Social Media and Election Campaigns: An Analysis of the Usage of Twitter during the 2021 Assam Assembly Elections

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Abstract

Election campaigning in India shows increasingly more sophisticated and widespread use of digital technologies like mobile phones and social media platforms, including Twitter for broadcasting messages and WhatsApp for creating political communities. Political parties hire workers to work for their social media campaigns, generally spreading negative campaigns about their opposition and glorifying their own agendas. At the same time, parties have mobilized campaign strategies around the personality of the leaders. Accordingly, Indian politics mirrors existing trends in western democracies, but these changes in election campaigning have occurred later and for many Indian voters, seem to have appeared out of nowhere. Hence this study may pave the way to gain a comprehensible understanding of the parties' dominant political ideologies and identities, and especially the various issues that they may focus upon. It uses theories of professionalization, and social media campaigning for the 2021 election campaigns of the two dominant parties in Assam, an Indian state with more than 30 million residents. Primarily the study will try to explore the role of Twitter in the election campaigning process in the state of Assam. It will use qualitative content analysis to categorize the dominant techniques used by the two dominant political parties of Assam and finally percentage analysis will be performed to churn out the dominant issues used by the two political parties on Twitter. By analyzing the dominant issues this study also tries to explore which party was able to use Twitter significantly and how its role as a political communication strategy was effective.

Keywords: *Election Campaigns; Social Media; Professionalization; Agenda Setting; Framing*

Introduction

Citizens mostly learn about current political events via television, newspapers, or digital media spaces (Verma & Sardesai, 2014). In the context of an election, parties and candidates use media to advertise their electoral platforms, often involving 'war-like' strategies to win votes and secure political office (Owen, 2014; Verma & Sardesai, 2014). Increasingly, campaigning involves professional campaign strategists and consultants to efficiently manage and monitor the campaigning process. Although the process of campaign professionalization is well-established in many democracies, in Indian politics it is a relatively new phenomenon. At the same time, the emergence and increasing usage of new media platforms are buttressing traditional media platforms and adding a new dimension to the ways in which political communications are carried out. In this paper, we examine the 2021 Assam Legislative election as a case study of professionalization and digital media strategy, adding to our knowledge of politics in the world's largest and fastest-growing democracy.

In India over the last two decades, television has played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, especially during elections (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020; Verma & Sardesai, 2014). However, with the advent and growth of digital technologies and increasing accessibility to Internet connectivity, India has transitioned into a hybrid media system. Along with the existing traditional media, online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. which are collectively known as social media, have been increasingly capturing public attention and influencing their opinions (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). Twitter has attracted the most use by political parties and candidates, especially during election campaigning (Ahmed et al., 2016). And it is also observed that the tweets of political actors are often picked up by and discussed further in traditional media platforms like newspapers, television, etc. helping to set the broader political agenda.

To that end, we can analyze parties' and candidates' media content and how they communicate with their followers on such platforms – to reveal their campaign strategies. Such analysis can also provide insight into the parties' dominant political ideologies and identities, and especially the specific issues that they seek to focus their campaigns upon. The presence of some problems in election communications and the absence of others provides clues to the agenda that a party or candidate is trying to set, or in other words, the type of electoral war they are seeking to fight.

Existing literature on election campaigning in India shows increasingly more sophisticated and widespread use of digital technologies like mobile phones and social media platforms, including Twitter for broadcasting messages and WhatsApp for creating political communities (Neyazi et al., 2016). Political parties hire workers to work for their social media campaigns, generally spreading negative campaigns about their opposition and glorifying their own agendas. At the same time, parties have mobilized campaign strategies around the personality of the leaders, as represented in the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) heavy focus on Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the exclusion of other senior party figures. Accordingly, Indian politics mirrors existing trends in western democracies, but these changes in election campaigning have occurred later and for many Indian voters, seem to have appeared out of nowhere.

In this paper, we apply theories of party professionalization and social media campaigning to the 2021 election campaigns of the two dominant parties in Assam, an Indian state with more than 30 million residents. Currently, Assam's dominant parties are the BJP and the Indian National Congress (INC).

One means of understanding political parties' strategies is to analyse their discourse on various social media platforms and the way they communicate with their followers on such platforms. Hence, this study may also pave the way to gain a comprehensible understanding of the parties' dominant political ideologies and identities, and especially the various issues that they may focus upon. By analyzing the

dominant issues this study also tries to explore which party was able to use Twitter significantly and how its role as a political communication strategy was effective.

Case Study: The Indian State of Assam

India has a two-party system at the national level, but each state has a varying range of different parties. State-level parties compete in both state and national elections, forming electoral coalitions with like-minded parties from other states to help form and maintain national governments.

India follows a multiparty political system. It has a number of national and regional parties. While regional parties are represented in a particular state, on the other hand a party is considered national if it has been represented in more than four states. As per the latest report published by the Election Commission of India in September 2021, there are a total of 8 national parties, 54 state parties, and 2796 unrecognized parties (D. Nath, 2022)

The national parties consist of the All-India Trinamool Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party, Bharatiya Janta Party, Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Nationalist Congress Party, and National People's Party (D. Nath, 2022). Whenever these parties could not form a government on their own, they invite other parties to form a coalition (Barthwal, 2022). At present in India there are two types of coalition, United Progressive Alliance (UPA) formed in 2004 is an alliance of center-left leaning parties led by INC, which is the biggest party in the coalition, while the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) formed in 1998 is a coalition of the right-wing parties led by BJP, which is the biggest party in the coalition (Barthwal, 2022).

However, when it comes to state assembly elections, the political equation slightly changes, as all the national parties are not predominantly present in all the states, apart from BJP and INC. Instead, state elections have a lot of regional parties predominantly found in those particular state. Therefore, these national parties form coalitions with the regional parties of the states. For instance, in Assam for the 2021 state legislative assembly elections, NDA was led by BJP with two regional parties- Asom Gana Parishad and UPPL (United People's Party Liberal) while another faction, the MAHAJOT was led by INC, AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), BPF (Bodoland People's Front), and other regional parties, another faction named was formed and led by Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Raijor Dal (RD) (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). These are all regional parties apart from BJP and INC. According to a chief electoral officer report around 23,374,087 voters were eligible to vote in Assam ("Assembly Election 2021: Over 2.31 Cr Voters in Assam Eligible to Vote," 2021). It follows a similar first-past-the-post (FPTP) system to the national-level elections.

Assam is situated in the north-eastern region of India and has 33 districts which are further divided into 126 constituencies (Goswami, 2021; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). The BJP has been uncompetitive in Assam elections for almost three decades, but following the party's success at the 2014 national election, the 'Modi wave' spread to the Assam assembly election in 2016 (Goswami, 2021; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Assam voters initially expressed high satisfaction with the BJP government, but in 2019 the party announced its Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) which later became Citizenship Amendment Act. The Citizenship Amendment Act states that Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs who migrated to India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan before 2014 should not be considered illegal immigrants and should be granted Indian citizenship ("Explained: What Is Citizenship Amendment Act?," 2019). People of Assam felt that this would lead to an influx of lakhs of Bangla-speaking Hindu people, hence, fears losing the Assamese identities at the hands of Bengalis ("Explained: What Is Citizenship Amendment Act?," 2019). According to the people of Assam, the state has already taken the pressure of accommodating migrants from 1951 to 1971 as per the Assam Accord, but with the introduction of CAB, a new cut-off date will be set i.e. 2014. Hence, it led to a state-wide

protest which later culminated in a nationwide protest ("Explained: What Is Citizenship Amendment Act?," 2019). The BJP introduced this Bill because it aligns with their ideological belief. Hindus faced a lot of hardship therefore; they deserve rights and dignity and they can get everything only in India (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). These protests along with the rise in prices and unemployment are some of the bottlenecks which could have hindered the BJP's return to power.

