

Electoral Politics in Arunachal Pradesh

A Study of Voting Behaviour

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Electoral politics in the modern and truly democratic sense is a new experience for the people of Arunachal Pradesh. "Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) is the youngest sub-polity of India to be introduced to the process of modern participatory politics."¹ Although the first General Election in India was held in 1952, the franchise right remained unextended to the people of Arunachal for long. The voting right was withheld till 1977 by a special provision of the Representation of People Act, 1951.² This was probably due to the fact that the "Administrative policies of Arunachal Pradesh had long been determined by the anthropological view that elections are alien to tribal culture."³ The Bordoloi sub-committee also did not favour extending franchise to the people of NEFA as it found that the level of consciousness among the tribals was very low.⁴

Notwithstanding the late entry of electoral politics into Arunachal Pradesh, the democratic culture was in practice here since time immemorial in the workings of the traditional village councils in different forms among different tribal groups. Traditional political institutions such as Kameng of the Adis were essentially democratic in function and structure. Elements of the electoral system too were not entirely unknown to the tribals here. It is on record that the Monpa tribe of Tawang and Kameng Districts traditionally employed modern methods of election in their process of selection of *tsorgens*, the village head.

Verrier Elwin describes the system as:

... "the election of *tsorgens* is traditionally initiated at the Kharchung level, on the initiative of the various *tsoblas*. The panel of names of person suitable for election as *tsorgens* is drawn up by the *tsobla* concerned after consultation with the entire village population. In practice there is nearly an occasion when a panel has to be prepared and the deliberation normally results in the choice of one person as the most suitable candidate. All the *tsoblas*

concerned, then approach the person selected and after obtaining his agreement to the nomination, put it up to the *tsotsang zom* or the General Assembly. Three days are normally given for the distribution of the ballot papers and for their collection from the voters. In rare cases where there is a tie, the *tsorgen* is chosen by drawing lots from among the candidates. Participation in the voting is compulsory and the household whose head does not attend the General Assembly when it meets, or fails to take part in the voting, is fined."⁵

In our view, however, the electoral system as described by Elwin above does not reflect the traditional system. A survey of Monpa dominated areas has revealed that such practices including the distribution and collection of ballot papers in a three day time period did not exist in the traditional Monpa society.⁶ In the traditional way, an assembly represented by a member from each family, selected the *tsorgens*, after the potential of the candidates was debated at the *tsobla* (village) level. On the appointed day and place the villagers assembled together to select their leaders from among those persons of ability. The selection of a candidate is generally made by a unanimous decision. Thus, the Monpa type of democracy can be termed as 'Direct but limited Democracy'.

The Panchayat Raj Institution introduced in 1969 initiated the modern participatory political process in the state. And the North East Frontier Agency Administration (supplementary) Regulation, 1971 introduced an electoral system in the Village Panchayats. The 1971 amendment has changed the provisions of 1967 Regulation relating to the Gram Panchayats to create a new body, to be elected according to customary tribal methods, by the residents of a village or villages that fall within the Gram Panchayat.⁷ The Arunachal Pradesh Gram Panchayat (Constitution) Rules (1972), spelt out certain details regarding the election of the members of Gram Panchayat, but, it is silent about the actual process of election.⁸ This rule says that the Deputy Commissioner should prepare a list of all adults in the Gram Panchayat area⁹ for the purpose of the Panchayat elections and that the election should be conducted by a Presiding Officer to be appointed by him. The successful candidates are required to be formally declared elected by the Presiding Officer.¹⁰

