. The same was the case with Hojai in Nagaon where he added that Dimasa historical monuments which are parts of our heritage are neglected.' This is a matter of grave concern to the Dimasa people, the neglect and loss of their culture, and heritage. Of late, Sambudhan Phonglo, Tularam Senapati, are getting more importance under the BJP government. The RSS influence is seen more among the Dimasas of Cachar and Hojai as well. The minority status of the Dimasas in this region and the lack of political representation also can be another factor for the close ties. The VHP's and RSS' support to the Dimasas particularly during the Dimasa Hmar conflict also has created linkages and communication. The cultural assimilation in the Hindu culture among the Dimasas of Cachar and Hojai is observed to be more unlike the hill Dimasas. The Dimasa king had converted to Hinduism and patronized Sanskrit and Bengali literature which also aligns the Dimasas greater to the Hinduism. The Dimasas in Cachar had converted alongside the Dimasa king and to date use the surname Barman signifying the royal lineage and conversion instead of their Dimasa clan names as is the case of the Dimasas in the hills of Dima Hasao.

The RSS mediated with the local and higher authorities for the protection of Dimasa cultural heritage in Cachar. The statue of Raja Govinda Chandra Narayan, the last Dimasa king was installed in Cachar on September 2021 (Organiser Weekly, 20 September, 2021). The CM Himanta Biswa Sarma had also announced the allotment of 100 bigha of land to develop the site of the Dimasa ruins in Khaspur as a tourist destination which appeased the people (NKTV, 19 September, 2021). The Dimasas support of BJP is also growing due to the appointment of the current MLA Nandita Gorlosa being inducted into the Assam Cabinet. Her portfolios include the newly created Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture Department and the Archaeology Departments which have given hope to the Dimasa demands. The national

government through its initiatives also attracts the animist tribal groups of the country. For instance, the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav emphasized bringing out the history of freedom fighters of the different communities of the tribal peoples of India which gives an opportunity to communities like the Dimasa for inclusion of the Sambudhan Phonglo and Joya Thaosen. The NCHAC and state government have set up several girls' hostels and schools in the district as well as in Guwahati under the name of Joya Thaosen. In 2021, the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in Nagpur released a photo which was shared by an MAC of the NCHAC where it shown the allotment of a room with the name Veer Sambudhan Phonglo. Such gestures have built confidence among the larger populace that the current establishment will protect the culture and history of the Dimasas. The elevation of Gaidinliu to the national icon as protector of the indigenous tribals from the Christian proselytisation or Lachit Barphukan as the protector from Muslim aggressors has also raised hopes for the Dimasas in the district.

The BJP is selective in their approach to the coopting of historical and political icons. For instance, the foundation of the NCHAC can be attributed to the leadership of Hamdhan Haflongbar alongside several other tribal leaders of the district who had represented for self-government to the Constituent Assembly. However, the BJP in the current establishment nor the state or centre were interested in commemorating this aspect of the district's history.

5.6 Co-opting Myths and Local Customs

The assimilation of the Dimasas (Shin, 2020) and Heraka Nagas (Longkumer, 2010, 2020) has been an ongoing process. As earlier noted, the Dimasa kings converted to Hinduism which happened when the capital shifted to Cachar. King Krishnachandra performed the *Hiranyagarbha* in 1790 through which the king and his brother were assigned Kshatriya status. (Shin, 2020, p. 68) After that to account for the entry into Hindu traditions of the Dimasas, the genealogy of 103 generations reaching Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima and Hidimba was composed. This origin myth has existed alongside the Dimasa's tribal origin myth of *Arikkhidima* and *Banglaraja*, divine ancestors of the Dimasas. There is tension among the Dimasas with regard to these two different genealogies as well as the authenticity of the former. The Dimasas also follow a religious practice system of sacred groves called the *daikho* and the worship is heavily based on their clan system. The clan system is also the basic structure of the community, and the community has both the patrilineal and matrilineal through which lineage and descent ensues. Till date, they are seen to be extremely clannish as all rituals, position in society and identity are based on their clan. They also follow strict endogamy. ((Thaosen, 2018)

The Dimasas have accepted their official religion as Hindu. However, in their ritual domain, they still continue to practice and zealously guard their animist practices. The VHP and other Hindu affiliates such as ISKCON and Joy Guru have inducted many Dimasas, especially the urban dwelling Dimasas into their fold. Although figures are not available, in Haflong town many are inclined towards the Joy Guru sect and ISKCON cults. Contestations have arisen in this regard with Dimasas who want to participate in puja rituals where the *gotra* of the individual offering puja is asked of. The Dimasas devoid of *gotra* and hence the patriclan names were assigned *gotras* which was released in an annual publication of one of the Dimasa villages in the township of Haflong. However, the practice has failed to take off among the Dimasas. Among the Dimasas joining the ISKCON fold there were some friction as well since ISKCON debar the consumption of meat and alcohol. While meat and the use of rice wine is part and parcel of Dimasa culture and way of living. The Dimasa women traditionally prepare an indigenous rice wine called Judima which is primarily used for all Dimasa rituals as offerings to their ancestors and gods. In 2015, the Dimasa civil society groups under Dimasa Mothers Association, Dimasa Youth Forum and Yadem, started conducting the ‘Judima Festival’ as a measure to preserve the traditional practice of preparing the liquor and create awareness of the same. The festival was also an attempt to boost the tourism prospects in the district. The festival came under severe criticism of Dimasa members of the ISKCON, Joy Guru and RSS as promoting alcoholism among the youth and the necessity of reform within the traditional practices. The other section of Dimasas who were conducting and promoting the festival emphasized that the preparation of rice wine was inherent to the Dimasa knowledge system and preservation of such indigenous knowledge systems was important. The current establishment in the NCHAC especially the CEM is seen to be keenly promoting the Dimasa mythical figures and lores through the council. Since 2018, the installation of two Dishru(Dimasa mythical princess) statues and other figures such as Veer Dhimalik (mythical Dimasa heroes) is being patronized. The naming of buildings, schools, roadways and waterfalls after mythical figures, as well as clan deities and progenitors, have also appeased members of the society.

5.7 Conciliatory Approach towards Christian Tribes

In July 2022 at a BJP National Conference held in Hyderabad, CM Himanta Biswa Sarma claimed that BJP was able to win in Dima Hasao despite having 30% Christian population. He claimed that BJP is a party of all classes. It is without a doubt that BJP in Northeast India wants

to present a more balanced image of itself and not the majoritarian image of itself as its party members do and Hindutva claims. The BJP is very measured in their approach towards the Christians in the district. The BJP's Minority Morcha's role becomes most important during elections as earlier mentioned by the *morcha* Vice President and they have to convince the pastors and priests to ask the people to vote for the party. L. Hmar added that minorities feel insecurity with the BJP mainly due to their association with VHP and RSS. That made the Christians wary, especially on account of their views on conversion. The connection among them is not very clear within the party though, she added. "At times they seem to agree on some issues. At times they are not". BB Hajger, BJP MLA in 2016 had also added as seen in the earlier chapter that it was not the party's approach to rake up religious conflict in the district.

On the other hand, according to the Khongsai, youth activist and politician from the Kuki tribe, the Hindu nationalist agenda would never be able to penetrate among the Christian tribes. He adds that "majoritarian politics is on the rise and BJP is outrightly anti-Christian and anti-tribal. Their party members say anything without bothering about the minorities which he says is being imitated in Dima Hasao as well". According to him, BJP does not influence the Kuki youth. 'There might be BJP *karyakartas* but they will not be hardcore BJP supporter nor supporters of its ideology. The youth are aware of the party's stance speaking openly against minorities all over the country elsewhere'.

Langthasa, Haflong MAC from Congress added that during his campaigns he had seen that the Christians will never say they like or support the BJP. For most, the BJP is just another political party, and its presence and strength today is just a phase which they think will soon decline. It's a matter of survival for now since for most, it's a hand-to-mouth kind of situation they live in without jobs and meagre sources of income. He added that especially for the youth, they saw no point in being part of the Opposition for now. He feels that in his observation the churches such as that of the Presbyterians (PYF), seemed to have their gatherings increased, which is a response to the RSS' activities in the region. This did not bid well for a secular nation, he added. All the same, many PYF members are also BJP *karyakartas* he says.

There is no religious clash in the district and the violence in the past were on ethnic lines and not religious. In the past two to three years however, the NCHAC CEM was seen to indulge in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian language. Haflongbar says that the CEM in a public speech prior to Assembly elections 2021, had said that BJP will make Dima Hasao *Congress mukt* and *Muslim mukt*. However, this did not have any takers in the district. He says that it was only an

attempt on the part of the CEM to appease the RSS and VHP. Contradictorily, he adds the number of Muslim merchants in Haflong market is increasing since being outsiders they are only required to pay a certain sum to obtain a trading licence.¹⁸ No documents are required, unlike for the local people. This has led to more Muslim merchants in control of the meat and vegetables market.

In addition to the Kuki, Hmar and Naga there is a small number of Dimasa Christians as well in the district. According to X, the Dimasas who are converting to Christianity are not doing so because of any other wish but pressure from the changing socio-economic system around them. For instance, he adds that Dimasa faith's upkeep is too expensive. We need to sacrifice goats, ducks etc. It costs money which we don't have. Christianity is simple that way. N-Wari village has a small Dimasa Christian population. The Nagas, Hmars, Christian tribes from far off come and help in the death rituals. X adds that the incumbent CEM had openly declared that Dimasa Christians will have their PRC, ration card cancelled and no jobs will be given to them. He also alleged that Dimasa Christian supporters of a Christian EM's names were deleted by CEM from getting state provisions.

Despite BJP's conciliatory and guarded approach towards the Christians in the district, the party and RSS' and VHP's growing association with the Dimasas was resented and has become a cause of insecurity.

5.8 BJP's Interaction with the Civil Society

Civil society refers to the sphere of social interaction and organization outside the formal structures of the state and the market (Hann & Carroll, 1992). The civil society organisations in any society play a key role in mobilizing the people on social, political and economic issues. In Dima Hasao, the community organisations of the different tribes and non-tribals exist. There are several NGOs and there is a Press Association besides market associations etc. My focus here is mainly the community civil society organisations of the different tribes and to see these organisations' engagement with the BJP. As seen in earlier chapters the All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU), the Dimasa Students' Union, the North Cachar Hills Students Federation (NCHSF) have been active members and led the autonomy movements in the district. The leadership in ADSU also mobilized around the Dimasa national question. Several leaders had also later joined the DHD such as Jewel Gorlosa and Dilip Nunisa, of the DHD (J) and DHD(D) factions. Besides, all communities had their own specific student bodies. However, in a space

where inter-ethnic competition with a history of conflict it is observed that there is largely no real interaction between the civil society groups of different student groups. They function in their own nebula of issues and activities. It is the author's observation that the student bodies' groups especially that of the Hindu communities and Hindu tribes are being replaced by the BJYM in the political sphere. The youth join the student bodies keeping the election in mind and expect party tickets. Earlier NCHAC leadership were also from the student bodies and the student bodies were natural steppingstones for the district's youth to get into politics. Of late, with the increasing popularity of the BJYM, it being the youth wing of the party, the local student bodies have been pushed out of patronage by the council authority. The activities of the current set of student organisations are also being restricted within their communities which perhaps also has led to their ebbing in significance.

The Dimasa Mothers Association (DMA) is another important civil society organization which is active in the district. The General Secretary of the DMA, Maiphal Kemprai says that they are not associated with any party, and they choose to work independently in the district for the cause of women, children, education and health. They are particularly, involved with the issues of preservation of Dimasa language, culture and heritage. Although a bit wary of the BJP because of the involvement with RSS and the 2018 debacle with Jagdamba Mall's inclusion of Dima Hasao in Nagalim, she said that the party had done several good work as well, especially with regards to Dimasa culture and preservation.

There are several literary organisations active in the district as well. For many tribes in the district several of whose mother languages are considered to be 'endangered'. There had been long drawn demands for inclusion of several of these languages in the Ninth Schedule such as Dimasa, Garo, Karbi etc. In the light of the National Education Policy, 2020 the central as well as state governments have taken active measures to introduce the mother language as a medium of instruction in primary schools up until Class VIII. The Assam government has been highly proactive in this regard and the different Sahitya Sabhas are regularly involved with the Department of Education to implement the same. The present GS of Dimasa Sahitya (DSS) informed the author that the government was working with the different tribal groups such as Dimasa, Hmar, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa and others to produce textbooks and teaching learning material in tribal languages. However, he added that he was unsure how good that will do to the learners. In 1991 the DSS had taken a resolution that the Dimasa script was to be written in Roman script. In the author's field visits in Maibang, at the house of the local headmen, the

locals had said that they wished the government would open more quality English Medium schools.

The religious institutions of the tribal communities especially the Christians are, as earlier discussed, approached by the Minority Morcha during elections to vote for the BJP. As Khongsai had informed the churches in length discuss the activities of the VHP and RSS as well as the anti-minority comments of the BJP leaders in the mainland which makes them very wary. Thus, with the Christian institutions the relationship was purely transactional and meant for electoral purposes alone. In the case of the Dimasa traditional priests of the *daikho* and clan systems, the Assam government had recently assured support to protect indigenous cultures and to this effect, monetary contributions were made to clan elders. In the case of the district, the current CEM is also seen to be actively mobilizing the clan elders and has installed statues of the clan progenitors in the recently opened Ranachandi Temple (rock-cut temple) in Maibang in Dima Hasao.

5.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the BJP's mass fronts such as the different morchas have over the last few years mobilized significantly among the people and different social groups of the district. Particularly the youth morcha BJYM and the mahila morcha have been active in the district. The youth's and the women's aspirations have been significantly mobilized by the BJP and its morchas. It is also to be noted that many of the morcha members join the wings in expectation of party tickets. Several morcha members had already become members of autonomous council or were vying for party tickets in the indeed upcoming elections. The youth mobilization is spectacular in particular because of the higher number of activities of the youth morcha is organizing in the district. The zeal of the younger members of the party that the author corresponded with also goes to show BJP's popularity among the youth in the district. The women mobilization which is lesser discussed in the academic circle is something which needs to be further studied and analyzed. In the case of Dima Hasao it is seen that many younger women participate in the activities of the mahila morcha and also contribute regularly to holding the *Mann ki Baat* and other programs in the households and neighbourhoods. As one of the respondents from the kisan morcha had commented that given the fact many women in the district were unemployed the aspirational among them had found a space to enter the political arena through the mahila morcha. . Among the tribal community especially the Dimasa women who are higher in number in the morcha, are seen to take great pride that they are able

to represent the community and the district at the state or the national level. The activities of the morcha and their mobilization had also reduced the significance of several indigenous youth organisations severely as well. These social mobilization by the BJP allies such as the RSS and VHP have also been great in it is observed that they have been working patiently in the district during times of conflict as well as establishing schools in remote areas to inculcate Hindu culture and values the mobilization of the VHP and the RSS through their schools and ashrams have been significant among the Heraka Nagas. Presently the council establishment under the BJP has taken up the mantle to protect Dimasa icons and preserving the history and culture through the installation of statues and construction of community and dance halls. Of course, these mobilization aspects are not without criticism. Additionally, the involvement of RSS and VHP and their inclination towards the Dimasas has made the other tribal communities wary.

Chapter VI

Paradigm Shift: From Politics of Tribal Autonomy to Hindu Nationalism?