Despite these obstacles, the BJP managed to return to power in 2021. The Assam assembly election was divided into three phases, with each starting on 27 March, 1 April, and 6 April 2021 (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). In the first phase of polling 47 constituencies voted; the second phase consisted of 39 constituencies and the last phase concluded with 40 constituencies voting ("Assam Assembly Election Date: Voting in Three Phases from March 27 to April 6," 2021). BJP and its allies won 75 seats in this election and for the first time, a non-INC alliance managed to win consecutive terms in this state (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022).

The use of social media in Indian election campaigns, at both the national and state levels, has grown incredibly quickly. The 2014 general election marked a shift from Westminster-type parliamentary elections to a US-style presidential election that largely centers on political personalities, resembling Barack Obama's campaigns in 2008 and 2012 US presidential elections or cricketer Imran Khan's rise to political fame in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2016). BJP's election campaign focused on Narendra Modi and aimed to reach out extensively to the youth population and first-time voters, which could be evident from their campaign's extensive focus on economic development and job creation. Hence, the 2014 elections in India are often termed as the first "substantially mediatized" election (Verma & Sardesai, 2016, p. 82).

By the time of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the Indian National Congress and many other parties in India had joined the social media campaigning wagon. Both major Indian parties are increasingly using social media and messaging apps to spread their message and influence potential voters, especially the young and first-time voters whose presence on social media is the largest. Its growing influence has necessitated the political parties to set up their own social media teams in an attempt to reach out to the maximum number of voters and deepen their presence and influence on these platforms. Thus, India provides for an interesting case study of a non-western parliamentary democracy where campaigning through this hybrid media system can be studied.

The study begins by explaining the region of Assam and its political history. It is followed by an extensive literature review to better understand the changing campaigning strategies and tools owing to changes in media and the emergence of new media platforms. The paper then goes on to define the methods used to carry out the research and the data collected, followed by the findings and analysis of the research. And finally, the study concludes by explaining the various campaigning strategies used by the parties and their effect on the electoral results.

Literature Review

Since its appearance for the first time in 1992, new media have been increasingly utilized in elections worldwide (Owen, 2014). Specifically, the American presidential elections of 1992 used new media for the first time and since then it has brought about a new era of media campaigning (Owen, 2014). New media also helped the politicians to bypass traditional media's stranglehold on campaign coverage (Verma & Sardesai, 2014).

Social media platforms facilitate the production, dissemination, and exchange of content, making it suitable for campaign coverage. In turn, over the years this has changed the ways campaigns are designed by the candidates, reported by the journalists, and experienced by the voters (Jaffrelot &

Verniers, 2020). Candidates design complex strategies to disseminate their campaigns for higher reach; campaign coverage now is no longer the sole domain of journalists, influencers, bloggers, and average citizens can now cover events and proliferate on the net; and new media has also become a primary source of information for the voters, that also provides a platform to citizens for directly engaging with the candidates (Ahmed et al., 2016; Owen, 2014)

Starting in 1992, rudimentary websites known as 'brochureware' were used for campaigning, which was essentially digital versions of traditionally printed campaign flyers. During this phase, the dominance of traditional media was still prevalent (Owen, 2014). By the 2000s, most political parties in America had some form of basic website. By 2004, campaign websites were developed that could enable users to have an interactive experience, facilitating donations to candidates, engagement in discussions online, etc. (Owen, 2014). By the 2008 elections, innovations in digital communication could facilitate networking, collaborations, and better engagement activities. Notably, around 2008 the use of new media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, etc. started to disseminate information about elections and campaigns (Owen, 2014; Verma & Sardesai, 2014). The use of new media was further amplified in 2010 when Twitter and other such microblogging websites gained more prominence in the election media campaign scenario (Ahmed et al., 2016). The use of new media since then has continued to increase, along with the use of big data, which are huge detailed data information sets curated from social media analytics, consumer data, and voter information files (Ahmed et al., 2016; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). This helps in better targeting voters with preferential election content, as well as predicting voter behavior and outcomes of elections (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

Social Media and Agenda Setting

As mentioned in the above literature, social media was instrumental in the success of the US presidential election of 2008 and 2012, and with this success, these platforms have proliferated all over the world. In these elections, the campaigning strategies were framed in a specific way that might influence voting behavior. Framing and setting specific messages for the public is an important part of campaigning strategy and through these platforms, political parties and candidates can now directly target their potential voters. In simple terms framing means how a concept or an issue is constructed to influence how the audience processes information, which subsequently influences their decisions (Borah, 2016). The way issues are framed or emphasized influences the audience to focus on those reflections (Borah, 2016). The subjectivity attached to the way of interpreting an issue determines the frame (Borah, 2016). Along with this theory, two more theories have been quite popular over the past few decades, i.e., agenda setting and priming.

All three theories are quite popular among the studies based on political communication and public opinion. Agenda setting refers to the capacity of the media platform to regulate the issues that should be available to the public. The importance of the issue determines its importance (Moy et al., 2016). These issues are put in such a strategic manner that they may have a definite impact on the minds of the voter. While agenda setting provides the issue of salience, priming theory refers to how the human mind processes information cognitively (Moy et al., 2016). Therefore, altering the information that is needed to reach the public can influence the decision-making process of the voters (Moy et al., 2016). For instance, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 general Indian elections tried to capitalize on the opportunity provided by Congress's failure to fulfill its promise made in the previous election (Bajaj, 2017). BJP tried to structure its national-level agenda which was primarily based on development and good governance (Bajaj, 2017). Therefore, in all the digital media platforms and specifically, the social media platforms issues related to development and governance dominated during the entire campaigning period (Bajaj, 2017). This was done to influence the masses on a bright future if the BJP came to power (Bajaj, 2017). Moreover, on social media platforms like Twitter, BJP used information control tweets so

that only a particular type of information should flow to the general masses, this is a priming strategy done to influence public opinion on issue salience as well as the political party.

In political communication studies, these three theories go hand in hand and could be predominantly found in studies related to elections, more specifically related to the election campaign. The roots of all these theories could be found in media-effect research.

The media has immense power to set up public agendas on key issues. And with the rise of social media platforms, it has taken election campaigns to a whole new level (Sahly et al., 2019). Political parties used this platform to reach the people at the grassroots level. Various studies show that political parties have been constantly seen using agenda-setting, framing, and priming for election campaigns (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Through agenda setting and priming these parties try to determine the public agenda by deciding how much emphasis should be put on an issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). On the other hand, through framing, political parties try to influence the public by their description of issues that the people already know (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The level of influence a frame has on voters depends on the type of frame as well as the selective diets and characteristics of the audience and the way they process the messages. It can be said that instead of changing opinions completely these theories through mass media reinforces the existing attitude and belief.