The North-East Areas (Re-organization) Act, 1971 provides the Union Territory with one seat in the Rajya Sabha and another in the Lok Sabha to be filled by the nomination of the President.¹¹ The candidates, however, were not exactly nominated by the President, for the candidates to be nominated by the President were indirectly

elected by the people. With regards to the Rajya Sabha seat, the candidate was selected by the Pradesh Council through an election process. So, in effect, an electoral college consisting of all the Zila Parishads elect a candidate to be nominated for the Lok Sabha seat. Each Zila Parishad consists of all the Vice-Presidents of all Anchal Samitis within its jurisdiction, with one representative from each Anchal Samiti in the District, and not more than six persons to be nominated by the Administrator to secure representation in the Zila Parishad. The seats to be filled were hotly contested. There were five contestants in the fray for the first Lok Sabha seat—three from Siang District and two from Lohit District.¹² The first Member of Parliament was Chowkhamon Gohain to be followed by Dying Ering. In 1972, Todak Basar became the first member of the Rajya Sabha.

Even with the introduction of the Panchayati Raj, the formal pattern of political behaviour could not be conspicuous as elections to the Panchayats were patterned on the existing tribal customs. An election on the basis of the Universal Adult Franchise took place in the state only in 1977. Even in this first parliamentary election in Arunachal only half the population exercised their franchise as there was no election in Arunachal West Parliamentary Constituency, the lone candidate being elected uncontested. But the first Assembly Election in 1978 ensured a popular participation of the people of Arunachal in electoral politics.

Party politics made its first entry in the State in October 1972 with the foundation of a unit of the Indian National Congress. The two nominated members of parliament joined the Congress party. Party politics were activated by the first General Election in 1977 in which an electorate of 2,15,657 were called upon to elect their members of parliament in place of the previous practice of their nomination by the President of India. The Indian National Congress was the only political party to participate in the first ever General Election in Arunachal Pradesh.¹³

The Sample

This study plans to understand and analyse the voting behavior of the electorate in five purposefully selected Assembly Constituencies. The selected constituencies possess a varied social structure and political traditions therefore can be said to be possibly representative of the tribal society in Arunachal Pradesh. The Assembly Constituencies selected are: 7-Bomdila (ST), 13-Itanagar (ST), 55-Khonsa East (ST), 17-Ziro-Hapoli (ST), and 38-Pasighat East (ST).

The Khonsa Assembly Constituency is inhabited by the Wanchos and Noctes with a political tradition of tribal chieftaincy. The Adis of Pasighat are one of the first tribal groups who reaped the benefits of early education and development in the State. This group is famous for its political institution called *Kebang*, a highly democratic traditional village council. The political institution of the Monpas in Bomdila is theocratic in nature. The Itanagar constituency represents a society of mixed political cultures and cultural ethos. The Apatanis of Ziro-Hapoli Constituency are counted as one of the most advanced tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Their society still maintains rigid social structure uninfluenced by the forces of modernization.

A partially structured questionnaire was designed for this study and supplied to the sample electorate in order to elicit the necessary information. Since it was not possible to cover the entire Assembly segment of all the constituencies, it was considered prudent to select at least four polling booths (two rural and two urban) from each constituency at random. The survey covered twenty polling stations and reached an electorate of 570 (371 males and 199 females) in total, employing the random sampling technique.

Voting Behaviour

Voting preferences have been found to be an outcome of various pressures working on an individual in a social milieu. Therefore, an understanding of voting behaviour is a study into socio-cultural processes, which influence the psychology of voters.¹⁴

David J. Elkins has identified two strategies — “Individualistic” and “Holistic” - for explaining the national and regional differences in political participation. The individualistic approach is distinguished by two important features: (i) it aims to answer questions about an individual such as “how does an individual make up his mind regarding whether or who to vote for”? (ii) it depends primarily on individual attributes (such as, age and attitudes towards politics) to answer such questions. The central question in the holistic approach does not refer directly to the individual’s voting decisions or their decisions about running for office; rather this focuses on the social, economic and political aspects of the regional electorate. The holistic approach however, does not rule out the importance of individual differences, but it considers them only within the context of the broader social structures, which condition the levels of participation in a broad spectra of citizens.¹⁵

As Arunachal’s society is made up of diverse social and political

cultures, an attempt has been made here to analyse the voting behaviour of individuals representing various cultures with regional differences. Hence, the study shall keep into considerations "holistic" approach placing individuals as the basic units of analysis.