6.1 Introduction

As we have seen from the earlier chapters the main political issue of the district revolves around the demand of the implementation of 244(A). The tribal communities are united in their demand of autonomy, although there might be a lack of clarity on whether that autonomy is supposed to come through the creation of a separate state or an autonomous state within Assam. The leadership across parties have reiterated greater autonomy for the tribals as their main electoral plank through the grant of 244(A) or the MoU of 1995 or the MoS of 2012. The district bifurcation demand by the Indigenous Peoples Forum (IPF) also revolves around the same question. The root of autonomy movements in Dima Hasao district can be seen to stem from a recognition of the tribal communities of their unique ethnic identities separate from that of the plains as in especially different from the caste society. There is a consensus for immediate protection of the tribal identity, cultures and rights of the hills of Assam which crystallized into demands for separate states based on ethnic markers. After 2016 when BJP formed government in the state as well as in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) elections it is seen that the demand for autonomy has taken a backseat. In Dima Hasao, the leaders of the majority tribe Dimasa promptly joined the BJP. It is seen that the non-tribal Hindu population in the district have also consolidated their votes in their support of BJP. The district being under Sixth Schedule, the elected council seats are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes of the district alone. As pointed out by one political activist who belongs to a Christian tribe, it is observed that the non-tribal Hindu voters are more inclined to vote for Dimasa candidates who are also Hindus. The Dimasa tribe have their own traditional religious practice called the *Daikho system* of worship. However they predominantly identify as Hindus and have undergone significant process of Sanskritisation especially the Dimasa population in the contiguous district of Cachar. As pointed out in previous chapters due to a very volatile political system with a lack of a party system, the BJP's entry at the level of the political elite was not very difficult. Presently, the entrenchment of the party is seen to be leading to the strengthening of a Hindu nationalist ideology among the 'animist Hindu' tribes. The Hindu nationalism that the BJP propagates is simultaneously influencing the co-option and assimilation of these tribes and

therefore weakening the cause of the tribes' demands of autonomy and self-determination. In the district the BJP is systematically along with the RSS and VHP introducing icons, symbols and a culture which assimilates the icons and symbols unique to the tribes. The BJP's majoritarian language and perspective has also seeped into the majority Dimasa leadership of the district which has further alienated the Christian non-Dimasa tribes. In a potentially volatile environment due to a decade of inter-ethnic strife, a religious and majoritarian dynamic is also seen to be growing deeper roots which could be detrimental to the peace and stability in the district. This chapter investigates the larger trends which have arisen after the coming in power of the BJP and how it affects the autonomy movements in the district.

6.2 Dilution of Autonomy Provisions of the Sixth Schedule

The main political issues of the Dima Hasao district over the years on account of which the district saw umpteenth conflict, disturbance, protests and violence are the implementation of Article 244 (A) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Besides, according to the President of the Dima Hasao District Congress "in the upcoming 2026 Delimitation, they wish to place before the government the demand for MLA seat enhancement in line with other tribal states such as Mizoram and Meghalaya. In states like Mizoram and Meghalaya there is provision of one MLA for every ten thousand population. The demand if fulfilled then Dima Hasao would have four MLAs (three more) for the district according to the population". This would strengthen the district politically as presently the district had only one MLA which often led to the marginalization of the region's voice in the Assam Assembly. The demand for one seat in the Parliament has also been voiced by different leadership of the district in the past. According to him when it comes to these demands the different communities are united and in agreement with each other. However, in the past few years insecurity arising out of the fear of dilution of Sixth Schedule provisions has risen.

According to former MLA Samartjit Haflongbar of the constituency, there is an increase in gross interference in Sixth Schedule provisions from the state and central levels. For instance, he says, elementary education in the district is run by the Autonomous Council as per MoU of 1995 but in recent times such as in November 2022, out of a total of sixty four appointment letters that were given to M.E and H.S schoolteachers, only one was appointed from the district. Rest was all from outside and the Council had nothing to do with the appointment except for ceremonial distribution

of appointment letters. This is gross interference with the autonomous powers of the District Council.

During the 2021 election campaign, the Panchayati Raj and Sixth Schedule dilution became a huge issue. The Constitution (125th) Amendment Bill, 2019 was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in January 2019. The amendments include the amendment of the Sixth Schedule for creation of Village and Municipal Councils in addition to the District Councils which was used by the Opposition. The Opposition argued that this measure would reduce the Sixth Schedule to Gram Panchayats and the councils would lose all autonomy.

After the BJP released a Vision Document called Sankalp Patra during the Assembly Elections campaign in 2021, a separate election manifesto for the Dima Hasao district was hurriedly released on social media by district official representatives owing to pressure of the opposition and the mass protest it generated. The first two points that figured in the manifesto are:

- Implementation of article 244 A and creation of autonomous state
- Non introduction of Panchayati Raj system in this district
- Creation of 1 MP seat in Lok Sabha for Dima Hasao
- Creation for 2 more MLA seats

The then CM Sarbananda Sonowal had to declare that the Panchayat system would never be implemented in the district. But according to Haflong MAC Langthasa it is observed that, “Gaon Sabhas are being conducted by Village Level Committees which are called Constituency Level Committees in the district. Even the constituency MAC are part of it, alongwith Block Development Officer (BDO), Gaonburahs, and line department staff. The Gaonburahs have no say in it and the meetings’ agenda is pre-decided to be implemented by the Gaonburahs. He further added that local BDO’s have been transferred and the bureaucrats who are from outside the district, are not aware of the local political system and specific procedures of the Sixth Schedule. The Gaon Sabhas are working in a ditto with the guidelines of the Gaon Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). Yet the GPDP is called Constituency Development Plan in the district. The only thing is elections are not conducted of the Panchayats.”

X, a respondent who wished to remain anonymous added that “during nomination in the Gaon Sabha, anyone can file nominations”. He feels that there should be some qualification(sic.) rules such as ST, PRC or *patta*. He also feared that the tribal customary court is continuously undermined even if the Sixth Schedule presupposes its protection. He adds that precious little has been done over the years for the upgradation of the customary laws in keeping with modern laws by our people. “There is a customary court, followed by Mujari Court and then the Council court. Today our customary heads are being arrested in the name of breaking modern laws in the line of how Reserved Forests become an impediment to tribals using the resources on the traditional forest lands and resources. The Higher Courts need to make laws in consultation with the locals especially the tribals but that doesn’t happen.”

Although in the past different BJP national leadership such as Rajnath Singh and LK Advani had made statements about the protection of Sixth Schedule and the implementation of 244 (A), the current regime was not interested in doing so. In fact, the 125th Amendment Bill if passed would dismantle the Sixth Schedule and all authority of the Autonomous Councils altogether. Thereby, it is apparent that BJP is in no hurry to resolve the issue of the autonomous council and is seen to further participate in the erosion of the autonomous provisions of the Sixth Schedule as seen above.

6.3 Influence of the State Government in the District’s Decision Making Remains Unresolved

There is a general understanding among the political elite as well as the masses in the district that voting the party in power in centre and state is vital to development in the district. Longkumer (2019) called this the alignment of region-state-centre. The weaknesses of the council making it prone to external influence stem from the very structure of the autonomous council and the Sixth Schedule. (Gassah, 1997) The state government more often than not plays kingmaker in the district. (Bhuyan, 1989) Influencing the autonomous council’s political elite is in no way a new strategy and has been in place in the district since its very inception. The state government has time and again tried to control the council.

The Sixth Schedule does not explicitly spell out the power and resource-sharing mechanism between the state government and the autonomous councils thereby leading to several loopholes in the autonomy provisions which become open to interference by external forces, in this case, the state government. The review and audit mechanism of the council has also come under scrutiny

over the years. However, precious little has been done to rectify these issues despite BJP's past claims of *poriborton*. The meddling from state government in Sixth Schedule remains unabated according to the Langthasa. The creation of Guardian Ministers was a case in point. The Ministers and Secretaries send orders to the council administration and hold review meetings which violate the MoU 1995. The Hill Areas Department (HAD) Ministry was also not given to any MLA from the Dima Hasao or Karbi Anglong. It went to Jogen Mohan, MLA from Mahmara in Upper Assam and not a denizen of either Dima Hasao or Karbi Anglong. It has been the norm that the HAD ministry will be under the MLAs of either district as the department is concerned with the Sixth Schedule areas. This change was criticised by many as doing away with rightful representation.

The council's dependency on the state and central government, particularly for financial support has been the bone of contention between the APHLC leadership as well as the ASDC especially between the council leaders of the different hill districts and the Government of Assam as seen from earlier chapters. The former Congress MLA and minister GC Langthasa wrote 'that the State Governments acts as an intermediary between Central Government and the Council in the matter of central grants, the progress of development activities faced stumbling blocks at different levels of implementation particularly in the State level'. (Langthasa, 2005) Besides the financial control which has been the most crippling manner in which state government controls the autonomous council, there are other legislative, executive, judicial and political ways in which the state government exerts more serious control. The Assam Vision Document released by BJP prior to the 2016 Assembly Elections on 23rd March, 2016 mentions that the hill districts would receive special attention so that developmental works such as roads, agriculture, education etc would improve. The document states that lack of finance should not be a bottleneck. The BJP government is yet to resolve the issue of financial independence of the autonomous councils. The grants and funds are still routed to the council via the state government.

The Governor is the Head of the NCHAC as per provisions of the Sixth Schedule. But in practice the Council of Ministers exerts control especially through the Hills Area Department (HAD) Ministry. The state government can supersede the council if the Governor becomes satisfied that the council is not running in accordance with the Sixth Schedule. Such order has to be approved by the state legislature. The Governor can also dissolve the council on the recommendation of a Commission appointed under Para 14 of the Sixth Schedule. Immediately after issuing the

notification the Governor shall direct that a fresh election be held for reconstitution of the council or he may assume the administration of the district himself or any other authority as he sees fit for a maximum period of twelve months. This provision is in effect used as a tool by the Council of Ministers of the state legislature to manipulate the district's politics. (Bhuyan, 1989) In 2001, the Assam Government took control of the autonomous council on grounds of financial mismanagement and all powers of the elected council authority had come to be vested in the Deputy Commissioner. This was repeated in 2006. In this manner, the Assam government exerted indirect control on the autonomous council.⁵ The term of the 9th NCHAC was due to expire on 20th December 2006 when the Governor taking charge in June 2006, extended the term of the council by six months. The Gauhati High Court however suspended this extension and the Governor had to make changes as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. Herein, the Governor appointed Anil Kumar Baruah, Deputy Commissioner of the district to take over the administration.⁶ The supersession provision is akin to Article 356 of the Constitution of India. Such instances have been a common occurrence in the council as seen in the previous chapter which has led to instability and maladministration in the autonomous council. The state government delayed the council elections which were due in 2018. The term of the council had been extended unconstitutionally by the Governor which was challenged by the local opposition leaders in AGP.⁷

Another, means of political control is the nominated positions in the autonomous council. Presently, two seats are nominated in the council besides the 28 elected members. It was also laid down that preference should be given to minority communities who are unrepresented [The Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act 1969] The Constitution of the NCHAC was amended and now states that the nominated members would be appointed by the Governor in consultation with the NCHAC members and majority decision would prevail (1958). Thereby, it is seen that the appointments are largely made based on political considerations at the state level and are always expected to support the party in power in the state. (Bhuyan, 1989, p. 223) In 2002, the majority community Dimasas were seen to be being nominated as council members. Presently, since 2019 nominated members of the NCHAC are Issory P Joishi and Liton Chakrabarty, belonging to Nepali Brahmin and Bengali Brahmin communities respectively.

Another means of state control of the Sixth Schedule area is that the NCHAC elections are conducted by the State Election Commission. According to JI Kathar, founding member of the

new APHLC which is active in Karbi Anglong, in 1951, the Governor of Assam was empowered to conduct elections and form an interim council. After the formation of the Interim Council, the 1951 Rules became irrelevant and the Interim Council was to make their own laws under Paragraph 2, sub paragraph 7 and subparagraph 6. That never happened and we never utilized these provisions.”. This provision is included in the first Enacted Sixth Schedule. (Hansaria, 2005, p. 373-374) Kathar adds that “the Sixth Schedule is a Constitution within a Constitution. It is not a cultural thing or reservation, and we have to conduct our elections which include voter list preparation”. The electoral roll presently for the council elections is prepared on the basis of the Assembly and Lok Sabha electoral roll. The rule is to apply to the Revenue department and apply with PRC.

Khongsai also adds that *boro-babu* or the office assistant in charge of preparing the electoral roll is always a non-tribal and mostly a Nepali or a Bengali. He alleges that they enroll the persons without any proper inspection. The council authority was also lax in regard to the proper inspection of the PRCs. Today, the Council doesn’t have any data on the number of new electorates and who have left which is creating a lot of loopholes and confusion.

With the autonomy provisions weakening, the state as well as centre’s interference has been increasing in the district. The creation of guardian ministers, bottlenecks in the funding and meddling in council elections has not been resolved by the party which increases further friction and distrust between the state and the council. The state’s constant interference has also led to severe impediments in the functioning of the council. The issue of electoral roll must be looked into by the NCHAC authority because unabated influx could further marginalize the hill tribes or lead to violence in the district as has happened in other parts of the state as well as the region.

Kathar adds that autonomy provisions of the tribals in the Sixth Schedule Areas is taken away through the backdoor. It is indeed true with the BJP’s manipulation of the ideas of High Command and National Party, local autonomy had become severely strained. Autonomous Councils are not autonomous anymore as they are now bound by BJP’s high command. The BJP had also successfully installed former rebels and insurgents in the party who still had heinous cases pending against them in court. This led to easy manipulation by the government through the National Investigation Agency, CBI and the Enforcement Directorate, which is seen happening in other

parts of the country. The review meetings held in the district where state ministers are frequently holding reviews of the council has also impeded the autonomy of the NCHAC. In MoU 1995 it is given that an officer of the rank of Divisional Commissioner alone should be the Principal Secretary of the Council. Now most of the P.S. are the rank of Secretary. So, the Deputy Commissioner can do anything they like. As Kathar says, indeed the councils should be equipped to review themselves. Only then would autonomy be meaningful.

6.4 Status of Autonomy Movements?

The district has seen ‘autonomy demands’ since the beginning of the Sixth Schedule and autonomous councils. It began with the APHLC which ended with the formation of Meghalaya and Article 244 (A) for the Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, then taken up by ASDC which ended with the MoU of 1995. The ethnic homeland demands which followed also are built on similar grievances and aspirations but with different ideologies and methods and hence will be discussed later in the chapter. Presently, there are still demands and aspirations of an Autonomous State under 244(A). Secondly, there is also the district bifurcation demand by the Indigenous Peoples Forum (IPF). The demand for implementation of 244(A) is still strong among the people and hence it is seen during every election the parties make a point to bring it in their plan of action. However, popular consolidation around the demand has become weak in the absence of strong opposition parties in the district. Opposition parties being absent in the present NCHAC also hampered the mobilization. The different youth organisations were also unable to raise a strong unified voice in this regard. The author observed that youth organisations such as ADSU(All Dimasa Students’ Union), Dimasa Students’ Union (DSU), which both in the past have been instrumental in the autonomy movements had been replaced by the BJYM in Dima Hasao. Earlier these student body members went on to participate in elections in the NCHAC and beyond. Presently, with the BJYM and other morcha mobilization among the youth, the ethnic-based student bodies seem to have lesser patronage. With lesser youth participation, the demands and movements have significantly taken a backseat.

The bifurcation demand by the Indigenous People’s Forum (IPF) as a response to the *Dimaraji* demand and renaming of Dima Hasao from NC Hills created distrust and intense competition between the Dimasas on one side and the non-Dimasa tribes on the other. The Dimasa civil society

groups are unified in their opposition to the bifurcation which further hampers the possibility of uniting for the demand of the autonomous state. They have accused the IPF of trying to divide the district on 'communal lines'. The IPF says that their demands the point of contention is not necessarily ethnic or communal, it is about discrimination, rights and share of resources. They feel deprived when it comes to jobs, contracts etc. However, at times the language does become inflammatory due to the sensitivity of the issue and the exchange between the antagonistic groups have taken a dangerous turn where calls the other 'refugees' and the other 'fugitive'. There have been bandh calls by IPF for their demand while Dimasa youth are seen to oppose the bandh call. Both sides have made several representations to the state government on the behalf of their demands. The state government also is seen to add fuel to the fire with Himanta Biswa Sarma, then Finance minister, tweeting on 6th February, 2019 that "we've decided to create a separate new district from existing Dima Hasao district considering its large geography and hilly terrain which makes the access of government services difficult for the citizens". The standalone tweet created great tensions in the district. The author had inquired from friends from opposing camps as to whether the bifurcation was the one mentioned in the 2012 MoS, although, the MoS mentioned a trifurcation. Or it meant the fulfilment of the IPF demand. Neither claimed to know which side of demand the finance minister had intended and the 'we' he mentioned was unclear. The district's boundaries remain the same. Yet, the issue continues to create great consternation among the tribal groups.

Langthasa says that it is observed that the state machinery uses the Indigenous People's Forum when there are questions to the ruling dispensation by the opposition on crucial issues. Whenever, the party is questioned it slips the IPF issue in, which in turn consolidates Dimasa votes. The regular refrain is that support the ruling dispensation or else, the Dimasas will get divided and that can only benefit the non-Dimasas such as the IPF.