How Parties Use Twitter as a Campaigning Strategy

In recent times many democratic countries are using Twitter as one of their campaigning strategies during elections. For instance, the 2008 and 2012 US presidential elections witnessed the use of Twitter as one of the important strategies of Obama's election campaign (Owen, 2014). After the success of this campaign, political parties and candidates all over the world were quick to take up this new campaigning technique, which is evident from its presence in non-western democracies like India, especially after 2014.

Twitter tends to stand apart from the rest of the social media platforms when it comes to the impact it has on its users. Firstly, there seems to be a "second-order" effect of online media that often tends to get undermined in studies such as that by Lokniti-CSDS (Sen, 2019). This "second-order" effect becomes useful in defining political personalities as well as the way offline campaigns get influenced (Sen, 2019). That is to say that online media platforms have the capability to frame agendas of traditional media because it is observed that most of the topics or issues discussed on social media platforms are often talked about on traditional media platforms (Sen, 2019). It can bypass traditional media and establish a direct two-way communication with the people, and with the right tweet at the right time, political actors can successfully compel traditional media platforms to pick up on it and follow behind (Bajaj, 2017). This is especially true in the case of Twitter whose content seems to be much more "political" as compared to that of other social media platforms (Bajaj, 2017).

For instance, PM Narenda Modi is often witnessed making important announcements through his official Twitter account, which then becomes news on traditional media platforms (Bajaj, 2017; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). It is shown that a way of achieving this is enabled by journalists working for print and television media that follow the political actors' accounts and increasingly reference their tweets in their stories, thereby also blurring the line between online and traditional media (Jungherr, 2016). The platform's effectiveness as a news source is so much so that sometimes it is ahead of traditional media platforms in breaking important news stories (Ahmed et al., 2016). And secondly, Twitter has a profound effect on defining and cementing a politician's image and brand. Hence, for the purpose of this study, Twitter has been chosen to carry out the required content analysis.

How Twitter Effects Voting Preference

Most studies of Twitter-based campaigning have focused on the United States (Jungherr, 2016), even though Twitter has become a prominent campaign platform throughout both established and emerging democracies. The result of this focus is that we do not know much yet about how Twitter is used in different political contexts, or how voters might respond differently in comparative contexts.

The relatively small number of non-US studies conducted so far shows evidence of diverse effects in different countries. For instance, in Sweden, it could be shown that there exist positive effects on political participation amongst followers of candidates' Twitter accounts, with a slight increase in political learning (Jungherr, 2016). In Japan, the followers of a prominent candidate's Twitter handle experienced increased positivity towards the particular candidate, but it was shown that there exist no changes in voting intentions (Jungherr, 2016). While in South Korea, a series of experiments showed that the use of Twitter was connected to specific patterns of political learning (Jungherr, 2016). In contrast to exposure to the candidate on television or in newspapers, exposure to the candidate's tweets led to more feelings of connectedness and social presence. This is especially true when the candidate's messages were personalized, which generated stronger effects on 'recognition', 'recall', 'feelings of social presence', and 'imagined intimacy' (Jungherr, 2016, pg 77). The effects were subject to the political interests of users, with users with low-interest levels appearing to experience weaker or even opposite effects (Jungherr, 2016). Another study on Singapore elections revealed that the usage of Twitter for election campaigns proved to be successful for the opposition party which won unprecedented 6 seats in parliament in the 2011 Singapore General Elections. The study has also revealed that with the introduction of Twitter as a tool for election campaigns, political engagement among Twitterati (the frequent users of Twitter) has also increased manifold.

In developing countries where there is relatively low internet penetration, a very small number of studies have found that Twitter can affect election results. A study conducted by Ahmed and Skoric in Pakistan revealed the usage of Twitter for the first time as a campaigning tool during the 2013 Pakistan General Elections (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). The findings of the study revealed that usage of Twitter by the Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) party led by Imran Khan turned out to be a successful platform where they could interact with their voters, directly bypassing the traditional media systems, and the success of the party in that election speaks volume of the importance of Twitter during election campaigns, especially in non-western democracies (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014). In the 2004 Indian general election, even though most parties had websites, their impact was negligible due to uneven Internet access in most regions (Neyazi et al., 2016).

Internet and Twitter Use in India

Even as recently as 2014, internet penetration and use in India were still very low, (Verma & Sardesai, 2014). By the time of the 2019 general elections in India, approximately half of the voting population had gained access to digital information platforms and one-third had access to social media (Mehta, 2019). More than 400 million Indians were active internet users, increasing by 10 percent each year; furthermore, more than half of all Google searches came from non-metro cities, suggesting that the internet had truly penetrated the whole country (Mehta, 2019). This is driven by the fact that India had the second-highest smartphone penetration in the world and the highest average data usage per smartphone by the end of 2018.

Cheap data availability was also facilitated by the launch of Jio mobile networks in 2016 (Mehta, 2019). As the digital divide reduces in India with an increase in cheap data availability, this new mass media technology may have the capacity to seriously impact politics in the country.

The observable strategies used by the major parties suggest that they believe social media platforms can help them win elections. As the internet becomes more entrenched, campaigning has focused more on the leaders than on policy. During the 2014 General election campaigns, the BJP largely centered its campaign on development-oriented promises (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). During the 2019 General election campaigns, the incumbent government campaigned on an "ethnic-nationalist security-oriented repertoire" with leader Narendra Modi at the center (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 156). For example, Modi was portrayed as the protector of the nation and on social media, he added the term "Chowkidar" (watchman) to his Twitter handle name, which was then adopted by many of the BJP leaders and effectively became the symbol of his campaign.

Sangh Parivar – a collection of Hindu nationalist organizations – started using digital media to campaign as early as 2003. They mostly used these platforms to coordinate party workers known as 'party shakhas'. More than a decade later the Sangh Parivar explored different prospects of the social media platform as the BJP started maximizing the use of such platforms for election campaigns which started in 2014 for micro-targeting and increased manifold in 2019 (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). The party shakhas flooded social media users with party messages, news etc. Some of these strategies were used to portray the opposition Congress leader negatively and as incompetent (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). For instance, a photoshopped image of Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi went viral on social media platforms portraying her as a Christian; again in another instance of fake news regarding Rahul Gandhi's (the prime ministerial candidate from Congress) conversion to Muslim circulated in social media platforms (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). Such strategies were also prevalent at the local level, used during Assembly elections to portray the opposition leaders in a negative tone (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

One of the ways used for better targeting was classifying the voters by religion and caste and socio-economic statuses; BJP IT cells used the voter's list and electricity bills for the purpose (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). This also gave them access to the phone numbers of the voters, which was effectively used for campaigning through WhatsApp messages.

With time Congress has become quite professionalized as well. However, BJP outclasses Congress by spending more than 20 crore on social media platforms (Tewari, 2019). Moreover, BJP had more than 142 million followers on social media platforms as compared to the Congress which had a total of 23 million followers (Bajaj, 2017; Tewari, 2019). BJP utilized the space effectively as their posts were trending every day on Twitter. Moreover, on Facebook, the party posted certain short videos, memes, gifs, etc. to generate public attraction (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020; Tewari, 2019). Most of these videos were either related to their development activities or made a mockery of the opposition. Moreover, using WhatsApp, they tried to connect millions of people at the grassroots level (Tewari, 2019).