Different studies have delineated different sets of variables as determinants of voting behaviour. The studies undertaken by scholars of Columbia University entitled, *The People's Choice and Voting*, place an emphasis on the impact of social and environmental factors in the individuals' voting choice. The studies conducted by Michigan Survey Research Centre like the *Voter Decides* and the *American Voter*, on the other hand, link voting behaviour and party preference to psychological variables or to the subjective world of the individual voter and his interpretation of the candidates and the issues associated with a particular event.¹⁶

According to Norman Palmer there are three broad classes of factors or variables which influence individual's voting behaviour- the ecological, the political and the socio-economic or SES factors. "Not so much attention," he writes, "is given to the ecological or environmental factors. Yet these are of decisive importance, for they concern the broad cultural, social, political and economic setting of the total social system in which the act of voting takes place."¹⁷ Norman Palmer has also emphasized certain political factors that influence individuals voting behaviour i.e., the candidate orientation, the party orientation and the issue orientation of the voter. According to Imtiaz Ahmed, "the local political framework is significant for the understanding of the political behaviour of social or communal groups in an area."¹⁸

The social determinants of voting behaviour in India include certain primordial factors such as family and kinship, caste, factions and communalism. In a parliamentary democracy, the main assumption is that the party is more important than the candidate in voting. "In India," Norman Palmer writes, "the party rather than the candidate has been the major determinant in most constituencies and in most elections."¹⁹ This proposition does not hold true for the voters in this study. A majority of the voters (52.80%) voted in consideration of the candidate as a person rather than for his party affiliation and only 30.35 per cent of the total voters cast their vote in consideration of the party. Only 16.84 per cent voters considered issues as the basis of their voting.

Table 1

Q. Do you vote in consideration of individual candidate/party/issues?

Constituency	Candidate	Party	Issues	Total
Bomdila	85 (56.66%)	45 (30%)	20 (13.33%)	150
Itanagar	64 (43.24%)	51 (34.45%)	33 (22.29%)	148
Ziro-Hapoli	28 (56%)	14 (28%)	8 (16%)	50
Pasighat East	77 (50.65%)	48 (31.57%)	27 (17.76%)	152
Khonsa East	47 (67.14%)	15 (21.42%)	8 (11.42%)	70
Total	301 (52.80%)	173 (30.35%)	96 (16.84%)	570 (100%)

Candidate Orientation and Voting Preference

The political behaviour of voters who are oriented towards the candidate rather than a party or other considerations is largely un-ideological. Their voting preference is likely to be shaped by factors such as caste, class, religions, etc. These voters do not attach much significance to the policies and programmes of the political parties. The percentage of voters who vote in consideration of a candidate rather than a party or an issue is the highest i.e., 52.80 per cent.

Party Orientation and Voting Preference

Most of the sample voters were not members of the political party they voted for. Table 1 shows that 30.35 the voters voted in consideration of a party as against 52.80 per cent of these who voted in favour of a candidate.

A unique feature in the electoral politics of Arunachal Pradesh is that the voters tend to favour candidates who are official nominees of the ruling party. Their orientation towards party has nothing to do with the policies and programmes of the concerned party. In fact, a majority of the party-oriented voters were ignorant of the ideological basis of the parties they voted for. Party ticket, therefore, rather than party itself is the prime consideration of the voters. Some of the candidates are believed to have spent a considerable amount of money in their effort to secure party (party in power) nomination.

Issue Orientation and Voting Preference

The general observation is that "issue orientation is much less significant as a voting determinant than candidate orientation and party identification."²⁰ This is true even in the case of the sample voters in this study. Only 16.84 per cent of the voters consider issues as the determinant of voting behaviour.