In addition to this, there are other rivalries between the different tribal groups in the district. For instance, the Nagalim issue as already mentioned earlier was a source of insecurity for the Dimasas since the NSCN(I-M)'s proposed Nagalim includes the Dima Hasao district. The Kuki groups also have issues with the Nagalim demand. There have been ethnic conflicts between the Nagas and the Kukis in Manipur in 1992 and 1993. In Dima Hasao's Diger, Khongsai's constituency, he adds that it is a border area of Assam. "We Kukis are strictly against the NSCN-IM's Nagalim demand.

From Khepre if one moves further inside, there are Kuki villages as buffers. He claims it is the Kukis who are protecting the integrity of Assam. The village of Vattop Leikeh is a strategic village where a Police Border Outpost is being constructed. The village borders Manipur on one side and Nagaland on the other. The villages are populated by Kukis and mostly Zemes. As such, the main bulwark against Greater Nagalim demand which includes Dima Hasao district, are the Kukis in these border villages. The Kukis are antagonistic to NSCN-IM as they have slaughtered thousands of Kukis”, he adds.

The autonomy movements have been also impeded by the lack of trust among the different ethnicities in the district. Discussion and reconciliation needs to be encouraged among the different communities to end isolation and ensure solution to people’s grievances. Additionally, it has to be added that the non-tribal population in the district are also to be taken into confidence regarding the autonomy movements of the district. It is the general understanding among the non-tribals of the district that any increase in the benefits of the tribals would lead to decrease in their entitlements. Such gap also needs to be addressed and discussed. However, the BJP leadership at the council and state level do not seem interested in resolving these issues. Rather, it is seen that the party representatives are amply using these animosities and fanning them further for political gains.

6.5 Future of Opposition in a Deteriorated Party System?

The current NCHAC has no Opposition member left in the council which brings any democratic system to a grave threat. It is observed in the district that anti-incumbency exists but there is a question if that could materialise into electoral victory. According to Langthasa, the general understanding among the Dimasas that the present CEM has a love for the community due to being part of the *Dimaraji* movement is now on the wane. There is a growing view that he is also another opportunist. But the opposition being non-existent leaves the voters with no choice. Building opposition has become extremely difficult in the present scenario. Before 2014 there was some coexistence of other parties besides the ruling party but that is not the case now. The ruling BJP do not want any opposition to exist at all according to Langthasa. He says that the people joining the opposition parties have drastically reduced. Due to a lack of employment opportunities, many youths want to enter the market but the competition is fierce and it creates more antagonism among

the different tribes. One needs a political connection to be able to enter the market space for which the local BJP establishment has made it a rule that they have to join the BJP. Any minor connection with the opposition is also not welcome.

There are criticisms against the present functioning of the Congress party as well, which is the main opposition party in the district. Langthasa alleges that present members are inactive. There is fear, insecurity and lack of courage when it comes to challenging the might of the BJP among the common people and without able leadership, the insecurity increases.

Khongsai, who was also previously in the Congress and now in Trinamool Congress (TMC) adds that the senior leadership seemed to be willing to maintain the status-quo. “They were just waiting for the party to change at the national and state level. Although the younger members were the brain behind the campaign of 2021 and doing all the work of the party, the former CEMs and EMs who were now losing elections in their constituencies still wanted to call the shots within the party. They do not wish to share the power with the younger lot, alleged Khongsai.

According to the present BJP ST Morcha president, Naiding, he may have some personal criticism of the party representative in the district’s actions and policy, but it was against BJP’s policy to critique him. Such is a dangerous trend as it could safeguard the well-being and strength of any party organisation but in a democracy it is unhealthy. It is indeed a matter of concern that the party members as well as the leadership in the district did not critique any of the party policies or activities in the public forum. In the author’s discussion with the party workers, there did not appear much critique of the party or the way it functioned in the district. The party workers in many cases blamed the people themselves for any said failure or shortcoming. The structural issues of the district, the council and the party system do not figure in their discussion.

Currently, the TMC is seen to be recruiting people in the district although it is still in a nascent state. Khongsai, adds that the party is very aggressive in West Bengal, and it seemed to him that the party is equipped to handle the political system of the district. It is also a national party and was once part of Congress party. While AAP also has good chances, but it has no idea about what Sixth Schedule is or the politics of the district., claims Khongsai. TMC also has good leadership in Assam. On the other hand, Ripun Bora, formerly in Congress, now in TMC understands Sixth Schedule and Susmita Dev, from Cachar, knows Dima Hasao. West Bengal politics also affects the

Bengalis' orientation in Assam. Thus, TMC might be able to take the mantle of opposition in the near future. However, these are only conjectures on the part of the respondent as well as the author.

The existence of an opposition to question the policies of the ruling party is essential to all democracies. The BJP in the district has stymied that and the major opposition Congress is unwilling to take the mantle and only play the waiting game. Meanwhile the people find no avenues to channel their grievances. In such a situation any party in the establishment runs the risk of becoming autocratic, as well as the members at the helm of affairs. Earlier the case of the NCHAC was unstable councils with constant defections, no-confidence motions and supersession of the council by the Governor at the cost of the democratic functioning of the council and its autonomy. Since 2016, the BJP government claims that it has checked defections and council enjoyed stability which in turn led to proper functioning of the council easing the developmental processes and schemes. However, the apparent lack of internal democracy within the party and with the opposition in no position to question the establishment brings the district's political system to dangerous throes.

6.6 Discrepancies in Promise and Practice: Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas?

The BJP's slogan *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*, *Poriborton*, and *Acche Din* are slogans that have captured the common psyche. The outreach among the common people can be attributed to the massive media campaign by the BJP. In Assam, in 2016, after three terms of Congress rule, the anti-incumbency was rife. People believed that only a party like BJP could bring the necessary change and development to the region. Even in Dima Hasao, in 2016, the general mood among the people was positive towards BJP. The district's grave socio-economic backwardness then attributed to the Congress' corrupt regime could finally end with the coming of a nationalist party like BJP.

The NCHAC's employees had long suffered the problem of irregular salaries whereby salary used to be paid even a year late as discussed in an earlier chapter. One of the first promises when the incumbent CEM came to power was that he would resolve the issue of the salary. In August 2018, in a public programme attended by CM Sarbananda Sonowal and Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the NCHAC authority announced that the council would release the pending 10 month salary of the council employees and then a Voluntary Retirement Plan or a Golden

Handshake would be offered with government norms. The NCHAC had sent a 200-crore proposal to carry out the same. When the BJP government had come, the council had 2,270 people on its rolls and salaries have not been paid since November 2016. The party's solution was to remove a 1000 employees. The NCHAC council employees union had been carrying out protests demanding their salary. The union was not taken into confidence before the preparation of the said plan.²³ The union president had accused the council of fund leakage since council leaders were not giving any accounts of their respective departments. The employees had been reduced to selling fruits and vegetables on the roadside because of nonpayment of salary and some employees had to take bribes just to survive. Corruption had increased manifold. The employee union had claimed that the earlier Congress government at least gave the salary from the grant-in-aid but the BJP government had stopped doing it. Of the 1000 employees, most were schoolteachers and forest guards.

The forced retirement scheme was a quick fix and cruel solution to the problem of the bloated number of employees in the NCHAC. Surely, the government could have found other solutions to the issue after consultation with the employees' union and other stakeholders. The problem of unemployment cannot be resolved through forced retirement especially after promises of progress and development.

In June 2023, a newspaper report in the Assam Tribune reported that the utilization of funds for the NCHAC for the financial year 2021-22 was nil as on December 31, 2021. This was revealed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs. The Committee expressed that zero expenditure will cause a stoppage of all ongoing work being undertaken in the district. The meeting was called by the DoNER ministry. The budget allocation for the NCHAC for the year 21-22 was rupees 22 crores. The DoNER ministry coordinates closely with the state government to monitor these schemes in the district. The non-utilization of funds as reported was on account of the late receipt of utilization certificates (UC), delay in awarding work, delay in release of funds by the state government to the implementing agencies etc. This report pointed to two things- that the council was not producing proper UCs which and hence the nil expenditure or no fund had been released by the State government to the council for the schemes. Either way, the report represents the presence of anomalies and continuing bottlenecks in the district administration and procedures. For long scholars and experts (Chaube,) have pointed out the lack of an audit system is a huge

drawback of the autonomous council. The lack of transparency will obviously breed corruption and misappropriation of funds. The government needs to take measures to empower the NCHAC to conduct audits and publish regular reports.

After coming to power, the party in the district announced several projects in the district such as the construction of heliports, Skill Development Centres, Horticulture Centre, Bamboo Industrial Park. However, as of now, the major projects are yet to be started. The district has had for long demanded university campus in the district. However, in the last budgets despite, several colleges in Assam being upgraded to university, no special provision was announced for the district. The council and state government are emphasizing the tourism industry in the district with mega cultural and entertainment festivals being conducted, such as the Falcon festival, Jatinga Festival. Huge sums of money are being spent on it. The focus can be education first, before the cultural activities. The government was also keen on appeasing the cultural sentiments of the people by constructing more dance halls, and community halls for different communities in the district as well as installation of statues of community socio-political as well as mythical figures.

Criticisms abound regarding the performing of the current establishment. Accusations of grabbing land accusations by council leadership, and allegations of patronage of VHP and RSS by the government who are grabbing tribal land in the name of constructing private schools using council funds were made by several respondents. Sand and stone mining with heavy amounts of extraction by heavy machinery had increased. In 2022 May, unprecedented massive floods and landslides occurred which had washed away National Highways and the New Haflong station which had been blamed on the excessive exploitation of the rivers and the sandbanks as well as deforestation. Unfortunately, no scientific study exists on this and, unfortunately, the state government nor the council is interested in investigating these alarming changes in the climate which could affect the local population severely.

Khongsai has claimed that despite the 2014 PM Modi claim that all villages in India have been electrified, there is misinformation going on as so many villages in the Dima Hasao itself are yet to be electrified. He claimed that the PMGSY, which was earlier announced by the CEM in 2019 that the tendering would soon be done in Dima Hasao and not in Guwahati. It has not been done either. The roads that are being made now do not even last a year. He also added that in Diger

constituency, PM Modi's first project Swachh Bharat Abhijan had not been implemented at all which he found out in after he had filed an RTI. No toilet has been constructed but on paper 12000 per household has already been paid. Perhaps, the money has been all pocketed by the contractor.

According to the BJP district General Secretary on the other hand, BJP had ushered in great development. She says that the local Panimur site in Dima Hasao had got a lot of coverage in the media when the Rangoon movie came to be shot there. Tourist flow has increased at the site. So local politicians and local youth ensure that they are organized to preserve the Panimur Tourist Spot. They ensure that the space is kept clean, and they have organized the local youth to collect entry fee etc at the site. She states that BJP gives space to meritorious people based on hard work and capacity. The party had recognized her hard work and determination and hence had given her the position of party district General Secretary she claims. During Congress' regime there were educated leaders who were at the helm of affairs of the district and yet they did nothing to develop the district. This is in reference to the taunts against the current council leadership who are former rebels and most are uneducated and some allegedly illiterate.

With reference to the party, and the current establishment's zeal and added interest in installing statues and constructing community and dance halls, she adds that Busu Dima is the traditional festival of the Dimasas and earlier regimes made no efforts to ensure the celebration of the festival with dignity. Now, with the construction of Baikho or dance halls in villages, people can come together and celebrate the cultural festival with ease. Dimasas have their worship system where the Madaikho and Gerkho (temples) are used for sacrificial ceremonies and mass worship. It is under the regime of the new CEM that the Madaikho and Gerkho have been built in all villages which also allows the Dimasas to carry out their worships with dignity and maintain proper norms. Earlier it was done in the jungles and during rains it would become difficult for people to worship properly. Road infrastructure also has been improved significantly. Lot of developmental activities are coming up such as Longku project where 80% job will be given to local people, Hathikali Bamboo Project, Solar Project and Eklavya Schools are coming up which will give more jobs to our people with eligibility. The Sambudhan Phonglo Skill Development Centre is coming up at Diyungbra which will also impart skills to the people generating employment opportunities. The council team goes often to rural areas to tell people about the plans for B.Ed college, Law College, Horticulture College. These last plans have been delayed due to corona or else they would be done

by now. The work at the Polytechnic Institute is also happening at a fast pace, she had claimed. Besides, road infrastructure has greatly developed, and Jal Jeevan Mission is ensuring water taps in all villages, and mobile towers since mobile has become a basic amenity today. On the issue of excessive sand and stone mining which are ruining the rivers and ecology she adds that the stones and sand are required to build our houses and other construction activities. “To build our houses, obviously we need to use the resources available to us in the nature”.

The BJP government in the council has been accused of being discriminatory towards the Christian tribes of the district and being partial to Dimasas. The IPF’s demand is based on this sense of discrimination in the share of resources. On this, the party functionary had commented that the BJP is not communal and those were just allegations made by the opposition just as they said that BJP was anti-tribal. The party shows respect to tribals. The party celebrates Janajati Divas where we pay respect to Bhagwan Birsa Munda, or Rani Gaidinliu.

Haflongbar had added that being Dimasa does not mean only wearing Dimasa *risa* (scarf) which have become the symbol of tribal identities. The present establishment claims to be a Dimasa while doing activities which are detrimental to the Dimasas and to other communities. Recently, 9 crores were given in the name of Rani Gaidinliu who has no relevance in the district, as she is from Manipur. There is no necessity to erect her statue in the district. Yet it was done. In the same manner, the establishment of erected statue of Subhash Chandra Bose in Haflong only to appease the Bengalis while the founding leaders of autonomy in the district such as the leaders of the North Cachar Hills Tribal Council are not remembered. He also added that installing status of imaginary figures were a waste of public resource as it was of no use for the public.

The non-tribal groups in the district are also high in number in the district as seen in an earlier chapter. The highest are the Bengalis followed by the Nepali/Gurkhali. Their votes had consolidated after the coming of BJP and several respondents observed that they voted enmasse. Their votes also mattered more in the MLA and MP election as they were the deciding factor. It was also observed in conversations that these groups were more inclined to vote for Dimasas than other tribes. The present two nominated MACs in the council belong to the Bengali and Nepali/Gurkhali community.

Haflong market is run by the Bengali Hindus and the Haflong Market Association has always been under the Bengalis. Presently, Muslim traders from outside the district are seen to be increasing in markets and they outbid the local Hindu Bengali traders by paying higher rent and higher tax. The local Hindu Bengali traders are being asked to pay *dao* tax as well which should be only applicable to outsiders according to them. Since they are second-generation families in the district they felt the *dao* tax was an unjust imposition on them. Additionally, for trade licence renewal applicants have to produce 1971 electoral roll or council electoral roll which becomes roadblock for these traders. On the other hand, traders coming from outside the district do not have to produce any documents and readily pay fees or tax as asked for.

The Gurkhalis are devout Hindus and BJP's entry was welcome to them. The Assam Vision Manifesto also specifically mentioned the Gurkhalis' issues and their resolution. According to Langthasa, in Umrongso where the Gurkhalis are concentrated, they are facing trouble. The Gaonburahs are not getting certification from the council authority, he claims. Land grabbing has become common as Umrongso is the new real-estate landmine in Dima Hasao and the new, upcoming elite of the Dimasas are buying big has and big has of land in Umrongso. Since the Gurkhalis are not ST, they have had to give up land. Their *pattas* are not renewed. The Gurkha population also seem to be getting disillusioned with the council was Langthasa's refrain. Earlier they aspired to and hoped for jobs in the council but their disillusionment under this regime seems to have grown.

6.7 Ethnic Homeland Demands and Hindu Nationalism: Do the Twine Meet?

The desire for an ethnic homeland arises from the innate human need for belonging and community. Sharing a common history, language, and culture within a specific territory fosters a sense of collective identity and solidarity. This shared heritage provides a foundation for social cohesion, cultural preservation, and the transmission of traditions across generations (Smith, 1991).

The concept of an ethnic homeland holds deep significance for many communities around the world. It represents a shared physical space where members of a specific ethnic group have historically resided, fostering a collective identity and sense of belonging. However, the notion of ethnic homelands is fraught with complexity, often intertwined with issues of history, politics, and social justice. In the Northeast India, the pursuit of ethnic homelands often results in overlapping

territorial claims and competing narratives which has led to complex political situations, including demands for greater autonomy, separate statehood, and secessionist movements.