Nevertheless, Congress used some innovative strategies but at a relatively smaller level. They tried to make certain funny videos and take on Modi's various claims in a sarcastic manner (Tewari, 2019). Comedy videos were a big hit during that period. Congress through its Instagram handle tried to use Bollywood dialogues to make a mockery of the BJP's taglines (Tewari, 2019). For example, they created a meme based on a Bollywood movie Gully boy's song 'Apna time Aayega'. This meme read 'Acche din aaye nahi, par apna time aayega' which means 'Good days did not come as you promised but our time will surely come' (Tewari, 2019). Moreover, Congress also had IT cells similar to BJP and it did create a lot of funny and attractive content but did not succeed to woo the audience at the last mile when compared to BJP (Tewari, 2019).

About Assam

Coming to the case of Assam, the state's political history is marked by ethnic conflicts, armed insurgencies, and counter-insurgencies between various ethnic communities and the state. (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Conflicts between the 'indigenous people of Assam' and migrant settlers from

Bangladesh led to the Assam Movement in 1979 (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). The differing demands of the various ethnic communities inhabiting the area gave rise to regionalism fuelled by politics of language and resources of socio-economic importance such as tea, oil, etc. (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). This took an ugly turn in the 1980s, developing into militancy that gave birth to the insurgent group of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), with its demand for independence of Assam from India (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Thus, the Assam Movement played a crucial role in the political development of the region. It paved the path for ethnic mobilization on issues of resources, immigration, etc. And most of these issues are found to be important electoral campaign topics in the years that followed (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022).

Such developments in the region have had long-term impacts and influence on the political scenario of the state that exists till date. Hence, the uniqueness of the state owing to its history makes it an interesting study to be examined. Moreover, the 2021 Assam legislative assembly election was a critical time in India's political development: one major party has adopted western-style campaigning techniques while the other has resisted modernisation.

Hence, this paper compares how these parties use Twitter differently, as part of their overall campaign strategies – the incumbent BJP has a more professionalized campaign operation and greater access to analytical data to fine-tune political messaging, while the INC only started using social media platforms much more recently. We, therefore, expect that BJP's Twitter communications will reflect a carefully crafted political strategy, seeking to set the news agenda for the election and prompt voters to think about issues that the BJP is deemed to 'own'. On the other hand, we expect the less professionalized INC campaign to use Twitter to respond to events and crises as they occur and have less success in setting the news agenda. The findings will provide insight into the future direction of Indian political campaigning, and whether electoral politics in this emerging democracy will eventually look like the politics of established western democracies.

Political History of Assam

The party system in Assam has evolved with time due to a myriad set of factors, which includes the colonial legacy and the post-colonial institution-building processes(Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022; Sarma & Phukan, 2021). Owing to the numerous ethnic communities living in Assam, the political history of the region is marked by conflicts, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies (Mazumdar, 2016; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Migrant infiltration from neighboring Bangladesh culminated in the Assam Movement of 1979, which is also known as the anti-foreigners agitation (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). This movement is one of the reasons for ethnic mobilization in the state on issues of resource crunch due to immigration, demographic changes, etc. (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Ethnic mobilization, language politics, etc. also took to the form of militancy, such as the emergence of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that demanded independence for Assam from India in the 1980s (Mazumdar, 2016). The rise of the insurgent groups wreaked havoc in state politics and led to grave law and order challenges in Assam. The Assam Movement concluded with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which was agreed between the All-Assam Students' Association (AASU) and the Government of India (Mazumdar, 2016). This movement and its consequent repercussions had a profound effect on the political scenario of the state and its social fabric.

Congress and Bjp in Assam Through the Years

Till 1985, the Congress Party mostly remained dominant in the state. However, around 1985, the newly formed regional party Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) restructured the electoral politics of the state and put up a challenge to the dominant Congress Party (Mazumdar, 2016; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). The student leaders of the Assam Movement formed the AGP after the signing of the 1985 Assam Accord. And it came to be recognised as an important regional formation that formed the government

after winning the 1985 elections (Goswami, 2021; Mazumdar, 2016). This election also witnessed the emergence and victory of other regional and ethnic parties as well. The formation of ethnic and tribal parties also revealed the growing visibility of the assertion of ethnic and tribal identities and interests (Mazumdar, 2016). Hence, the 1985 elections in Assam marked a shift from the single-party dominance of Congress to a multi-party system.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) entry into the political scenario of Assam came in 1991 after winning 10 seats in the Assembly election for the first time. BJP's support base increased in the state by the time of the 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha elections in Assam, as the State Committee of BJP focused heavily on illegal immigration in their campaigns (Goswami, 2021; Mazumdar, 2016). The Lok Sabha elections of 1998 also revealed that, in some districts, BJP could secure a substantial vote share next to Congress (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Congress party in the mid-1990s lost the support of a section of people mainly due to corruption allegations and its harsh policies of counterinsurgency to tackle the challenges posed by ULFA (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). But in the 2001 Assembly elections, Congress won and formed the government with Tarun Gogoi leading it (Goswami, 2021; Mazumdar, 2016; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). The party got consecutively re-elected in the 2006 Assembly elections and again in the 2011 Assembly elections (Mazumdar, 2016). However, in 2016, BJP won the Assembly elections by scoring 60 seats, a remarkable feat considering it could win only 10 seats in the 1991 and 2006 Assembly elections (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Similarly in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, out of the 14 seats, BJP won seven seats and Congress could manage only three seats (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). The rise of the BJP was facilitated by the efforts of the party to make significant developments in the communities of Assam along with an anti-incumbency wave in the state (Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Then again, in the 2016 Assembly elections, BJP in alliance with other regional parties like AGP won and did favorably well in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections as well (Mazumdar, 2016). Immigration and identity politics were the focus of this election as defined by the rising protests around the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) (Mazumdar, 2016; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). This also displays the persistent presence of identity politics, regionalism, and illegal immigration issues throughout the history of elections in this region, which have come to define the political scenario in Assam.

Data and Methods

We conduct an inductive, manual content analysis of the official Twitter accounts of the two major political parties in Assam, which are the BJP (@BJP4Assam) and the INC (@INCAssam). The polling dates were announced on 26 February 2021. Since the official campaigning period starts from the date of announcement of the voting date and ends 48 hours prior to the voting date, the period of this study is from 26 February 2021 to 25 March 2021. We use Twitter's advanced search to find relevant tweets and coded them according to their primary topic.

A total of 341 tweets were analyzed. Out of which 126 tweets were from Congress and 215 tweets were from BJP. All the tweets were coded based on their relation to election campaigns. Tweets directed toward the election campaign and related issues were categorized into four sections. They are as follows:

-State-level issues and developments (educational, agricultural, misc developments, etc.)
-Election and campaign-related content (online and offline rally coverage, campaign coverage, etc.)
- Rhetoric against opposition parties (allegations, etc.)
- Content/tweets categorized by official party hashtags

The selection of these categories to codify the tweets was done by analysing the tweets. For instance, the picture mentioned below contains a screenshot of BJP's tweet where we can observe that it

talks about allegations against the opposition party. Hence, this tweet and many other similar tweets fall under the code 'rhetoric against opposition party', which includes allegations, etc. made against opposition teams.