The issues to which voters pay attention are basically localized in nature with a parochial appeal. The voters indicated their inclination to vote for such parties with whose programmes they could identify themselves. In Arunachal Pradesh, every candidate issues a local manifesto detailing the problems confronted by the voters of that constituency. The local manifesto also contains promises to be fulfilled in next five years. It is evident from Table 2 that 73.33 per cent voters voted in consideration of local issues. The voters who voted in consideration of national and state issues constitute just 26.66 per cent of the total respondents.

Table 2

Q. Do you vote in consideration of local issues/state issues/national issues?

Constituency	Local issues	State issues	National issues	Total
Bomdila	116 (77.33%)	21 (14%)	13 (8.66%)	150
Itanagar	100 (67.56%)	30 (20.27%)	18 (12.86%)	148
Ziro-Hapoli	37 (74%)	8 (16%)	5 (10%)	50
Pasighat East	110 (72.36%)	27 (17.76%)	15 (9.86%)	152
Khonsa East	55 (78.57%)	9 (12.85%)	6 (8.57%)	70
Total	418 (73.33%)	95 (16.66%)	57 (10%)	570 (100%)

Kinship and Voting Preference

In a tribal society "in group" solidarity is religiously maintained. A tribal voter in Arunachal Pradesh behaves politically in response to the group pressures or community welfare. The voters are bound by a network of social relationships, which often get transformed to political relationships at the time of election. It is obvious from the Table 3 that 64.56 per cent of the voters consider kinship as a primary determinant of their voting behaviour.

Table 3

Q. Which factor do you consider in favouring a particular candidate?

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Kinship</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Caste</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bomdila	98	40 (65.33%)	-- (26.66%)	12 (8%)	150
Itanagar	76 (51.35%)	17 (11.48%)	5 (3.37%)	50 (33.78%)	148
Ziro-Hapoli	34 (68%)	3 (6%)	2 (4%)	11 (22%)	50
Pasighat East	107 (70.39%)	18 (11.84%)	— (17.76%)	27	152
Khonsa East	53 (75.71%)	12 (17.14%)	— (7.14%)	5	70
Total	68 (64.56%)	90 (15.78%)	7 (1.22%)	105 (18.42%)	570 (100%)

Religion and Voting Preference

Till recently religion did not find any place in the electoral politics of Arunachal Pradesh. S.K. Chaube notes that voters in Arunachal Pradesh voted without religious consideration, though the election result reflects a regionalist thinking which is very similar to that found in the neighboring hill states.²¹ The entry of two Rimpoches (religious head in Buddhism) from Lumla and Tawang Constituencies in 1995 general election has however, created a break in the political tradition of the state. Again in 1999 elections, an instance of intra-religious rivalry was reported from Bordurai-Bogapani. Assembly Constituency in which a Catholic candidate was pitted against the candidate belonging to Baptist denomination.

As seen from Table 3, voters who voted with religious consideration form merely 15.78 per cent.

Caste and Voting Preference

The role of caste in Indian politics is perhaps one aspect which has received the greatest attention. It is considered to be a key variable in India's political behaviour in general and electoral behaviour in particular. Scholars dealing with Indian elections have pointed out that Indian voters tend to vote on caste lines. They have further generalized that caste associations or assemblies or federations were mobilized to support their respective caste candidates.²²

It is evident from Table 3 that caste has no role to play in the electoral politics of Arunachal Pradesh. A mere 1.22 per cent voters

voted on caste lines. Even among the Apatanis where society is divided into two social groups, clan or village solidarity dominates caste or other considerations.

Village Council and Voting Preference

The behaviour of an individual in the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh is largely regulated by traditional village councils. The analysis Table 4 gives us a true picture of the importance of the village council and its role in the electoral politics of the state. About 31 per cent voters still maintain that traditional leaders do influence their voting choice. Of the respondents, 51.92 per cent however, feel that the council or its leaders remain neutral during elections. The percentage of voters who replied that the candidate to be favoured is decided upon in the meeting of the council is 10.87 per cent. Of the voters 6.84 per cent said that the village council directs the voters.