A prominent ADSU leader and one of the ideologues of the Dimaraji Movement Lt. Prafulla Hapila had noted that in the Dimasa inhabited areas of Nagaon district, from 1985 to 2016, there was exponential growth of voters, but due to the number of Dimasas being low there ranging from 10,500 to 12,000 they have become completely marginalised. Dimasas have not increased but the growth of 'non-indigenous' is so high, he adds. We have lost hope of sending political representatives at this rate. Our 10,000 votes joined with some other community could have raised some hope for us, but not possible at this rate of demographic change that is happening today. That has led to a lot of insecurity and fear among the Dimasas. He added that in Cachar (Barak Valley), Udarbong, Dholai at one time Dimasa voters were factors of political change but today had been reduced to nothing. The AGP was the voice of the indigenous of Assam but AGP could not utilize this opportunity to unite the indigenes. Thus, further sub-regionalism started within Assam. AGP's regionalism has developed differences with Bodo, Karbi and Dimasa and other indigenous tribes.

He further added that if one looks at Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, total population is almost as same as Nagaland. There are sixty MLAs for Nagaland while the number of MLAs for two districts together is only five. This was a huge disparity that was being done to the Dimasas said Hapila. If there is no justice done to Dimasas accordingly, then obviously Dimasas will want the separation he added.

This goes to show the Dimaraji's 'ethnic homeland' demand began as a rights-based demand arising out of discrimination and the urge for the people to fulfil their sense of self-determination. The fear of being so reduced to the margins in the face of unchecked influx would indeed force people to extreme steps. Indeed, this fear exists among almost all the 'indigenous' communities of the region. The Sixth Schedule was granted to accommodate the aspirations of self-determination as well as assuage the fears of the hill tribes.

The homeland movement of the Dimaraji started by the DHD which later broke into two factions- DHD(D) and DHD(J) demanding a separate Dimaraji state had begun in the 1990s as discussed in an earlier chapter. Haflongbar notes that Dimaraji's demand for a separate Dimaraji state is in line with the Article 2 and 3 of the Constitution of India. There is also a separate Article 244A in

particular relation to the district. The area within the boundary of Sixth Schedule is fixed and surrounding areas with tribal population is called contiguous areas. As such, contiguous villages as demanded by Dimaraji movement can be added to 244(A) under Article 2 and 3. Thus, both issues can be resolved and there is no contradiction. Dimaraji, he adds, is not meant for only Dimasas. The ethnic conflict (between Hmars and Dimasas) that began in 2003 was to break tribal unity by vested interests he added. He also adds that, the Dimaraji movement is at an end since the people who carried out the movement are now all coopted and rehabilitated within the state after the MoS. The talks are done as well as the movement. However, the author observed during the study that the sentiment which gave rise to the Dimaraji state demand lives on. The autonomy demands as well as the separate state demands are based on the feeling of powerlessness and hence the demand for self-determination through a separate state.

Additionally, in the case of Dimaraji we also see another particular strain which is that of the glory of a great past, infact a royal past which is the community's history and heritage and is also understood to be the doorway to future greatness.

During the course of the field work and discussions with the general populace and the party workers, it was observed by the author that the ideas of Hindu nationalist thought had seeped into the minds and expressions of the people. However, in most cases, the respondents called it Indian nationalism. This goes to show that the understanding that the idea of India is culturally Hindu is present among people as a common sense. That Hindus are a minority in comparison to other major religions was another idea that people had imbibed. The political rallies of the BJP in the district were attended by RSS and VHP officials who spoke at length on the threat to Hindu culture in almost the same breath as tribal cultures. Thus it is understandable that the people would immediately connect. Among the tribes of the district, especially among the Dimasa and the Heraka Nagas, the idea that their culture was fast eroding had always been a grave socio-political issue.

In the BJP's political rhetoric as well as that of RSS, Akhand Bharat evokes a sense of historical grandeur and cultural unity. This rhetoric is seen to collate with the Dimasa separate state demand of Dimaraji as well. Often, the grandeur of the Dimasa kings and kingdom, is used by most Dimasa intelligentsia to invoke community sentiments. Among the DHD's Dimaraji demand's many

thrusts is the aspect of the royal glory which had presently been ruined and actively neglected. The establishment of Dimaraji meant the bringing back of the lost glory as well as dignity of the Dimasas. The fact that the Dimasa kings also had converted to Hinduism makes for the Hindutva forces to easily co-opt the ethnic homeland demands especially that of the Dimasas of the district. The RSS and VHP's support of the Dimasas during the Hmar and Dimasa conflict of 2003 reducing the conflict to the threats and excesses of Christian missionary and the militants spawned by the missionaries was also tacit support of the Dimaraji homeland movement. The RSS and VHP currently in association with the state and central governments have promoted Dimasa cultural relics and historical sites as stated in an earlier chapter. The ST Morcha President who is also a Dimasa had added that the Dimasas are Hindus, not the like of the Bengalis or Marwaris, he added, but we are part of the greater Hindu culture. This is a common understanding of most Dimasas that the animist practices of the Dimasa people or other tribes actually are part of the greater Hindu tradition. The ST Morcha President had also added that the Christian tribes of the district as well as the Muslims were earlier practitioners of their own ethnic cultures and religions. However, they had lost it all after conversion. Hinduism doesn't cause the loss of our indigenous faith and practices, he added. Thus, the ethnic homeland sentiment, feelings of discrimination, followed by the ethnic violence, has coupled with the markers of Hindu nationalism, Akhand Bharat to make a complex mix of ideology and identity. A Dimasa man from an interior village Nontho Langthasa, who had come to attend a BJP political rally in October 2023 had struck up a conversation with the author. The rally followed by a meeting was the day to inaugurate the statues of Dimasa freedom fighter Joya Thaosen and Dimasa mythical princess Dishru in Haflong. The programme was attended by the CEM Debolal Gorlosa, CM Sarma and Minister Nandita Gorlosa along with VHP representatives. Nontho Langthasa remarked that the Dimasa kings were also like the king Ram. Ram had his kingdom at Ayodhya and Dimasas had the kingdom at Dimaraji. According to the author, Rama and Ayodhya are new additions to the Dimasa royal parallels. The genealogy in Cachar had already been made of the Dimasas being descendants of Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima and Hidimba.

After the signing of the MoS in 2012, the representatives of the DHD and DHD (J), the flagbearers of the Dimaraji Movement are part of the civic society and as stated earlier, the current CEM and

at least 6 other MACs and EMs are former DHD (J) militants in the NCHAC. The CEM himself went by the alias of Daniel Dimasa and was the Commander-in-chief of the DHD (J). In the Northeast, for long, the strategy of the state to counter-insurgency was to bring the insurgents to the talks table to sign 'peace accords' and sharing of political power for the co-signees, in this case the insurgents. In this manner, we have seen the Bodo Accord, the DHD Accord and the UPDS (United People's Democratic Solidarity) Accords being signed.

According to Samir Kumar Das (2005) peace accords may be defined as those that are signed between the state and its adversaries involved in some form of discord in an attempt to bring about peace between them. This also suggests that the accords are preceded by discords. The signatories of the peace accord are also to make a promise of peace. While accords specify mutual obligations, the state is expected to provide some form of autonomy that the state grants or promises to grant. The peace accords create a moment of recognition, create a constitution- a set of rules and norms as mentioned in the accord, and most importantly creates an ethnic space Every peace accord tends to work out how the signatory ethnic community is to be provided with a distinct geopolitical space that it can claim as its homeland. (Ibid.)

The author's observation is that the peace accords emphasis on the distinct geopolitical space for the group to call its homeland has created an understanding in the minds of the people that the land now is their 'ethnic space', their 'ethnic homeland' thereby creating an 'other'. For the Dimasas immediately the Christian tribes especially the Hmars, due to the 2003 conflict, have become an 'other'. Another issue with the peace accords in the region is the government inviting only the specific ethnic adversary for talks and signing while there are multiple stakeholders in the territory being discussed.

In the aftermath of the ethnic conflict followed by the peace and political rehabilitation of the insurgents into the political establishment, the line between the autonomous council and the 'ethnic council' seems to have blurred. To be fair, this is also due to the larger trend of sub nationalist movements that have been part of the history of the region. The entry of BJP and Hindu nationalism through the political establishment has led to an intermixing of Hindu nationalist thought of cultural superiority, territorial integrity and Hindu values to the autonomous council. The present incumbent CEM Gorlosa in the same public rally mentioned earlier addressing the gathering in

Dimasa said that ‘the Constitution of India had clause for a separate state, but there were conditions. The conditions were that the people of this proposed state need to have their own unique history, unique culture and language’. However, the intellectuals, even among the Dimasas were distorting the Dimasa culture, history and language. His effort has been to maintain the purity and sanctity of the Dimasa culture and hence he was making safeguards for the Dimasa king’s homes, and land (referring to the Dimasa ruins and Dima Hasao) By constructing statues of mythical figures and cultural platforms (*baikhos*) he was only protecting this unique culture and history which could lead the Dimasas to the fulfilment of a separate state.

It can be said that the sentiment of a separate state Dimaraji is also still alive among the Dimasa whose territory would include all the Dimasa inhabited areas. The movement had grown out of sense of deprivation and insecurity of being wiped out due to massive demographic change over which the people had no control. However, in the current scenario, the ideas of the movement are being turned into an exclusivist exercise with active patronage from the autonomous council authority.

6.8 Cultural Assimilation of Dimasas and Herakas

The cultural assimilation of the Dimasas or Heraka Nagas is not a new process. Cultural assimilation refers to the process by which a minority group or culture adopts the values, behaviors, and beliefs of the dominant culture in a society. This process can be full or partial, voluntary or forced, and it can have a significant impact on both the minority and dominant groups. Full assimilation: Complete adoption of the dominant culture, resulting in the loss of the minority group's distinct identity (Gans, 1979). The types of assimilation also varies such as partial assimilation where some aspects of the dominant culture are adopted (Alba & Nee, 2003). There can be forced assimilation where a minority group is coerced to adopt the dominant culture (Berry, 1980). Thirdly, there is acculturation whereby exchange of cultural characteristics between two groups happen leading to both influencing each other’s cultures (Berry, 2003).

In case of the Herakas, by the late 1960s the VHP had already started work among them by the late 1960s with the object of defending them against Christian proselytizing. (Longkumer, 2010, p. 136) Organizations such as the Janjati Vikas Samiti under the umbrella of Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) are active with the Heraka in developmental projects,

education and also in providing organizational support. Kalyan Ashram has recognized Rani Gaidinliu and Haipou Jadonang as freedom fighters. She was also awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1980 and Vivekananda Seva Award in 1982.

The tribes of Northeast India are seen as preserving the *sanatan dharma* (eternal faith and culture), which is treated synonymously with traditional Hinduism. For the 'Hindu' groups the Heraka present a practice that is consonant with the rest of the 'Hindu' nation, according to the definition of Hindutva. According to Longkumer (2010) much ammunition has been collected to target Christians as the root cause of 'loss of culture and tradition' in the Zeme regions of Dima Hasao. Most propaganda and even literature becomes oppositional to the Christians and the Nagas. This however puts the Heraka in a difficult position since their numbers are largely concentrated around North Cachar Hills, and Heraka is practised mainly among the Zeme. Yet the majority of the Nagas are Christians. Even among the Zemes, The Heraka are largely anti-Christian in their rhetoric because of conversion tactics employed by Christians in the past. Therefore, they try to distance themselves from Christian schools (in some cases) and instead rely on Government schools or schools started by the VHP like Saraswati Vidya Mandir, Vivekananda Vidyalaya and Kendriya Vidyalaya. (Ibid.p. 140)

There is another aspect to the Heraka association with the BJP and affiliates which Longkumer calls a 'marriage of convenience between Hindutva and Heraka'. The NSCN(I-M) have been vocal about their claim of 'Nagaland for Christ' which the Herakas challenge. Their argument is that the Naga state should be based on ethnicity and not on religious identity, although they are in support of the Naga cause. The Indian state uses this as bulwark against the Naga nationalist identity. Thus, the Heraka and Hindu nationalism presents a range of complexities and the assimilation may not be as simple as it may seem.

In the case of the Dimasas, the relation with Hinduism started with the Dimasa king's conversion which led to the initiation of the kings into the Kshatriya caste. The Dimasas attained a new origin myth of the lineage of Bhima of Mahabharata and Hidimba. Among the Dimasas it seen that both myths, that of Hinduism and the indigenous faith both exist parallelly. The BJP district general secretary had remarked of the two existence of the two origin myths that the tale of Bhima was that from the side of the father and the indigenous myth of Arikhidima she believes is that from

the mother. Both could be believed in and practised together without one hurting the other. Another BJP morcha member had also in his discussion with the author proclaimed that in case of Christianity or Islam one would have to discard everything of the mother culture and faith as has happened with the Christian tribes. However, he added in the case of the Hinduism, it was not so and one could practice both, without losing either. The inference here also can be made of that the Dimasas are aware that the Hindu culture is not their 'own'. Yet, since the practising of two can continue without either's loss. It is in some ways, another marriage of convenience between the two groups. Just as in the case of the Herakas, the Dimasas and Dimaraji could also be used as bulwark against the secessionist Nagalim demand.

6.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that with the coming of BJP in power, the state government's intervention and meddling have increased and gone unchecked. The lack of an opposition voice in the NCHAC has aggravated this matter. This greatly risks the autonomy provisions of the Sixth schedule. The 125th Constitution Amendment Bill suggesting panchayats in Sixth Schedule has generated great insecurity among the people. The autonomy movements have over the years greatly weakened. However, it doesn't seem to have gone away completely in Dima Hasao. The BJP rule has not been able to curb corruption as suggested by the lack of transparency. In this mix, Hindu nationalist ideology through a new strength of VHP and RSS as well as the autonomous council is seen to have created a complex mix of ethnic assertions and Hindu nationalism. The future of the autonomy movements and Hindu nationalism in the region is a subject that will continue and take new shape in the near future.

Chapter VII

General Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The Dima Hasao district in Assam, governed by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and administered by the North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council (NCHAC), is predominantly a tribal area with distinct political concerns that differentiate it from Assam's Brahmaputra Valley. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has recently gained prominence in Assam and other Northeastern states. Despite its establishment in 1980, the party initially had a limited social base and weak grassroots structure, leading to restricted performance until 1990. However, the BJP's fortunes started to improve from 1990 onward, particularly after allying with the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party of Assam. Although as observed the party operated in the background, this partnership contributed to its enhanced performance and visibility. During the 2000s, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained prominence nationally, it emerged as a viable alternative to the Indian National Congress. The party's ascent in Assam became evident in the 2014 General Elections when, for the first time, it secured a majority in the 14-member Parliamentary seats. The victory was fueled by an anti-incumbency wave against the Congress-led UPA, reflecting a widespread desire for change ("*acche din ane wale hain*"). Notably, in 2014, the Dima Hasao district, which shares a parliamentary constituency with the Karbi Anglong hill district, witnessed a Congress victory, a rarity among constituencies.

However, a significant shift occurred during the 2016 Assembly elections when a wave of change, referred to as "*poriborton*," swept through the district. In a historic moment for Assembly elections in the district, B.B. Hagjer of the BJP secured victory with a margin of 8285 votes. In June 2016, leadership in the NCHAC underwent a change after experiencing internal turmoil since 2013. Debolal Gorlosa, a former insurgent who joined the BJP between May and June 2016 and had previously won the election as an independent candidate in 2013, was unanimously appointed as Chief Executive Member (CEM) during a Special Session of the Council convened by then-Governor P.B. Acharya. The incumbent MLA being from the BJP and the state BJP's recent substantial victory at the state level played a role in influencing this transition. Subsequently, in December 2017, the anti-defection law was passed and implemented in the council. The council members asserted that their council was the first in the country to pass such a law. In January 2019, the 12th Autonomous Council Election took

place in the district, revealing the growing strength and influence of the BJP in electoral outcomes. Previous elections had experienced hung verdicts, frequent defections, and changes in party leadership in the district. However, in 2019, the BJP secured a majority by winning a total of nineteen seats, with Congress winning two, AGP one, and six seats being claimed by independent candidates. Following the election results, all six elected independent candidates and the lone AGP candidate joined the BJP. Additionally, Joysing Duroing, a previously elected Congress candidate from the Garampani constituency, also joined the BJP, leaving only one member as the Congress representative in the NCHAC. The Congress representative also resigned in 2021 from the Congress party thus leaving the autonomous council without any opposition member. These developments were made possible with the BJP coming to power in the Centre.