The study follows the election campaign on Twitter for one month starting from 26th February to 25th March 2021. After collecting all the data, percentage analysis was carried out with the help of Microsoft Excel.

Findings and Analysis

Two of the most popular cultural icons in Assam are Srimanta Sankardeva (1449- 1568) who was the neo-Vaishnavaite movement preacher in medieval Assam, and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), the 20th-century musical legend (Dutta, 2017). The BJP strategically utilized both of them to their advantage, culturally contextualizing their sloganeering around Sankardeva and Dr. Hazarika during the 2016 elections (Dutta, 2017). For example, their aggressive campaign in the media included advertisements on the front page of local dailies, appropriating Dr. Hazarika's lines "*Akou natun prabhat hobo* (a new dawn will descend once more)" to signal the defeat of the incumbent Congress party and its corrupt ways and the building of a new Assam (Dutta, 2017).

Another dominant strategy was to highlight the party's opposition in a negative tone. They utilized leading local media houses in the region, both print and electronic (Dutta, 2017). And for further amplification of their information and messages, advertisements and news were circulated in the leading media houses' YouTube channels, on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc. as well indicates the use of new media to some extent (Sarmah & Mohapatra, 2020). Both the BJP and the Congress party during the

campaigning period of the 2016 assembly elections in the state used many creative musical songs and videos, mostly in a satirical manner, which were widely circulated on both traditional media and social media (Sarmah and Mohapatra, 2020).

The Dominant Issues Focused Upon by the Parties Online

The table below represents the dominant issues focused upon by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in their official Twitter accounts. From the table, it is clear that the BJP has tweeted heavily about their development achievements in the state of Assam. In the first week, they focused majorly on educational development done in the state such as free uniform distribution to school-going children, waiver of admission fees schemes, etc. that accounted for 38% of their total campaign-related tweets in Week 1. They also tweeted significantly about other developmental works done in the state. Miscellaneous development in the above table refers to many tweets regarding development works done by the party in the state since 2016 when they were voted to power and includes works such as the development of worshipping places like Namghars; building of roads, footbridges, flyovers; protecting the state from terrorist organizations; and overall measure of progress in the state. This category of miscellaneous development came out to be one of the most dominant issues tweeted about by the party during the period of this study. From the second week onwards, the party tweeted frequently about their on-ground rallies and campaigns. Photos and videos of mass rallies, bike rallies, gatherings during nomination filling of the candidates, etc. were seen frequently on their Twitter accounts. This remained dominant consistently, rising up to 60% of their total campaign-related tweets in Week 3. Allegations against the opposition Congress party and the Congress-led alliance or "Mahajot" which includes various other regional parties, were frequent towards the later part of the official campaign period. In the initial phase of the campaign period, the party refrained from tweeting about allegations about the opposition and it significantly increased towards the end of the campaign period, amounting to 27% of their tweets in the final week. Moreover, various tweets were also put up that specifically targeted the tea garden workers development, which included many promises and schemes for the tea garden workers' welfare as well as the previous development works done in their favour by the party.

Table 1. Dominant issues highlighted by @BJP4Assam

The Bharatiya Janata Party (@BJP4ASSAM)

	WEEK 1		WEEK 2		WEEK 3		WEEK 4	
ISSUES	**Freq.**	**Per.**	**Freq.**	**Per.**	**Freq.**	**Per.**	**Freq.**	**Per.**
Educational development	6	38%	0	0	0	0	2	1%
Industrial development	1	6%	1	3%	0	0	0	0
Infrastructural development	2	13%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Agricultural development	2	13%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miscellaneous development	3	19%	23	66%	5	17%	38	28%
Tea garden development issue	1	6%	1	3%	1	3%	8	6%
Allegations against Congress/Mahajoth	1	6%	1	3%	6	20%	36	27%
Offline campaign/rallies	0	0	9	26%	18	60%	50	37%
Total	16	100%	35	100%	30	100%	134	100%

The graph below also shows that BJP focused mainly on highlighting their development works done in the state, showcasing their on-ground mass rallies, as well as tweeting about allegations against the opposition party.
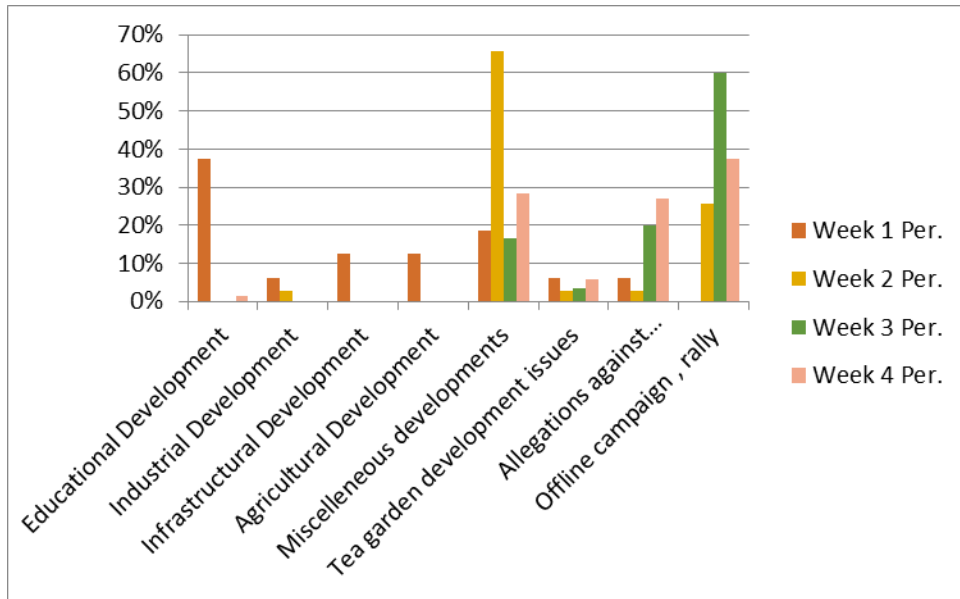
Figure 1. Dominant issues highlighted by @BJP4Assam

Major Hashtags Used by @BJP4ASSAM

From the table and graph below it is clear that the BJP focused dominantly on the #BJPinAssamAgain. Moreover, the use of hashtags was relatively fewer and only rose significantly in the last week of the campaign.