Table 4

Q. What is the role of traditional village council leader in elections?

Constituency	I*	II**	III***	IV****	Total
Bomdila	17 (11.33%)	10 (6.66%)	45 (30%)	78 (52%)	150
Itanagar	2 (8.10%)	7 (4.72%)	40 (27.02%)	89 (60.13%)	148
Ziro-Hapoli	5 (10%)	3 (6%)	12 (24%)	30 (60%)	50
Pasighat East	16 10.52%	10 (6.57%)	46 (30.26%)	80 (52.63%)	152
Khonsa East	12 (17.14%)	9 (12.85%)	30 (42.85%)	19 (27.14%)	70
Total	62 (10.87%)	39 (6.84%)	173 (30.75%)	296 (51.92%)	570 (100%)

*Candidate to be favoured is decided at the meeting of the council.

**Village council directs the voters.

***Traditional leaders influence the voters.

****Council leader remains neutral during election.

Locality of the Candidate and Voting Preference

Election politics in Arunachal Pradesh is tribe-oriented and the election issues are largely parochial in appeal. A tribal voter finds it hard to accept a candidate from outside his tribe/community. Gegong

Apang, a former Chief Minister was defeated in Liromoba Constituency in the 1999 election primarily because he did not belong to that area.

Table 5 shows that a large majority of the voters (89.93 % in Bomdila, 64.86 per cent in Itanagar, 84 per cent in Ziro-Hapoli, 79.60 per cent in Pasighat East and 87.14 per cent in Khonsa East) feel that their MLA should be a local person. It is to be mentioned here that a local person basically means a person from the voter's own tribe. A significant percentage (32.48%) among the voters of Itanagar constituency, however, was ready to accept a good leader from any outer place as their representative.

Table 5

Q. Do you think your MLA should be a local person or a good leader from any other place?

Constituency other place	Local Person	Leader from any	Don't know	Total
Bomdila	134 (89.93%)	13 (8.66%)	3 (2%)	150
Itanagar	96 (64.86%)	48 (32.48%)	4 (2.70%)	148
Ziro-Hapoli	42 (84%)	7 (14%)	1 (2%)	50
Pasighat East	121 (79.60%)	25 (16.44%)	6 (3.94%)	152
Khonsa East	61 (87.14%)	7 (10%)	2 (2.85%)	70
Total	466 (81.75%)	87 (15.26%)	17 (2.98%)	570 (100%)

Money and voting preference

Money is an elusive factor in any election. Its role as a determinant of voting behaviour is not easy to understand. An accepted fact is that one cannot think of entering into an electoral fray in Arunachal Pradesh without a sound financial background. In some of the constituencies, the financial involvement of each candidate is reported to be very close to a crore. But not even a single voter is ready to admit receiving this payment for votes.

At the same time, it must also be noted that money alone does not determine the winning chance of a candidate. There are cases where money was received from both parties, yet the vote was not given to

the higher bidder. It was found that "money by itself did not produce the desired result; it succeeded only when used as a timely instrument of election strategy."²³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. S.K. Chaube, *Electoral politics in North-East India*, Madras, 1985, p.191.
4. Boordoloi sub-committee was appointed to recommend an appropriate and special administrative framework for the tribals of Assam and other un-represented people.
5. Verrier Elwin, *Democracy in NEFA*, Itanagar, 1988, pp.59-60.
6. Mr. A.B.Sharma, Lecturer, Govt. College, Bomdila has drawn the similar conclusion.
7. NEFA Administration (Supplementary) Regulation, 1971, Section 21(1).
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22. Rajni Kothari, Ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1970.
23. Myron Weiner, Rajni Kothari, Eds. *Indian Voting Behaviour- Studies in 1962 General Election*, Calcutta, 1965, p.33.