Unfortunately, these developments over five years have been largely overlooked in mainstream discussions about politics in Assam. The district's historical, geographical, and cultural isolation from the Brahmaputra Valley has shaped a distinct political trajectory. Key political issues in the district revolved around tribal autonomy, bolstering the powers of the autonomous council, the creation of a separate homeland independent of Assam's mainland, inter-ethnic conflicts, and insurgency. This study was undertaken primarily to examine the BJP's mobilisation strategies in the district given the uniqueness of its demography – majority tribal, with 30% Christian population. Academic studies on BJP's influence distinctly among the tribals voters of the Northeast are few. The recent works on BJP's rise in Assam by Akhil Ranjan Dutta(2021) and Sandhya Goswami (2020) primarily centre on the Brahmaputra Valley and as such discussion on Dima Hasao is limited. Longkumer's (2019, 2020)works discussed briefly about BJP's politics in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, where he assessed that the 'alignment of centre-regional-local' levels of power influenced the voters and recent victories in the districts and the party had no strong or deep ideological moorings there. His work on elections in Tripura where the BJP is in alliance with the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT) argues that what may seem like BJP's victory in the state is the reaction against the Left rule. Longkumer's work highlights some aspects of the BJP's campaign strategy in Tripura such as booth level campaigns and BJP's ability to stitch right alliances such as with the IPFT.

The discussion on BJP's win in the Northeast region is of alarm where it is understood by many in the academia as the rise of Hindu nationalism in the region. Images of young children waving saffron flags and carrying out marches in *khakhi* pants and white shirts are seen as saffronisation of the tribals, who remain passive receivers of Hindutva. The BJP also tries to

portray the picture of the animist tribals and Christians in the region are now supporting Hindu Rashtra.

This study is an attempt to look beyond this binary and understand the nuances of a political party's mobilisation attempts, failures and successes in a region where it has only just been succeeding in elections, but its presence has far preceded the recent success.

7.2 Research Questions

The primary research question is to investigate the factors behind rise of the BJP in the tribal-dominated Dima Hasao district of Assam, administered under the Sixth Schedule provision of the Constitution, with a history of autonomy movements and demands for an ethnic homeland. Of late, the district's political movements, previously focused on issues of distinction such as tribal autonomy and ethnic homeland insurgency seems to be on the wane.

The study also tries to understand the following questions:

- Electoral strategies that the BJP deployed during successive elections
- Mobilization strategies carried out by the BJP to consolidate the diverse and antagonistic ethnic and religious groups in the district
- What are the changes that a party like BJP, with its core ideology of Hindu nationalism, has brought to the political discourse, especially regarding tribal autonomy in the hills?
- Has BJP also imbibed cultures and discourse of the local politics within itself in its engagement with the hills?

7.3 Findings

The BJP was established in 1997 in the district with only one member. Its entry into the Dima Hasao district's electoral arena occurred in 1998 when the party contested the Lok Sabha elections in the joint constituency of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, known as the Autonomous District (ST) constituency. Currently, the BJP holds power in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC), the MLA Constituency (Haflong ST), and the shared Parliamentary constituency with Karbi Anglong (Autonomous District).

The BJP has established a strong organizational framework, experiencing a notable surge in membership in recent years. The party claims to be the largest political party in the country, with its national website stating that it became the world's largest political party in 2015,

boasting 11 crore members—2.2 crore more than the Communist Party of China. According to a senior BJP worker in the Dima Hasao district, the party had a solitary member at its local formation in 1997, and by 2012, it had grown to 52 members. The membership further escalated during the 2019 Autonomous Council elections. Today it has reached over 1500, although precise figures were not provided. Joining the organization has been simplified, allowing individuals to become members through methods like giving a missed call or registering their details on the BJP website.

The party conducts extensive membership drives, especially in rural areas, often preceding elections and organized at block levels. These drives, attended by the Chief Executive Member (CEM) or Executive Members (EM), contribute to increased participation. Individuals are joining the party voluntarily, inspired by the party's regular welfare initiatives such as cleaning lakes, parks, hospitals, plantation drives, and awareness programs. The party is also involved in commemorating the anniversaries of freedom fighters and local icons, particularly those less known nationally. To many the party's activities resemble those of NGOs, and the local population is impressed by these efforts, leading them to volunteer and join the party. To many the party is also the remaining party which can give them a winning ticket!

The organizational structure of the BJP mirrors the national pattern. The party's structure is well-defined and operates under a unified command, with directives originating from the central national headquarters. Similar to the national model, the district committee in Dima Hasao is headed by a District President and two Vice-Presidents and is further decentralized, featuring committees at the Block or Mandal level, each with its President and Secretary. The party also establishes booth-level committees, comprising 203 booths in 28 electoral constituencies. Working in collaboration with seven *Morchas*, which serve as crucial mass fronts for the party in the district, the district committee successfully brings together individuals from diverse communities under the party's umbrella. These mass fronts include the *Mahila Morcha*, *ST Morcha*, *SC Morcha*, *OBC Morcha*, *Yuva Morcha*, *Minority Morcha*, and *Kisan Morcha*. The district committee primarily operates based on the instructions of the state-level in-charge or Prabhari, who visits the district monthly to assess the activities and functioning of the district units and its wings signifying a unified command structure of the party.

Contemporary elections involve substantial expenses, as evident from expenditure data, encompassing costs such as travel for party representatives nationwide, advertising, and the organization of rallies and meetings. Over the recent years, the only party in the district that

has provided some competition to the BJP, albeit on a limited scale, is the Congress. Regional parties like ASDC, AGP, AIUDF, and NPP have had minimal traction, and the entry of TMC in the district began only in 2022. There is a significant disparity in resources and expenditures between the BJP and other parties, highlighting a substantial gap. In this context, the BJP has emerged as the sole party in Dima Hasao equipped with the necessary resources to secure electoral victories and attract a larger following.

The absence of dissenting voices within the council is apparent now where the present leadership is not observed engaging in constructive criticism of the party in a democratic manner, which is unhealthy for any democratic system. The party members are also seen engaging in coercive methods to stop opposition party membership.

The present BJP administration in the district has placed greater emphasis on an ethnic form of cultural politics, particularly highlighting the predominant Dimasa culture. The current establishment has shown a particular interest in fostering the culture and identity of the Dimasa tribe through the autonomous council. Additionally, the council authority has demonstrated support for Hindu religious institutions. For instance, in 2019, the council announced that its budget would include infrastructure development for the following entities: Hari Om Haflong Akhanda Mandali, Haflong Kalibari, Ardhangini Kali Mandir, Ram Krishna Seva Samity, Satsang Vihar, and Gadain Raji Kalibari. In 2022, Chief Minister Sarma inaugurated the Skill Development Centre at Diyumgumukh, Ganesh Mandir at Umrongso, Girls HS Hostel at Umrongso, Saraswati Vidya Mandir at Langcherui, Umrongso, and Durga Mandir at Hathikali. The ceremonies involving inaugurations and laying of foundation stones often include bhumi puja rituals. The district council authority inaugurated statues of various cultural icons in the district, predominantly focusing on Dimasa mythical figures like Princess Dishru and warrior figures from folklore such as Dhemalik. Recently, statues of Dishru and freedom fighter Joya Thaosen were also unveiled. The council authority has actively sponsored films and short films depicting Dimasa history and lore. Prioritizing the promotion of Dimasa culture and art, the council authority has undertaken initiatives such as constructing community halls and dance halls (*baikhos*). Protecting historical sites of the Dimasa Kachari kingdom has been a key demand, highlighted in the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) of 2012 and emphasized by Dimasa intelligentsia. One such site in the district is the stone house of Maibang, designated a Monument of National Importance by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Renovating the temple and transforming its surroundings into a park, the council authority named it Ranachandi Temple Park, inaugurating it with cultural festivities and statues representing

Dimasa mythical and historical figures, including clan progenitors. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the social media presence of political leaders across various parties. At the district level, the council led by the BJP exhibits a strong presence on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. It has become a regular practice to capture and share images of certain ceremonial activities, such as inaugurations and felicitations, accompanied by hashtags featuring the names and offices of party leaders and elected representatives. Leaders are frequently seen participating in social events like marriage receptions and other ritual gatherings, showcasing these occasions on social media. Birthday greetings are also a common occurrence, along with commendations for individual achievements on Facebook, often tagging the individuals concerned. However, the party's developmental initiatives in the district appear to be fragmented, with limited efforts to address structural changes.

The BJP's extensive rallies, frequent meetings, and visits from state and national leaders have contributed to making the party more approachable and available. Visits from the former Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, followed by even more frequent visits from the current Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, as well as the presence of Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in 2021, along with regular visits from state government ministers and BJP functionaries at the regional and state levels across various locations in the Dima Hasao district, not just in the headquarters Haflong, have fostered a sense of familiarity and accessibility among the local population. As of January 2022, in line with the current government's decision, Assam Cabinet meetings are being conducted in different parts of Assam outside Guwahati. The Cabinet meeting held in Haflong on January 19, 2022, brought together a complete contingent of ministers, staff, and personnel to the district.

The various wings of the party, including the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha (BJMM), Kisan Morcha, SC Morcha, ST Morcha, OBC Morcha, and Minority Morcha, serve as the primary mass fronts mobilizing diverse social groups within the district. The BJYM and Mahila Morcha have been particularly active in the party's endeavors in the region. Membership in the *morchas* is substantial, and it can be challenging to keep track, especially as not all members actively engage in party activities. The morcha committees also include an in-charge or Vyavastha Pramukh, who is a member of the NCHAC, particularly involving various Executive Members (EM) of the council. In morcha activities, the distinction between a party and a government authority of the autonomous council often becomes blurred. The EM also funds the activities of the *morchas* which goes to show direct patronage of the council authority for a party's activities.

The VHP operates several schools, including the Vivekananda Vidyalays, Saraswati Vidya Mandirs, and Kalyan Ashrams in Haflong and other parts of Dima Hasao. It is noteworthy that many of these VHP-run schools, primarily located in interior areas, were in a state of disrepair and catered to extremely impoverished tribal children. Currently, the VHP schools in the district are receiving renewed support from the NCHAC and the state government. In 2021, new schools such as the KS Thaosen Saraswati Vidya Mandir, Nablaidisa Vidya Bharti School, and Janaring Hindu Academy High School were established in different parts of Dima Hasao. This year alone, a VHP school and a Hostel Building under Uttar Purbanchal Janjati Seva Samiti were established in the Heraka Naga village called Hejaichak. The inaugural ceremonies of these schools and centers are regularly attended by NCHAC officials, as well as regional RSS and VHP office bearers.

Furthermore, the VHP has inaugurated several new temples across different parts of the district. Notably, the VHP has initiated large-scale Ganesh Chaturthi festivals, a practice not previously part of the local culture. Given the sizable Bengali and Nepali population in Dima Hasao, the district has historic Kali Mandirs and Jagannath Bari, established by early settlers of Nepali and Bengali Brahmins in Haflong. These temples traditionally conduct the annual Kali and Durga Puja. Recently, Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations have gained prominence, with Ganesh Mandirs established in various parts of the district. Additionally, Satsang Viharas, Hari Om Temple, Hanuman Mandir, and Sitala Mandirs have been established in Dima Hasao.

Besides the tribals, the non-tribals also have a huge chunk of the district's population. It is observed that in the past few years the BJP has become their preferred party and are observed to vote collectively for the party. The temple ecosystem in the district has primarily been organized by the Bengali and Nepali communities, with the Bengalis, particularly, exerting influence over markets, such as in Haflong, and being older settlers compared to the Nepalis. The Hindu Bengalis in Haflong have traditionally held leadership roles in the Haflong Market Association. Various Hindu organizations like VHP, ISKCON, and Joy Guru have close associations with this community. According to three different respondents, Bengali and Nepali/Gurkhali votes have now coalesced under the BJP due to their religious affiliations.

The RSS has displayed increased activity and assertiveness in the district. The RSS recently inaugurated a new office in the center of Haflong town, generously donated by Shri Ramkui Zeme, a patron of the Zeliangrong Heraka Association and a social activist working among the Zeme tribal areas of the district. He also serves as the Vibhag Sangachalak of RSS. Zeme was

honored with the Padma Shri in January 2023 for his social activism and contributions to the revival and protection of the Heraka faith. The RSS has been present in Dima Hasao for three decades, with its initial leader in the district being KK Hojai, who served as the CEM of NCHAC from 1980 to 1983. While its activities were not prominently visible in the public domain earlier, the RSS is now seen conducting rallies in their distinctive white shirts and khaki trousers. The participants in these rallies are predominantly members of the district BJP and students from Vidya Mandir schools.

The RSS has been more actively engaged in Cachar since its inception, with the South Assam RSS headquarters situated in Silchar. Cachar has a notable population of Dimasa people. According to RSS claims, during the Dimasa-Hmar conflict in 2003, organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Keshav Smarak Samiti, Kalyan Ashram, and Rashtra Sevika Samiti collaborated to assist in the rehabilitation of Dimasas in relief camps. This effort, with the active support of the Hindu society, involved the donation of handlooms to Dimasa women in the camps, with KS Sudarshan leading the initiative. The activities of the RSS however is discreet and local members do not openly identify themselves as RSS members. BJP morcha workers also asserted that they did not collaborate with the RSS or VHP, emphasizing that the BJP as a party was distinct from socio-cultural organizations, each having its own set of activities. This separation was attributed to an incident in January 2018, commemorated annually by Dimasa civil society organizations on January 25. On January 20, 2018, Jagdamba Mall, an RSS stalwart, proposed a 'Draft Naga Agreement,' suggesting separate development authorities outside Nagaland for Naga people, including Dima Hasao in the 'Greater Nagalim' agreement. This proposal sparked outrage among Dimasa people. Protestors, led by Jadhike Naisho Hoshom (JNH), the Dimasa apex body, submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking clarification and urging Mall to apologize. The incident led to a 12-hour bandh in the district and a railway blockade in Maibang, during which police opened fire, resulting in the deaths of two Dimasa youth. The RSS office was attacked during this turmoil, leading Dimasa civil society organizations to condemn the RSS jointly after the 2018 incident. Mall disappeared from the scene, creating apprehensions and doubts among the majority Dimasa population of the district. It was noted that RSS and VHP personnel also had some influence in council tickets, with their impact being more significant in the Assembly constituency.

The Constitution (125th) Amendment Bill, 2019 was presented in the Rajya Sabha in January 2019. The proposed amendments aimed at modifying the Sixth Schedule to introduce Village

and Municipal Councils alongside District Councils. The opposition contested this move, arguing that it would diminish the Sixth Schedule to the level of Gram Panchayats, resulting in a loss of autonomy for the councils. During the Assembly Elections campaign in 2021, the BJP unveiled a Vision Document named Sankalp Patra. In response to opposition pressure and widespread protests, a separate election manifesto for the Dima Hasao district was hastily released on social media by district official representatives. The manifesto's initial two points emphasized the Implementation of Article 244 A and the establishment of an autonomous, opposition to the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system in the district, advocacy for the creation of an additional MP seat in the Lok Sabha for Dima Hasao and advocacy for the creation of two more MLA seats

The BJP-led state government's actions appear to contradict its manifesto promises. Gaon Sabhas, conducted by Village Level Committees, referred to as Constituency Level Committees in the district, involve Constituency MAC members, Block Development Officers (BDOs), Gaonburahs, and line department staff. However, Gaonburahs lack decision-making authority, and the meeting agenda is predetermined for them to implement. Additionally, local BDOs have been transferred, and external bureaucrats unfamiliar with the local political system and Sixth Schedule procedures have taken their place. Although the Gaon Sabhas follow the Gaon Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) guidelines, it is termed Constituency Development Plan in the district, and Panchayat elections are not conducted.