Table 2. Major hashtags used by @BJP4Assam

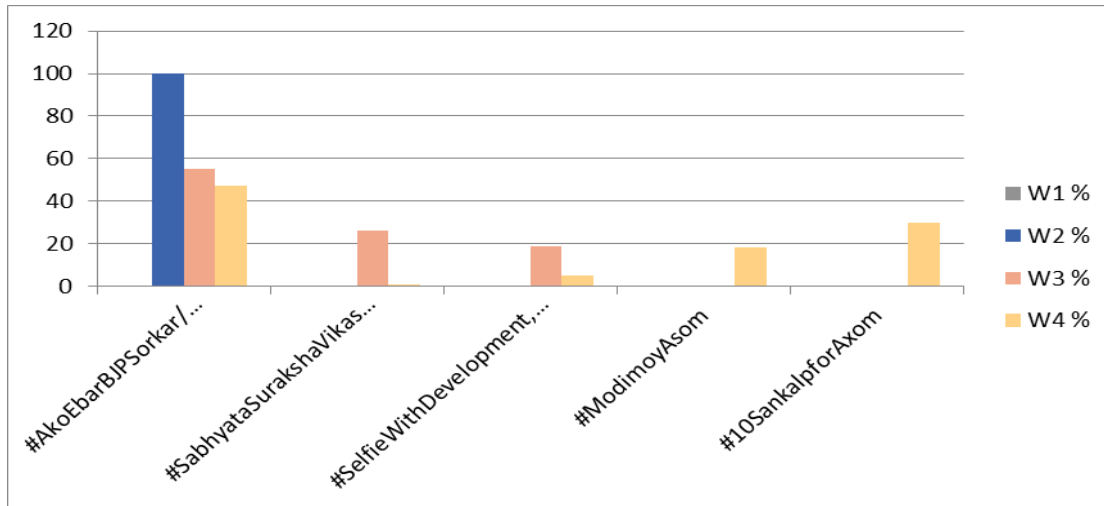| HASHTAGS	WEEK 1		WEEK 2		WEEK 3		WEEK 4	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
#AkoEbarBJPSorkar/ #BJPInAssamAgain	0	0	30	100%	23	55%	55	47%
#SabhyataSurakshaVikas	0	0	0	0	11	26%	1	1%
#SelfieWithDevelopment/ #ProgressiveAssam	0	0	0	0	8	19%	6	5%
#ModimoyAsom	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	18%
#10SankalpforAsom	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	30%
Total	0	0	30	100%	42	100%	118	100%

Figure 2 Major hashtags used by @BJP4Assam
The Indian National Congress (@INCASSAM)

The table below represents the dominant issues focused upon by the Indian National Congress in their official Twitter accounts. From the table it is clear that the Congress has tweeted heavily alleging the incumbent party. During the period of this study, in the initial phase, they tweeted mainly about the issue of Citizenship Amendment Act or CAA, amounting to 17% to 18% in the initial weeks, which reduced towards the end of the campaign period. CAA is considered a controversial Act, which was brought in by the ruling BJP that would grant citizenship to persecuted religious minorities who are Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis, from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Widespread protests all across Assam were witnessed protesting the Act as the state already faces a problem of illegal infiltrators, mainly from neighboring Bangladesh and the Act is feared to further aggravate the problem. Similarly, the incompletion of the National Register of Citizens or NRC in the state is another related issue picked up by the Congress party. Completion of the NRC is considered to solve the problem of illegal infiltrators in the state, and that is why the issue of CAA and the incompletion of NRC are supposed to go against solving the problem.

Further, various tweets about scams and the 'syndicate raj' of the incumbent party were observed during their campaign period. The tweets highlighted scams of the ruling party such as the Sub-Inspector recruitment scam, Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) cash for jobs scams, etc. The tweets regarding the 'syndicate raj' refer mainly to black money extortion scams related to the ruling party and the Congress party heavily tweeted about the ruling government running a 'syndicate raj' in the state that has institutionalized corruption. The final week of the campaign period sees the maximum number of tweets regarding this, amounting to 37% of the total campaign-related tweets in week 4.

Moreover, amongst allegations against the incumbent party, the issues of high unemployment and high price rise of essential items like gas cylinders, petroleum, etc. were the most tweeted about throughout the four weeks. Issues of floods and soil erosion were also significantly tweeted about that alleged the ruling government of failing to take measures to solve the problem. The deteriorating issue of women safety in the state was another matter that was significantly tweeted about.

Further, towards the end of the campaign period, the Congress party tweeted majorly about their past achievements in the state and about the promises that they plan to fulfil if voted to power. Promises were also made to the tea garden workers to woo them, as well as targeted the ruling government for neglecting this section.

Table 3. Dominant issues highlighted by @INCAssam

ISSUES	WEEK1		WEEK 2		WEEK 3		WEEK 4	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
CAA	10	17%	2	18%	3	8%	1	5%
Incompletion of NRC	4	7%	1	9%	0	0	0	0
Scams	1	2%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Syndicate Raj	1	2%	0	0	2	6%	7	37%
Failure of employment generation, Abnormal price rise	26	43%	3	27%	19	53%	2	11%
Flood, soil erosion issue	4	7%	1	9%	0	0	1	5%
Tea workers, ST, SC issues	7	12%	2	18%	0	0	0	0
Women safety issue	4	7%	1	9%	10	28%	0	0
Congress's previous Achievements	3	5%	1	9%	2	6%	4	21%
Promises	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	21%
Total	60	100%	11	100%	36	100%	19	100%

From the graph below, it is clear that Congress focused mainly on creating an anti-incumbent sentiment through their online Twitter campaign, amongst which they focused majorly the issues of unemployment, high price rise, CAA and NRC during the period of this study. They also focused significantly on highlighting their past achievements in the state and the promises to the public if they win the elections.
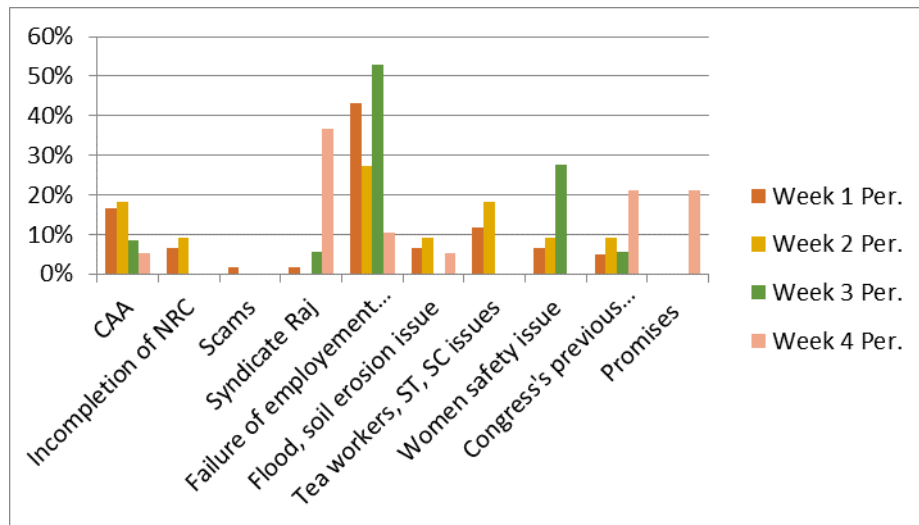

Figure 3. Dominant issues highlighted by @INCAssam

Major Hashtags Used by @INCASSAM

From the table and graph below, it is clear that the Congress party focused dominantly on the use of hashtags #AxomRokhya, which means Save Assam and #Congressor5guarantee, which is related to their promises for this election. The hashtag #EtiaAxomeKobo or #SpeakUpforAssam was their top trending hashtag that trended at no.1 during week 3. This hashtag was used to put up a strong fight against the ruling party and was accompanied by tweets that urged the online public to tweet and share about the many 'wrongs' done by the ruling party.