The BJP displays a lack of interest in addressing the problem of unwarranted interference by the State Government in the NCHAC administration, further compromising the autonomy of the councils. According to the current Haflong MAC, the state government's meddling in the Sixth Schedule continues without restraint. An illustrative example is the creation of Guardian Ministers, where ministers and secretaries issue directives to the council administration and conduct review meetings, contravening the MoU 1995. Additionally, the Hill Areas Department Ministry was assigned to Shri Jogen Mohan, an MLA from Mahmora in Upper Assam, not from Dima Hasao or Karbi Anglong. The Assam Vision Document released by the BJP before the 2016 Assembly Elections pledged special attention to hill districts for enhanced development in areas such as roads, agriculture, and education. The document emphasizes that financial constraints should not impede progress. However, the BJP-led government has yet to address the issue of financial autonomy for the autonomous councils. Grants and funds still flow through the state government to the council, and the provision for supersession is comparable to Article 356 of the Constitution of India. Instances of supersession have been

frequent in the council, contributing to instability and maladministration, as discussed in the previous chapter. The state government postponed the council elections, originally scheduled for 2018, and the Governor's unconstitutional extension of the council's term faced challenges from local opposition leaders in AGP. The BJP's interpretation of ideas from the High Command and National Party has strained local autonomy, rendering Autonomous Councils less autonomous and more bound by the BJP's high command.

The state of autonomy movements in the district is now uncertain, and progress is hindered by a lack of trust among various ethnic groups. Encouraging discussion and reconciliation among different communities is crucial to overcoming isolation and finding solutions to people's grievances. Moreover, it is important to involve the non-tribal population in discussions about autonomy movements in the district. There is a general perception among non-tribals that any increase in tribal benefits could result in a reduction of their entitlements. Addressing and discussing this gap is necessary. However, the BJP leadership at the council and state levels does not appear inclined to resolve these issues. Instead, it seems that party representatives are exploiting these tensions for political gain.

The opposition has significantly weakened and is virtually non-existent in the current NCHAC, posing a serious threat to the democratic system. While anti-incumbency sentiments prevail in the district, there is uncertainty about whether this discontent will translate into electoral victories. The absence of any viable opposition leaves voters with limited choices. There is also a significant decline in individuals joining opposition parties, attributing this trend to the scarcity of employment opportunities. Many young people aspire to enter the job market, intensifying competition and fostering animosity among various tribes. Gaining political connections becomes crucial for market entry, and the local BJP establishment enforces a rule requiring individuals to join the BJP. Even minor affiliations with the opposition are discouraged. Notably, party members and leaders in the district avoid public critiques of party policies or activities. During discussions with party workers, there was minimal criticism of the party or its functioning, with many attributing any perceived failures or shortcomings to the people themselves. Structural issues of the district, the council, and the party system are conspicuously absent from their discussions.

The BJP's slogans, such as "*Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*," "*Poriborton*," and "*Acche Din*," have resonated strongly with the public psyche. The widespread appeal to the common people can be credited to the extensive media campaigns undertaken by the BJP. In the context of Assam,

the year 2016 witnessed significant anti-incumbency sentiments after three consecutive terms of Congress rule. People held the belief that only a party like the BJP could usher in the necessary change and development in the region. This positive sentiment towards the BJP was also observed in Dima Hasao in 2016, where the prevailing socio-economic backwardness, attributed to the perceived corruption of the Congress regime, was anticipated to improve with the arrival of the nationalist BJP. However, the presence of anomalies and persistent bottlenecks in the district administration and procedures continue. The absence of transparency can foster corruption and the misappropriation of funds. The government has failed take steps to empower the NCHAC to conduct audits and regularly publish reports. Upon assuming power, the party in the district announced several projects, including the construction of heliports, Skill Development Centres, a Horticulture Centre, and a Bamboo Industrial Park. However, as of now, major projects are yet to commence. Despite long-standing demands for a university campus in the district, no special provision was announced for the district in the last budgets, even though several colleges in Assam were upgraded to universities. Both the council and state government are emphasizing the tourism industry in the district, organizing large cultural and entertainment festivals like the Falcon Festival and Jatinga Festival, with significant expenditures involved.

The government's priorities seem to be focused on cultural activities and infrastructure development rather than education. There is a notable emphasis on constructing dance halls, community halls, and statues of socio-political and mythical figures to appease cultural sentiments. However, criticisms have surfaced regarding the current administration's performance. Allegations include accusations of land grabbing by council leadership, claims of government patronage of VHP and RSS inappropriately using council funds to construct private schools on tribal land, and increased sand and stone mining with heavy extraction using machinery. Concerns have been raised about the environmental impact of these activities. In May 2022, the region experienced unprecedented floods and landslides, leading to the destruction of National Highways and the New Haflong station. Some attributed these natural disasters to excessive river exploitation, sandbank depletion, and deforestation. Unfortunately, there is a lack of scientific studies on these issues, and neither the state government nor the council seems interested in investigating the potential adverse effects on the local population.

As for the Dimaraji's demand for an 'ethnic homeland' initially emerged as a rights-based claim rooted in the desire to address discrimination and fulfill the community's need for self-determination. The apprehension of being marginalized in the face of uncontrolled migration

has driven people to extreme measures—a fear shared by many indigenous communities in the region. The Sixth Schedule was introduced to accommodate the aspirations and alleviate the concerns of the hill tribes. However, it is observed that the entry of the BJP and Hindu nationalism into the political landscape has resulted in the blending of Hindu nationalist ideals centered on cultural superiority, territorial integrity, and extensive cultural politics by the council authority. This integration has had the effect of alienating and marginalizing other tribal groups.

The assimilation of Dimasa social and political figures into the broader narrative is a noteworthy development. National initiatives like the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav, focusing on the history of freedom fighters from various tribal communities, provide opportunities for the Dimasa community to showcase figures like Sambudhan Phonglo and Joya Thaosen. The NCHAC and state government have established numerous girls' hostels and schools in both the district and Guwahati, named after Joya Thaosen. In 2021, a photo released by the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in Nagpur displayed the allotment of a room under the name Veer Sambudhan Phonglo, as shared by an MAC of the NCHAC. These symbolic gestures have instilled confidence among the broader population that the current administration is committed to safeguarding the culture and history of the Dimasas. The recognition of figures like Gaidinliu as a national icon protecting indigenous tribals from Christian proselytization, and Lachit Barphukan as a defender against Muslim aggressors, has also generated optimism among the Dimasas in the district.

The BJP exhibits a selective approach though, in incorporating historical and political figures into its narrative. For instance, the establishment of the NCHAC owes credit to leaders like Hamdhan Haflongbar, alongside other tribal leaders who advocated for self-government in the Constituent Assembly. However, the current BJP administration at the district, state, and central levels has shown little interest in commemorating this significant aspect of the district's history. Despite the official acceptance of Hinduism by the Dimasas, they continue to practice and protect their animist rituals in their cultural domain. Various Hindu affiliates, including the VHP, ISKCON, and Joy Guru, have attracted many urban Dimasas to their ideologies. While specific figures are unavailable, a significant number in Haflong town are drawn towards the Joy Guru sect and ISKCON cults. Controversies have emerged regarding Dimasas participating in puja rituals that inquire about the individual's gotra (clan lineage). The Dimasas, lacking gotras and patriclan names, were assigned gotras, as detailed in an annual publication from one of the Dimasa villages in Haflong. However, this practice did not gain traction among the

Dimasas. Joining the ISKCON fold presented challenges for some Dimasas, as ISKCON prohibits the consumption of meat and alcohol, which are integral to Dimasa culture. Dimasa women traditionally prepare an indigenous rice wine called Judima, essential for all Dimasa rituals, as offerings to ancestors and gods. In 2015, Dimasa civil society groups initiated the 'Judima Festival' to preserve the traditional practice of preparing the liquor and promote tourism in the district. However, the festival faced criticism from Dimasa members of ISKCON, Joy Guru, and RSS, who viewed it as promoting alcoholism among youth and necessitating reform in traditional practices. Another faction of Dimasas supporting the festival argued that the preparation of rice wine was intrinsic to Dimasa knowledge systems and emphasized the importance of preserving such indigenous knowledge. The current NCHAC establishment, particularly the CEM, actively promotes Dimasa mythical figures and lores through the council. Since 2018, there has been a patronage of installing statues of Dishru (Dimasa mythical princess) and other figures like Veer Dhemalik (mythical Dimasa heroes). The practice of naming buildings, schools, roadways, and waterfalls after mythical figures, clan deities, and progenitors has also garnered support from the community.

The above developments go to show that the inherent weaknesses of the Sixth Schedule leading to undue and excessive control from the state and central establishments over the years have created a highly unhealthy political system within the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council. The district's impoverishment, and lack of social, political and economic development further diminished the possibilities of a healthy political society and equal participation. The BJP's entry in such a state of affairs was hardly difficult. The 'alignment of centre-region-local' argument is not the natural choice of the electorate here, it has been conditioned in this manner through the creation of dependencies at all levels by the state itself. The party's entry through the state has created avenues for it to organise significantly in the district. The mass fronts of party in the district are attracting aspirational youth and women and other ticket and benefit seekers who wish to be closer to power and benefits. The morchas' in charge being the EMs of the NCHAC goes to show further the incentive behind joining the party. Even local civil society organisations can do little in this system of clientelism. The lack of strong opposition in the district has also worsened matters for voices of dissent among the masses and the civil society. This has significantly weakened the autonomy demands in the district. On the other hand the separate state demand of Dimaraji seems coopted for now by the political class. The activities of RSS and VHP have not necessarily aided to the party's victory. However, they do act as buffers and mediators between the party and the different sections of society. The impact of

ideas of Hindu nationalism is there but it is unlikely that it can take precedence with the demands of autonomy and self-determination. It does create a complex mix of indigenous and Hindu nationalist ideas which are used by the ruling establishment to propel their own politics and power.

7.4 The Limitations of the Study:

This study has limitations as it focuses exclusively on one district in Assam. Furthermore, it is a contemporary analysis, and considering the limited existing literature on the district and its political system, there is a potential for bias and personal opinions to have influenced the research, thereby compromising its rigor. Generalizing findings from this study may also present challenges.

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Interviews

1. Interview with Rupali Langthasa, General Secretary, District Committee, BJP Dima Hasao on 1.10.2022.
2. Interview with Dimasa Students' Union President, Pramith Sengyung on 7.10.2022
3. Interview with Lalropui Hmar, Vice-President, Minority Morcha, BJP Dima Hasao on 8.10.2022
4. Interview with All Dimasa Students' Union General Secretary, Mairing Johori on 8.10.2022
5. Interview with Liton Chakravarty, MAC, Nominated, NCHAC on 10.10.2022
6. Interview with Dimasa youth activist who wishes to remain anonymous. Referred to as X on 11.10.2022
7. Interview with Kuki leader and TMC political activist, Satminthang Khongsai on 11.10.2022
8. Interview with former Congress MAC, Daniel Langthasa on 12.10.2022
9. Interview with former ASDC MLA Samarjit Haflongbar on 15.10.2022
10. Interview with General Secretary, Dimasa Sahitya Sabha, Kumud Kemprai on 1.12.2022
11. Interview with former CEM and MLA from ASDC, Holiram Terang on 2.12.2022
12. Interview with BB Hagjer, former BJP MLA, Haflong (ST) constituency on 2.12.2022
13. Interview with Maiphal Kemprai, President, Dimasa Mothers' Association on 3.12.2022
14. Interview with Hari Ram, Member, Kisan Morcha on 5.12.2022
15. Interview with Ripa Hojai, President, Bharatiya Janata Youth Morcha, Dima Hasao on 5.12.2022
16. Interview with Porvita Johori Bathari, President, Mahila Morcha, BJP Dima Hasao on 6.12.2022

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Representative Organisations of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Districts, which are governed under the aegis of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, have been feeling dissatisfied with the quantum of autonomy available under the said Schedule. Resultantly, there has been a demand for constituting an Autonomous State within Assam under Article 244-A of the Constitution comprising the two districts.

2. Keeping in view the strong commitment of the Central Government, the Government of Assam and Organisations signatory to this MoU, to uphold the integrity of the State of Assam and not to take recourse to any further reorganisation and division of the State, efforts continued in the direction of finding a solution within the framework of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

3. Following initiation of a dialogue by Chief Minister, Assam in January 1992 with the leaders of the Hill Tribals, a series of discussions have been held by the Union Home Minister. The following understanding has been reached :-

- (i) The Autonomous District Councils of Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills District will be renamed as KARBI ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL and the NORTH CACHAR HILLS AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL.
- (ii) The jurisdiction of the two Councils for the exercise of executive powers will extend to the subjects/departments listed in Annexure-I. A resolution to this effect will also be passed by the State Legislature. To the above extent, the executive powers of the State will stand delegated to the above Councils.
- (iii) The State Government will, before the beginning of the financial year, give an indication to the Councils of the overall financial allocations for them. The Councils will, thereafter, prepare and pass their own budget and forward it to the State Government for being included in the overall

State budget. Ordinarily, no change will be made in the budget as proposed by the Councils. However, if for any reasons it becomes necessary to do so, the Councils would be consulted and would be explained the reasons for change ;

(iv) Action will be urgently initiated for amendment of para 3(1) of the Sixth Schedule for transferring legislative powers to the Councils in respect of the following subjects, in addition to powers already available to them under the Sixth Schedule ;

- (a) Industries, subject to the provisions of entries 7 and 52 of List 1 of Seventh Schedule;
- (b) Communications, that is to say roads, bridges, ferries and other means of communication not specified in List I; municipal tramways, ropeways, inland waterways and traffic thereon subject to the provisions of List I and List III with regard to such waterways ; vehicles other than mechanically propelled vehicles ;
- (c) Preservation, protection and improvement of stock and prevention of animal diseases ; veterinary training and practice ; and Cattle pounds ;
- (d) Primary and Secondary Education ;
- (e) Agriculture, including agricultural education and research, protection against pests and prevention of plant diseases ;
- (f) Fisheries ;
- (g) Water, that is to say water supplies, irrigation and canals, drainage and embankments, water storage and water power subject to the provisions of entry 56 of List I ;

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- (h) Social security and social insurance, employment and unemployment ;
- (i) Flood control schemes for protection of villages, paddy fields, markets, town etc. (not of technical nature);
- (j) Theatres and dramatic performances, cinemas subject to the provisions of entry 60 of List I; Sports, entertainments and amusements;
- (k) Public Health and sanitation, hospitals and dispensaries ;
- (l) Minor irrigation ;
- (m) Trade and Commerce in, and the production, supply and distribution of Foodstuffs, Cattle-fodder, raw cotton and raw jute ; and
- (n) Libraries, museums and other similar institutions controlled or financed by the State ; ancient and historical monuments and records other than those declared by or under law made by parliament to be of national importance.

included
PART 3A.

// Additionally, the feasibility of inclusion of " alienation of land" in Clause(a) of Sub-para(I) of para 3 of the Sixth Schedule will be examined.

The laws relating to List-III of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution enacted by the Councils shall be reserved for consideration and approval of the President.

Contd...4

- (v) Action will be initiated for necessary amendment of the Sixth Schedule to provide for exercise of discretionary powers by the Governor of Assam in respect of matters specifically indicated or entrusted to the Councils in the manner provided for in paragraph 20-BB of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. However, the present formulation in paragraph 20-BB may be modified to provide that in addition to the Council of Ministers, the Governor shall consult the District Council by omitting the words "and if he thinks it necessary". Additional provisions viz. paragraphs 2(6), 2(6A) excluding the first proviso thereunder, 8(4) and 10(3) may also be brought within the purview of para 20-BB.
- (vi) Para 14(2) of the Sixth Schedule be modified by omitting the words "with the recommendations of the Governor with respect thereto".
- ✓ (vii) The State Government would propose to the Central Government to examine the feasibility of bringing paragraphs 4(3), 4(5), 12(I)(b) and 17 of the Sixth Schedule within the purview of paragraph 20-BB.
- ✓ (viii) While law and order will continue to be the responsibility of the State Government, it would, however, evolve a mechanism for consultation with the C.E.M. of the Council concerned regarding the posting of senior Police and law and order officers i.e. the Superintendent of Police and below and the Deputy Commissioner and below in the area of the Councils. Similarly, the State Government will also evolve a mechanism for associating the C.E.M. of the Council concerned in the performance appraisal/recording of Confidential Report in respect of the above-mentioned Officers in accordance with the procedures being followed by the State Government.
- (ix) In the finalisation of the Annual Plan, for the discussions with the Planning Commission, officers of the Councils would be included in the State delegation.

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- x) The feasibility of separately mentioning the funds meant for the areas of the Councils in the releases made by the Union Government and the modalities for the same will be examined urgently.
- (xi) A suitable mechanism will be evolved to monitor the adequacy and promptitude in release to the Councils by the State Government of funds meant for the Councils.

Signed at New Delhi, on April 1, 1995, by

Sd/-

(DHOROM SING TERON)
CHAIRMAN, ASDC

Sd/-

(ROBINDRA RONGPI)
PRESIDENT,
KARBI STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION (SKA) (KSA)

Sd/-

(PRAKANTO WARISA)
PRESIDENT,
NORTH CACHAR HILLS STUDENTS' FEDERATION (NCHSF)

Sd/-

(JOITHON LONGMAILAI),
PRESIDENT,
DIMASA STUDENTS' UNION (DSU)

Sd/-

(HOLIRAM TERANG)
SPOKESMAN, ASDC

Sd/-

(JAYANTA RONGPI)
SPOKESMAN, ASDC

Sd/-

(HITESHWAR SAIKIA)
CHIEF MINISTER OF ASSAM

In the presence of

SHRI S.B. CHAVAN
HON'BLE UNION HOME MINISTER

ANNEXURE - I

DEPARTMENTS FOR ENTRUSTMENT TO THE THE N.C. HILLS & KARBI
ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT COUNCILS UNDER PARA 6(2)
OF SIXTH SCHEDULE TO THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

1. Industry.
2. Animal Husbandary & Veterinary
3. Forest.
4. Agriculture.
5. P.W.D.
6. Sericulture
7. Education: (A) Primary Education upto the level of
Higher Secondary Education.

(B) Adult Education

8. Cultural Affairs.
9. Soil Conservation.
10. Co-Operation.
11. Fisheries.
12. Panchayat and Rural Development including DRDA.
13. Handloom & Textile.
14. Health & Family Welfare.
15. Public Health Engineering.
16. Irrigation.
17. Social Welfare.
18. Flood Control Department.
19. Sports & Youth Welfare.
20. Weight & Measure.
21. Food & Civil Supplies.
22. Town & Country Planning.
23. College Education (General), including Library
Services, District Museum & Archeology.
24. Land Reforms.
25. Publicity/Public Relation.
26. Printing & Stationery.
27. Tourism.
28. Transport.
29. Excise.
30. Finance including Sales Tax on purchase of goods
other than Newspapers, Excise, Professional Tax.

Memorandum of Settlement

1.1 The Government of India and the Government of Assam have been making persistent efforts to fulfil the legitimate aspirations of the people of Dima Hasao regarding all-round development including preservation and promotion of their cultural identity and language, while concomitantly facilitating devolution of the developmental process to bring the fruits of education and economic development to the people. A number of initiatives both at the Government level and in collaboration with the concerned communities have been started from time to time with this objective.

1.2 As part of this process, several rounds of tripartite discussions were held with the representatives of both the factions of the Dima Naga Dagaoh (DND), one faction of DND led by Dilip Munisa and another faction of DND led by Joel Garlosa. As a result of this consultative process, it has been agreed to initiate time bound steps to bring about greater devolution of power to the grass roots level in Dima Hasao while ensuring increased capacity building for developmental activities at all levels.

1.3 The representatives of the DND shall abjure violence, in any manner, in furtherance of their objectives and shall join the peaceful democratic political process as established by the law of the land.

POLITICAL

- 2.1 A Committee, as envisaged in the Art. 371B of the Constitution, in the Assam Legislative Assembly will be constituted to deal with the matters relating to the 6th Schedule Council in Dima Hasao District. The 6th Schedule Councils will submit their Annual Report once a year to the

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Committee of the Assam Legislative Assembly along with a copy to the Governor. The Annual Report should also include the Audited Annual accounts of the preceding year, together with the observations and Action taken by the council on the comments of the Audit.

2.2. As part of the restructuring and empowerment process, the existing North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) will be renamed as the Dimas Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council (DHATC). 2

2.3. The State Government has agreed to re-organize the existing Autonomous district under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution into 3 (three) administrative units for better administrative and developmental administration, as per procedure established by law. 3

2.4. Increasing the number of members of the restructured council is agreed in principle (Increase in seats shall be applicable from subsequent election due in the year 2017 or mid term poll, if any). 4

2.5. The responsibility of conducting elections to the DHATC will be entrusted to the State Election Commission. 5

2.6 Additional subjects, as listed below, will be transferred to the Council under para 3A of the 6th schedule of the Constitution conferring legislative powers on the council in respect of these subjects so as to empower the council with legislative and executive powers in respect of these subjects: 6

1. Animal Husbandry & Veterinary. Preservation, Protection and improvement of stock and prevention of animal diseases; veterinary training and practice; and Cattle Pounds.
2. Forest (other than reserved forest)

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3. P.W.D
4. Sericulture
5. Education:
 - (a) Primary & Secondary Education.
 - (b) Higher Secondary including vocational training.
 - (c) Adult Education.
 - (d) College Education (General)
6. Cultural Affairs.
7. Soil Conservation.
8. Co-operation.
9. Fisheries.
10. Panchayat and Rural Development including DRDA.
11. Handloom & Textile.
12. Health & Family Welfare. Public Health and Sanitation, hospitals and dispensaries.
13. Public Health Engineering, Water supply and Water Storage. Water power upto 5 Mega Watt , subject to the provisions of entry 56 of List I of the Seventh Schedule
14. Irrigation & Minor Irrigation, Canals, drainage and embankments.
15. Social Welfare
16. Sports & Youth Welfare.
17. Weight & Measure, subject to provisions of entry 50 of list I of the seventh schedule.
18. Food & Civil Supplies.

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19. Agriculture, including agricultural education & research, protection against pest & prevention of plant disease.
20. Publicity and Public Relation.
21. Printing & Stationery.
22. Tourism.
23. Urban Development- Town and Country Planning.
24. Tribal Research Institute, controlled and financed by the State Government.
25. Land & Revenue, Land Reforms.
26. Planning & Development.
27. Municipal Corporation, Improvement Trust, District Boards and other local authorities.
28. Welfare of Hill Tribes.
29. Markets and fairs.
30. Lotteries, subject to provisions of entry 40 of list I of the Seventh Schedule.
31. Statistics.
32. Intoxicating liquors, opium and derivatives, subject to provisions of entry 84 of list I of seventh Schedule.
33. Labour and employment.
34. Registration of Births and Deaths.
35. Industries, subject to the provisions of entries 7 and 52 of list I of Seventh Schedule. Small, Cottage & rural Industry. Trade and Commerce in, and the production, supply and distribution of Foodstuffs, Cattle fodder, raw cotton and raw jute.

- 36. Transport (roads, bridges, ferries and other means of communication not specified in List I, Municipal tramways, ropeways, inland waterways and traffic thereon subject to the provisions of List I and List III with regard to such waterways; vehicles other than mechanically propelled vehicles)
- 37. Flood control for protection of villages, paddy fields, markets, town etc. (not of technical nature).
- 38. Theatres and dramatic performances, entertainment and amusement, cinemas subject to the provisions of entry 60 of list I.
- 39. Libraries (Library services) museums and other similar institutions controlled or financed by the state, ancient and historical monuments and records other than those declared by or under law made by Parliament to be of national importance.

2.7. Development functions and functionaries in respect of transferred subjects shall also be transferred to the DHATC.

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2.8. The State Government of Assam has agreed in principle to set up a Development Council with a suitable package for preservation and promotion of culture, language, etc. of people belonging to tribes like Hojai and Barman, etc. (to be decided by the State Government) living outside the present Dima Hasao District.

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3. DHATC

3.1. The Chief and the Deputy Chief of the DHATC shall have the status equivalent to the Cabinet Minister and the other executive council members equivalent to the Minister of State of Assam for protocol purposes within the jurisdiction of the DHATC. Similarly, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of DHATC shall have the status equivalent to the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly respectively for protocol purposes within the jurisdiction of DHATC.

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3.2 The DHATC authority shall have full control, consistent with the relevant Service Rules, over the officers and staff concerned with the transferred subjects working and placed under the jurisdiction of the DHATC. ACRs of these officers shall also be written by the appropriate authority of the DHATC

Personnel.
Off &
Admin

3.3 The authority of the DHATC shall be competent to make appointments to all posts under its control in accordance with the rules of appointment followed by the Governor of Assam. However, the posts, where recruitment is made on the recommendation of Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) shall not be covered under this provision. Vacancies in Class II and Class I rank officers create impediments in effective delivery of services to the people. The State Government will make all efforts to fill these vacancies by placing the services of officers in the departments under the control of the DHATC. This will, however, not include such cases where the vacancies have arisen because of general decision on grounds of austerity, etc., in respect of abolition of keeping the posts temporarily vacant. Special attention will be paid by the State Government for filling up vacancies in the Government colleges. No new post shall be created by DHATC without concurrence of the Government of Assam.

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3.4. The State Government will encadre posts of Grade I and Grade II under the DHATC expeditiously and streamline the process of filling the vacancies under the DHATC.

3.5. The DHATC authority may constitute a Selection Board for appointments to be made by it and may also make rules, with the

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Approval of the Governor of Assam to regulate appointments and to ensure adequate representation for all communities living within its jurisdiction.

Personnel.

4. ORGANISATION RELATED

4.1 The DHD and DHD/J shall dissolve themselves as organizations within a reasonable time (six months) upon the signing of this Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) as a precursor to the Government initiating further process to implement the agreed decisions of this agreement. 11

4.2 The State Government shall provide full support to relief and rehabilitation of the members of the DHD and DHD/J groups who have surrendered with arms in accordance with the existing policy of the State in this regard. Financial support in such cases shall be limited to the provisions of the relevant scheme prepared and funded by the Government of India. Vocational classes will be organized in the designated camps for the surrendered cadres of the DHD and DHD/J groups. Special psychological counseling and career guidance classes will also be organized in the designated camps by the State Government to facilitate rehabilitation of the cadres. 12

4.3 Criminal cases registered against members of the DHD and DHD/J groups for non-heinous crime shall be withdrawn by the State Government as per procedure established by law. Criminal cases registered against members of the DHD and DHD/J groups for heinous crimes shall be reviewed case by case according to the existing policy on the subject and, wherever feasible, steps for withdrawal of such 13

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cases will be initiated by the State Government. Withdrawal of cases against such persons and those related to over-ground DHD and DHD/J groups movement since their inception shall be considered according to the existing policy of the State of Assam.

5. DEVELOPMENT

5.1. Concerted efforts will be made by the Government of India and State Government of Assam in collaboration with the DHATC to improve the level of general and technical education. Initiatives already announced will be pursued with greater vigour in a time bound manner. 14

5.2. Additional steps like immediate up gradation of the District Hospitals and PHCs will be taken up by the newly restructured authority with assistance from the Government of India and the Govt. of Assam, as the case may be. Additional funds if necessary will be provided by the Govt. of India for this purpose on project basis. 15 H&F

5.3. The Government of India and the Government of Assam will encourage DHATC to take up projects under PPP model in the area of Health care and education including professional and higher technical education to achieve the potential of Dima Hasao emerging as a regional Health care and educational hub. Steps for necessary empowerment of the DHATC to initiate and formulate projects reports will be taken by the Government. 16

5.4. It is noted that the strengthening of the college and secondary/primary education infrastructure is important. The Council will prepare detailed project reports both for upgrading the existing institutions but also for starting new institutions, so that Government assistance could 17

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be considered. Assistance in drawing up suitable projects will also be made available by the Government.

6 INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

6.1. Steps for Constitutional amendments necessary to implement the agreed points of the MoS will be taken by the Government of India. Suitable amendments and delegation of powers under various relevant acts to enable the Council to exercise its responsibilities will also be taken by the State Government and where necessary by the Government of India. 17

6.2. Appropriate amendments will be proposed in the provisions of the 6th Schedule of the Constitution to facilitate and ensure devolution of administrative powers and stimulate developmental activity at the grass roots level by constituting village level local governance units e.g. Village Councils/Gram Sabhas.

6.3. An effective procedure to release funds (coming from both State and the Central Governments) to the DHATC will be put in place to ensure their utilization for the intended purpose without diversion or delay.

6.4. A committee comprising representatives of the State Government and the Council may monitor and review the regular release of scheme based funds to DHATC. The MHA monitoring committee will be kept informed. 18

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6.5 Both the Government of India and the Government of Assam will consider the case for higher fund allocation to the DHATC to undertake viable developmental activity within their jurisdiction.

6.6 The Government of India will sympathetically examine the possibility of introducing a regular Helicopter service linking Hailfong-18 Silchar-Guwahati which can be availed of by people on payment. *Transport.*

6.7. All participants in the tripartite process also accepted the need for strict adherence to established norms of financial management in the DHATC administration and the need for all involved in such management to maintain the highest standards of probity to prevent mis-utilization /mis-appropriation of developmental funds meant for the people. Without in any manner diluting the authority of CAG with regard to audit as provided in the constitution, it is agreed to evolve and implement an additional system of effective auditing projects with the participation, where necessary, of authorities like NABARD etc. Such audit reports along with the Action Taken Report (ATR) from the Council shall be placed before the Governor/ Committee of the Legislature (proposed) within a reasonable time. *Finance.* 19

6.8. An independent body like the State Finance Commission will be constituted by the Government of Assam to recommend establishing a proper basis for fund allocations and sharing of tax proceeds between the State Government and 6th Schedule institutions like the DHATC. The Government of India and the Government of Assam will initiate steps for necessary modification in the constitutional and other relevant legislative/procedural regulatory regime. 20

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In view of the changes relating to the role and scope of functioning of the Councils, there is a need to undertake a thorough revision of the Assam Autonomous District (constitution of District Councils) Rules, 1951 to incorporate these changes and to reflect the spirit of empowerment and devolution in governance at the ground level. The Government of Assam will initiate necessary steps in this regard expeditiously in consultation with the DHATC and other 6th Scheduled Councils. It is agreed to complete the revision within a year.

7. FINANCE & PLANNING

7.1. The planning and budgetary exercise for all the subjects in the Council after the proposed restructuring will be a major exercise. Preparation for Five Year and Annual Plans by the Council within the broad framework of State/National priorities will need to cover all activities of departments under their charge. To enable the restructured Council to handle this responsibility effectively, the State Government will initiate steps to make available adequate number of experienced officers to the Council for the purpose.

7.2. The Ministry of Home Affairs shall co-ordinate the task of Capacity building in the Council to deal effectively with enlarged responsibilities relating to transferred subjects by imparting suitable training to Officers and Staff of the Council. A sum of Rs.10 Crore will be made available as one time grant for the purpose

7.3. The State Government would provide an amount, to be decided every year on population ratio basis, as grants-in-aid in two equal installments to the DHATC for executing development works. The

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proportionate share for the DHATC shall be calculated on the basis of the plan funds available after setting aside the funds required for earmarked sectors and the salary. This amount may be reduced proportionately if the State plan allocation is reduced or if there is plan cut due to resource problem. In addition, a suitable amount of plan funds and non-plan funds will be made available to cover the office expenses and the salaries of the staff working under the control of DHATC. The DHATC shall disburse the salaries of the staff under their control and would ensure strict economy in the matter.

8.1. Steps will be taken for protection of language and culture of Dimasa people, their historical monuments and heritage sites. For this purpose, the Archeological department of the Government of Assam and the Archeological Survey of India will undertake a survey within the jurisdiction of the Council to prepare a list of such sites. It is agreed in principle to set up a Cultural Centre at an appropriate location in Dima Hasao to promote and preserve the culture and tradition of Dimasa people. The DHATC will send a detailed project report for consideration of the Govt. for approval and sanction of project funds.

8.2. The Archeological department of the Govt. of Assam and the Archeological Survey of India will undertake a survey of other heritage sites relating to non-Dimasa indigenous people within the jurisdiction of the Council to formulate projects for their preservation and maintenance.

8.3. The State Government and the Ministry of Environment and Forest will make an assessment of potential for forest related activities in the district and also suggest measures for their protection. The State Government/Government of India will consider release of additional

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focus on the DHATC for forest related activities and protection of Forest resources.

8.4. The Government of India will give a project based grant for setting up a Dimasa Bhawan in Delhi. For this purpose, the Council will apply for a plot to the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).

8.5. The demand for inclusion of Dimasa language in the VIIIth schedule of the Constitution will be referred to the Committee looking into such issues for its consideration. This will be decided on the basis of parameters recommended by the Committee and approved by the Government.