Table 4. Major hashtags used by @INCAssam

HASHTAGS	WEEK 1		WEEK 2		WEEK 3		WEEK 4	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
#AmiJujimeAmiJikime (We will fight, we will win)	8	20%	0	0	0	0	0	0
#AxomRokhya (Save Assam)	3	7%	8	89%	0	0	8	57%
#Congressor5guarantee	25	61%	1	11%	18	32%	6	43%
#BJPAgainstAssam	5	12%	0	0	0	0	0	0
#EtiaAxomeKobo / #SpeakUpforAssam	0	0	0	0	39	68%	0	0
Total	41	100%	9	100%	57	100%	14	100%
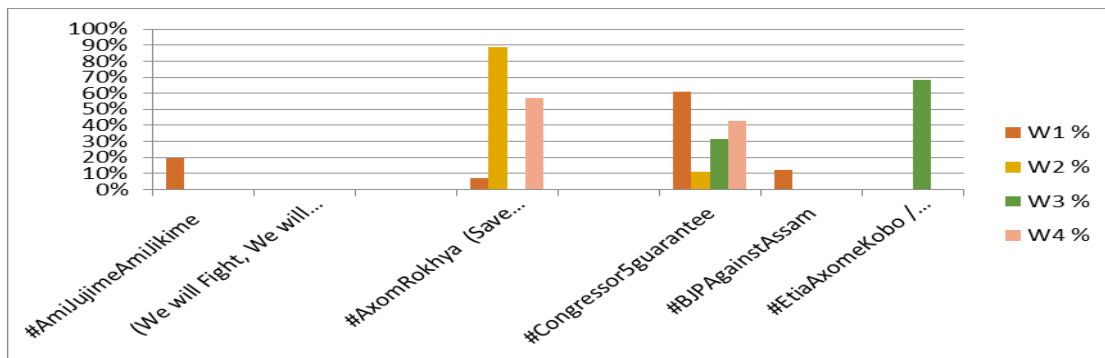
Figure 4 Major hashtags used by @INCAssam

Discussion

BJP has been adept at adapting to social media for campaigning purposes since the 2014 general elections in India. Since then, they have used social media platforms in various regional election campaigns, and this time too in Assam they have extensively used online platforms to spread their messages. However, in the past few years, it is noticed that even the Congress party has increased its presence on social media platforms, which was earlier known to be largely the BJP's forte. The party launched a nationwide drive in February 2021 to recruit social media 'warriors' as they are known. According to Pranav Vachharajani, national convener of All India Congress Committee (AICC) Social Media Department, this drive has been an attempt to "channelize isolated supportive voices so they are on one platform" in order to counter the BJP's "false narrative" (Agarwala, 2021). The rise in social media usage by Congress can be visibly seen since the Bihar assembly elections of 2020 (Agarwal, 2021).

In the case of the Assam assembly election of 2021, an external firm in coordination with senior leaders has carried out Congress's social media campaign and the campaign focuses largely on issue-based matters such as CAA, price rise, unemployment in the state, etc. According to Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, this social media campaign has been highly synchronized and well-coordinated, something that was not present previously in the party's social media environment (Agarwala, 2021). However, in the past few years with the BJP in power in the state, the public's faith in the party seemed to have waned somewhat due to failures in fulfilling its many promises (Handique, 2021). Despite completing many development projects in the state, issues of unemployment, illegal infiltration, recurring problems of flood and soil erosion as well as corruption remain to be solved (Handique, 2021). And most importantly, the state-wide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 greatly threatened the faith in the party amongst the indigenous population of the state.

As a result, what is also seen in the election campaigning for the assembly elections of 2021 is that BJP is not betting much on the issue of CAA, and almost downplaying it with no mention of the issue in its Twitter campaigns during the period of this study. Instead, the party strongly highlighted the development activities it had done in the state to woo the voters as well as announced a number of additional development schemes and promises for the state, should they win the election. This was further clear from the content analysis of their official Twitter account wherein they tweeted heavily about the various development works they had done in different parts of the state and portrayed Assam as a developed and progressive state due to their efforts since 2016.

Contrastingly, Congress has been sharp in highlighting the major issues of the incumbent party, which is also evident from their online campaign that is seen to be revolving majorly around 'protecting' the state from BJP's rule. From the Congress's point of view, this election is centred on protecting and preserving the Assamese way of life (Agarwala, 2021). Likewise, the centrepiece of their election campaign is titled "*Assam Basaon Ahok*", which means, "Come, let us save Assam". Moreover, in a bid to instil faith amongst the people that their issues matter to the party, the Congress in the month of February launched an online contest in Assam (Agarwala, 2021). They urged young people to submit a short video clip highlighting major issues that they think affect the state. Additionally, the party also launched a live interview series, known as "*Axomor Kotha*", which enables the viewers to directly pose questions to the leaders of the party (Agarwala, 2021).

Furthermore, both the parties' Twitter accounts extensively used many unique hashtags to highlight different issues of the state and to reach out to the maximum number of voters online. The use of hashtags helps to categorize content online and enables people to easily locate content with the same hashtags and/or put their own content under the same category by using the same hashtag. The use of hashtags was a way of setting trends online. A trending tweet is then able to capture the focus of a majority of voters online and influence their views.

For instance, keeping in line with their central campaign strategy of showcasing their efforts to transform and develop Assam, BJP used certain specific hashtags in their tweets such as #BJPMadeItHappen, #BJPDelivers, #BJP4SecureAssam, etc. to convey the above message. Similarly, the quintessential Assamese elder brother, or '*Axomiya Kokaideo*', or in short '*Kokai*', is chosen as the voice of Congress's social media campaign for this election (Agarwala, 2021). An animated character, Kokai is seen featured on Congress's social media handles of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, which is used alongside the hashtag '#KokaaiKiKoi' which translates to "What would Kokai say?" According to Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, the cartoon character of Kokai is symbolic of the ordinary person and the ways in which the common man thinks about issues (Agarwala, 2021). The party has also come up with various other hashtags such as the hashtag '#BaadDiaHe' which is being used to highlight BJP's 'false promises' for Assam. It is a signature phrase used by the former Chief Minister of Assam of the Congress party, the late Tarun Gogoi, and translates colloquially to "Forget it". Using late Gogoi's signature phrase the party seems to pay tribute to the late CM and keep his sentiments alive amongst the public, and to open the eyes of the public against the incumbent party. Posters online with Tarun Gogoi's face are commonly seen on their Twitter page, used predominantly to highlight their past achievements under Gogoi's leadership.

During the period of this study, various other hashtags were used to categorize and popularize both the parties' Twitter contents. For example, hashtags were used to tweet about the visits of some of the top most leaders of the parties to the state. In the case of BJP, most notably the state was visited by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP National President J P Nadda as well as PM Narendra Modi during the period of this study.

The hashtag #SelfieWithDevelopment and #ProgressiveAssam gained a lot of popularity during Amit Shah's visit when he urged the people of Assam to take 'selfies' with various development works

around the state done by the BJP and post it to their social media accounts with the above hashtags. Such a campaign strategy ensures that the public become aware of the development works done by the party as well as popularize the party's work in social media without having to do so by themselves but through the public, which further works to restore the faith of the people in the party as they themselves highlight and popularize their works.