9 ADDITIONAL ECONOMIC PACKAGE

9.1 Construction of roads for improvement of road connectivity in Dima Hasao District will be considered under existing schemes in phased manner on submission of Detailed Project Report (DPR) submitted by the DHATC. An illustrative list for construction of roads in Dima Hasao District is at Annexure I (page 16-17 of MoS). To augment availability of power, DHATC will submit proposals to the Ministry of New & Renewable Energy (MNRE) which will consider special projects for this purpose in the DHATC area. 21

9.2 Council will submit projects for water supply to Haflong and other notified towns in Dima Hasao which will be considered expeditiously for implementation. 22

9.3 A special economic package of Rs.200 Crore (Rs 40 Crore per annum) over and above the Plan fund over the next five years will be

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provided to the Council to undertake special projects that will be proposed by the Council. A committee will be formed involving the Representative of the Government of Assam, DHATC and concerned Central Ministries, for identification of projects under special economic package. Funds will be provided through the State Government for specific monitorable projects through the Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) or the Plan exercise in a time bound manner, while ensuring dovetailing of all fund flows to the district from Finance Commission and other sources.

9.4 The responsibility for providing land, if necessary, for any of the projects flowing from this MoS shall be the responsibility of the DHATC.

10 MONITORING

10.1 A Committee under the Chairmanship of the Joint Secretary (NE), MHA, Government of India will review every 6 months the status of implementation of the decisions under this agreement. Senior most Secretary, Home Department, Senior most Secretary, HAD and the Principal Secretary of Council will represent the Government of Assam and the Council respectively in the Committee. Initially, a representative nominated by the DHD will also be a member of this Committee, until further review.

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10.2 The Monitoring Committee shall associate representatives from other ministries/departments as and when necessary. The term of the monitoring unit will be co-terminus with the implementation period of the Memorandum of Settlement.

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10.3 The Committee will send a report to the Union Home Secretary who, on receipt of the report, may communicate the same with appropriate advice to the State Government.

Joel Gorlosa
08-10-2012
Joel Gorlosa
Chairman
Dima Haram Daogah (J)

Dilip Nunisa
Dilip Nunisa
Chairman
Dima Haram Daogah, (DHD)

Niranjan Hojai
Niranjan Hojai
Commander in Chief,
DHD (J)

Yathong Dimasa
Yathong Dimasa
General Secretary, DHD

Debolal Gorlosa
Debolal Gorlosa
Deputy Commander in Chief,
DHD (J)

Pronob Nunisa
Pronob Nunisa
Commander in Chief, DHD

Subrata Thaosen
08-10-12
Subrata Thaosen
Vice Chairman, DHD (J)

Rajesh Naiding
08/10/12
Rajesh Naiding
Assistant General Secy., DHD

Devojit Bathari
08-10-12
Devojit Bathari
Secretary, DHD (J)

Ronslin Dimasa
08/10/12
Ronslin Dimasa
Org. Secy, DHD

Athan Hapila
08/10/12
Athan Hapila
Zone Commander, DHD (J)

M C Langthasa
M C Langthasa
PRO, DHD

Sailesh
Sailesh
Principal Secretary
Home Department
Government of Assam

Shambhu Singh
Shambhu Singh
Joint Secretary
Ministry of Home Affairs
Government of India

Signed on 8th October, 2012 at New Delhi in the presence of Sh. Sushil Kumar Shinde Hon'ble Union Home Minister and Sh. Tarun Gogoi, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam.

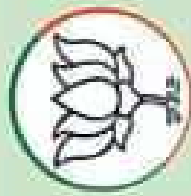
Illustrative list of Construction/Improvement of Roads & Bridges:

1. Khepre – Sonapur – Langaobra Via Langao Hajong.
2. Langaobra – Wajao.
3. Langting – Geroso Village.
4. Hatikhali – Langflang Via Bilaipur – Wadrenghisa.
5. Hatikhali – Munokol Khelma village.
6. Hatikhali – Wafudisa via Dilaothai.
7. (a) Gunjung – Maibang.
(b) Improvement of HPC Road in Dihangi area.
(c) Construction of 3 (three) meyor Bridge from Dihangi to Harangajao Via –
Thindol, Dilaima River, Panapur river, Dere River.
8. Gonjung – Dihangi Road – Khalanala via Thaisaling Hawar Arda village.
9. Dehangi – Umrangso Rd – Old Songbar via Dimikhri – Diphongena – Di
Maino – Thingdol Beite Village.
10. Lower Bagetar Via Boro Janam – Harangajao.
11. Haflong Jorai Rd – Borjenam – Nabdi Daolaguphu via Sangferdisa.
12. Ditakcherra via Kayung Valley – Noonsuri – Bihara Bazar.
13. Semkhor – Maibang Rd –Asalu via Diduki Dibaola.
14. Diyung – Lanka Rd – Garampani Lanka Rd. via Khlemfu Hafila.
15. Diyungbra Block Bazar – Berelang village via Haja Wari.
16. Block Bazar – Ferakangbo via Phonglo Disa.
17. Semkhor – KK Rd. via Drun Didambra – Nablai Disa.
18. KK Rd. Nabdi Langting – Longflang Via Drangbra Longren.
19. Thana Lambra – Dimaino via Dobongling – RCE Bridge Diyungbra.
20. Thana Lambra – Kalachand via Amlongbra Nawaidisa – Hagab – Motibra.
21. Gonjung – Hagab via Naben village.
22. Didambra – Gdingpur Maibang via Hadingma – Dukhaling.
23. Langting – Thaiju Wari via Thaiplungling Geroso.
24. Hatikhali – Thaiju Wari via Dikhlem Daofer.
25. Manderdisa – Maniyung Hadi.
26. Radaodisa – Mesebdisa RCC Bridge.

27. Purna Leikul – Bongkai via Semkhor – Khangjol – Molkon – Thingvom – Mongjang.
28. Maibang – Khepre – Thongikro.
29. Mahur – Laisong – Hangrum – Hajaichok.
30. Mahur – Ainacherra – Khaspur – Vongjola – Khangnam – Lodi Kachari – Lodi Kuki
31. Mahur – Laisong – Hatlong – N. Leikul.
32. Bagetar – Songbar – Mongon – Thuruk – Khobak.
33. Dittakcherra Bazaar – Kaeng Phai via Lalzar.
34. P. Leikul NEC – Tumjeng.
35. Diyungbra – Harmudisa.
36. Digandu – Bato Haja.
37. Rangerbil (Dismao) – Simbao.
38. Railing Hadi – Natun Gera village.
39. Diyungbra PWD – Baraima – Washaikhong – ND Rd.
40. Block Bazar – Khlempu Hafila- Daodip Disa.
41. Road Connectivity between the villages with dist. Hd. Qtrs. 1. Zion 2. Bethel, 3. Kashipur, 4. Lungkhok, 5. A Robbi, 6. Boro Robbi, 7. Routilla, 8. Bouljol, 9. Pajja, 10. Buangkung, 11. Chaptuk, 12. Tangpui
42. P Fulbul NEC Rd. to Tumjang Village.
43. Road Connectivity for the village- Buolmuol, Hmunthazao, D. Huonveng, Simtuiluong, Hmarthangmawi, Tlangsang, Aivaphai, Phaiphak, Zoar, P. Hnachangzawi, Thingbung, T. Muolkoj, Vongzawl, Hnachngzawl, Tattephai, Phaipui, Boro Leikek, Jinam, Khuongluong, Patherkot
44. Rural Electrification for the above mentioned villages.

24.

Dilip N. N. N.
44



ELECTION MANIFESTO

For Assam Legislative Assembly Election - 2021

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

MLA Candidate: **SMT. NANDITA GORLOSA**

15-Hailong (ST) LAC

The BJP comes to you to seek your valued blessings yet again, so that Dima Hasao District continues unhindered on the path of development, to realize its true destiny with renewed vigour. In 2016, BJP emerged as the symbol of the aspirations of the people of Assam and we made some promises. Today, when we are at this juncture of elections and facing the electorate, BJP Dima Hasao District can assert with immense pride and satisfaction that the journey of resolves and commitments that began in 2016 will continue to be carried forward in accordance with the wishes of the people. We have succeeded in kindling faith towards development in the minds of people and have convinced that the BJP government is the harbinger of a New Dima Hasao.

In the last five years, the work done by our government for the development and empowerment of every section of society has instilled faith in every citizen that they can move ahead on the path of progress with dignity. Dima Hasao District, which earlier made headlines for bloodage and neglect, is now witnessing unprecedented development. Today one can clearly see how development has become a mass movement. Our BJP government in the State and in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council has filed the infrastructure gaps with speed and foresight. To mention a few: construction of the Skill Development Centre at Kata Arda Drying Unit, construction of the N.L. Daulagoo Sports Complex, Hailong, an auditorium at Songgaing, Dlabara - Songlira Samucharam Nodrang at Hailong, construction of Bakhos (Dimas Cultural Platform) in almost every village of the district, construction and improvement of different village approach road connecting to the main road network, provision of water facilities through tube well boring and gravity at interior villages of the district, highlighting the district as the most potential tourist destination, construction of eco-tourism centre at Panimut, improvement of Golf Course at Umringso, construction and improvement of Tourist Lodge of different places of the district etc. are some of the examples of our commitments towards the development of the district. And we are committed to continue this journey of development, good governance and prosperity in the last five years, we have been successful in lifting the state and our district out of the morass of problems inherited from 15 years of misrule by the Congress government, while also increasing the pace of development.

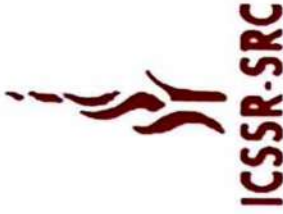
The Assam Legislative Assembly Election, 2021 is an election for carrying forward this journey of development that has started in Dima Hasao District and the BJP government has always considered people's participation of utmost importance in good governance and there

fore ensured that people in general were given ample opportunities for participating in our initiatives and voicing their opinions. The BJP Dima Hasao after holding hundreds of citizens' meetings represented by Apex Body of different Tribes & Communities, Students' Organisation, organizing round tables with subject experts, marshaling responses gained from thousands of feedbacks, online comments, email suggestions, Whatsapp messages, Tweets and Facebook comments etc., we have drawn up an action plan for Dima Hasao that would reflect the aspirations of people from all walks of life.

1. Implementation of the Article 244(A) and creation of autonomous state.
2. Non introduction of Panchayati Raj System in Dima Hasao.
3. Declaration of Dima Hasao as the first organic district of Assam.
4. Development of Some ja Sites in the district for the UNESCO World Heritage Site like the sites in Laos.
5. Development of Dima Hasao as the most sought after adventure and cultural tourism destination in the region.
6. Development of handloom, textile and handicraft for income generation of the rural population.
7. Setting up cultural resource centres for all the tribes in the district.
8. Establishment of Assam University Campus in Dima Hasao District, Assam.
9. Establishment of a Law College in Dima Ha sao District.
10. Development of Hailong Government College as an autonomous college.
11. Implementation of clause 4.2 of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS), signed on 12th Oct 2012 between the Government of the Centre and State with the DHD LJ & DHD in letter and spirit.
12. For Relief and Rehabilitation to the Ex-Cadres of both the factions of DHD & Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), Assam.
13. Need based fund allocation to the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council rather than on population pattern of the three Hills District: Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong (East), and Karbi Anglong (West).
14. Introduce Separate Schedule Race of Civil Work for Hills District of Assam.
15. Setting up of Industrial Training Institute (ITI) at Mahabing Sub-Division & Dyingpura Sub-Division of Dima Hasao District, Assam.
16. Completion of the Construction Work of Polytechnic College of Dima Waga, Dima Hasao District, Assam.
17. Immediate construction and starting of Horticulture College at Kalabhand, Dima Hasao District, Assam.
18. Immediate completion of National Highway from Nienbanglo to Balacheta.
19. Transfer of Multi-Sectoral Development Programme (MSDP) under the administrative control of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council.
20. Transfer of District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) to North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council.
21. Delegation of power to conduct Teacher Eligibility (TET), primarily for the candidates of Dima Hasao District by North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council.
22. Memorandum of Understanding between Govt. of Assam and North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council regarding Revenue Sharing of North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Ltd. (NEEPCO) Of Umringso, Dima Hasao, Assam.
23. Creation of 1 (one) seat for Member of Parliament (MP) Lok Sabha, in Dima Hasao District, Assam.
24. Creation of 2 (two) more seats for Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), in Dima Hasao District, Assam.



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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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National Seminar
Politics before Elections
25-26 March, 2019

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This is to certify that ~~Mr./ Ms./ Dr./ Prof.~~

Rakhee Naiding

University of Hyderabad

presented a paper/ chaired a

of

session titled Hindutva vs. Ethnic Ideology - Inquiries into the Ideological Underpinnings of BJP's Victory in Dima Hasaro District of Assam.
in the Two Day National Seminar organized under the auspices of the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad funded by

the ICSSR-Southern Regional Centre, Hyderabad. His / her contribution is highly appreciated.

Dr. Biju. B. L.
Convener

Prof. Manjari Katju

Head, Department of Political Science

Head

Associate Professor

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26th -27th March 2022

This is to certify that Prof./Dr./Mr./Ms. Rakhee Naiding, Assistant Professor, Deptt. of Political Science,

Bikali College, Dhrupdhara.

has participated and

presented a paper entitled:- Party Politics in Dima Hasao district of Assam: Shifts and Continuities in the

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The Rise of BJP in the Hills of Assam: A Case of Dima Hasao District

Rakhee Naiding
Research Scholar
University of Hyderabad-500046

Abstract

The BJP's entry into Northeast beginning with Assam has gained the attention of national academic discussion. The debates range from the rise of Hindu nationalism in the region to the future of ethno-nationalist politics, the mainstay of the region's politics. This paper looks into one such district, Dima Hasao, a hill district, with tribal majority administered under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The paper contends that the recent rise of BJP in the district's lone Assembly Constituency, Haflong (ST) and its Autonomous District Council has to do with the district's thirst for development and the internal churnings of the autonomous council.

Introduction

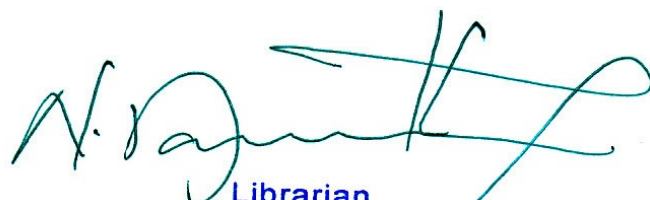
The Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has generated great academic discussion in the last few years. In Assam when the BJP came to power in the Assembly elections in 2016, the debates ranged from what the victory signified, to whether it was a matter of a simple electoral victory (Goswami and Tripathi, 2015) or as several commentators concluded that the electoral victory represented the entry of Hindutva in the region (Gohain, 2016) The 2016 Assam Assembly victory of the BJP and its allies brought to the fore its ability to stitch alliances with regional forces that ensured electoral success for the party. (Misra, 2016) The primary factor leading to the victory was the anti-incumbency sentiment against the Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government which had been in power in the state for three consecutive years. This article will look into the specific case of Dima Hasao district, a hill district of Assam which is administered under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The district's geographical and historical trajectory is separate from the Brahmaputra Valley and thus it creates its own set of reasons for the rise of the saffron party. This study is an analysis of the factors that led to the party's recent victories in the district. It looks into the 2016 Assembly Elections in the district's lone Assembly constituency and recent developments in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council(NCHAC) with the BJP in power at local, state and national level.

Where lies the Dima Hasao district?

The Dima Hasao district(erstwhile North Cachar Hills) of Assam is situated at the southern end of the state of Assam. The author will stick to the name North Cachar Hills presently for matters of convenience since the autonomous council still goes by the erstwhile nomenclature. The district covers an area of 4,890 Sq.km. The region is surrounded by Nagaon district and Karbi Anglong district (another district under Sixth Schedule which has a shared history with N.C. Hills) of Assam at North and Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi district of Assam at the South. The states of Manipur and Nagaland are at its eastern boundary, while Meghalaya and a part of Karbi Anglong district are situated at the western boundary. The geographical topography of the entire N.C.

BJP and its Mass Fronts: A Case Study of Dima Hasao District

by Rakhee Naiding



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