The hashtag was most prominently used to tweet about the various issues and developmental progresses the party had achieved in the state, which included mostly educational development, infrastructural development, and agricultural development in the state. PM Narendra Modi's visit was accompanied by the hashtag #ModimoyAsom on their Twitter account, which was used to reflect the overwhelming sentiment that the people of Assam have for Narendra Modi. Using this hashtag, a series of tweets were created that highlighted the speeches Modi made during his visit. The hashtag was used extensively to tweet about the various good deeds done in the state, and how the party was successful in ensuring peace and stability in the state. To resonate with the sentiments of the people, the hashtag was accompanied by tweets about protecting and preserving the cultures of Assam. For instance, it highlighted the works done by the party to protect and develop the Namghars (places of worship associated with the Assamese community) and Satras (monasteries of the Ekasarana dharma) of the state, and promises were made to further develop them if they are voted to power again. Similarly, the hashtag #AkoEbarBJPSorkar (or #BJPinAssamAgain) had been the most dominant throughout the period of this study.

Congress, on the other hand, had put up a strong online fight by consistently highlighting the 'wrongs' done by the incumbent party. This is also evident from the content analysis for the period of this study, wherein the majority of the dominant issues highlighted by Congress were allegations against the ruling party. In the initial phase of this study, the party focused strongly on the issues of CAA and the incompletion of NRC. To resonate further with the sentiments of the public, they heavily tweeted about the lack of employment opportunities and the high price rise of petroleum, gas cylinders, as well as the issues of flood, soil erosion, and the deteriorating safety of women in the state. The hashtags #AxomRokhya or 'Save Assam' and #EtiaAxomeKobo or #SpeakUpforAssam were extensively used to accompany the above tweets.

BJP too, tweeted significantly to counter-attack the Congress party's jibes at them that increased further towards the end of the campaign period. Alleging the party of making fake promises, the tweets portrayed the Congress party to be the main enemy of the state. The tweets also targeted the 'Grand Alliance' or 'Mahajot', which is the alliance headed by the Congress party that includes the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), and six other regional parties. The main key strategist of BJP is Assam's current CM Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma. He has immense popularity all over the state (H. K. Nath, 2021). His popularity increased by two folds, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis when he showed some excellent management skills (Nath, 2021). In fact, many people voted for BJP in the name of Dr. Sarma. His unmatched popularity in the state is one of the reasons because of which his road shows and state-wide campaigns attracted huge crowds, in fact, many BJP leaders in the state wanted Dr. Sarma to campaign for them in their constituencies for these reasons (Nath, 2021).

Further, gearing up towards the voting day, BJP National President J P Nadda paid a visit to the state, unveiling their manifesto or 'Sankalp Patra' for this election. The hashtag #10SankalpforAxom was used to categorize the tweets during this time on the Twitter handle of BJP. The official tweets highlighted the party manifesto promises, which included promises of job creation, a corrected version of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) with the promise to deport infiltrators and protect the indigenous identity of the people of Assam, amongst others.

Congress too had its own set of promises readied for Assam, which was revealed by Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi during her visit to the state. The hashtag #Congressor5Guarantee was

used to tweet heavily about the five guarantees, and not promises, which the party will fulfil if voted to power. During the period of this study, apart from creating an anti-incumbent sentiment online, tweets about the five guarantees of Congress remained dominant throughout. The guarantees mainly included non-implementation of CAA, job creation, an increase in the daily wages of tea garden workers, etc.

The issue of tea garden workers appeared to be quite prominent in both parties' tweets. The reason for gaining such prominence is that a majority of 38 constituencies out of the 47 constituencies that went to poll in the first phase falls under the tea garden districts of Assam (PTI, 2021). In the 850 tea gardens of the state, the workforce is 8 lakhs strong, which makes it an important vote bank (PTI, 2021). As a result, both the BJP and Congress have made considerable promises to woo the tea garden workers.

Conclusion

The study concludes that during the period of this research, both the parties i.e. Congress and BJP had different campaign strategies. While the BJP's campaigns were considered pompous and loud, Congress's campaigns could be compared to a bee's humming sound (Nair, 2021).

Two years after its initial use, social media, still a new platform for election campaigning has played a good supporting role in BJP's landslide victory over the Congress in 2016 (Dutta, 2017). But slowly social media campaigns became one the significant tool for election campaigns, especially after BJP's successful election campaign for the 2019 general elections. Therefore, for the 2021 Assam assembly election as well, BJP invested heavily in advertising through social media platforms. The online campaign strategy of the incumbent party BJP focused heavily on highlighting their achievements in the state since they were voted to power in 2016 and portrayed Assam as a progressive state due to their efforts ("Shah Launches BJP Social Media Campaign," 2021). Moreover, the party has also introduced various welfare schemes in the tea garden areas which helped them to gain upper hand among the tea garden areas (Deka, 2021). The Arunadoi scheme, which provides Rs. 830 to every eligible household every month, helped BJP earn massive support among women voters (Deka, 2021). Apart from that Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma in his rallies even promised to waive off all the micro-finance loans taken by the women of the state (Deka, 2021). These big lines started trending on Twitter. Therefore, such populism-driven strategies helped BJP to gain a significant advantage over Congress in the 2021 Assam assembly elections.

The other most dominant strategy of the BJP was to showcase the party's massive support base in the state. This was tactfully done by tweeting pictures and videos of their grassroots-level campaign rallies, shows, and meetings, which showed massive crowd gatherings, often exuberant and cheering the leaders and candidates. PM Modi himself had addressed four meetings within fifteen days; moreover, Home Minister Amit Shah also conducted a road show in Assam's current CM Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma's Jalukbari constituency, just before the last day of the campaign (Nair, 2021). In the last fifteen days from March 15, apart from PM Modi and Amit Shah other heavyweights from BJP, which includes BJP chief JP Nadda, Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath, etc. were present every second day (Nair, 2021).

The tweets containing pictures of such big leaders in huge rallies, meetings, etc. were often always accompanied by captions that correlated the massive gatherings as evidence of the party's huge support base in Assam. This strategy remained prominent throughout the period of this study and reached the maximum towards the end of the campaign period. Thirdly, allegations against the Congress party as well as their grand alliance 'Mahajot' was another important campaign strategy that was most prominent, especially in the fourth week of this study, which was nearest to the poll dates. Here, the BJP successfully created polarization over religious identity (Deka, 2021). Dr. Sarma projected Baddaruddin Ajmal, the AIUDF chief as the biggest threat to Assamese identity (Deka, 2021). Dr. Sarma convinced the voters by stating that Ajmal is protecting the interest of illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and that BJP is

the sole harbinger who could protect the Assamese people's identity (H. K. Nath, 2021). The narrative, therefore, got transformed into Hindu vs. Muslims from the binary of Assamese vs. illegal immigrants (Nath, 2021).

Congress on the other hand went through a number of bad lucks. First Priyanka Gandhi had to cancel three rallies because her husband tested Covid-19 positive and she had to self-quarantine herself on March 30, three more programs had to be cancelled in Karbi Anlong region owing to the bad weather conditions (Nair, 2021). Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Bagel and Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot tried to make up for the absence of Priyanka Gandhi but ultimately it was not enough to give Congress an upper hand over BJP (Nair, 2021).

This time Congress too had invested in social media platforms for its campaigns. The party mainly focused hard on creating an anti-incumbency sentiment amongst the public. They tweeted heavily highlighting the major issues facing the state. Secondly, the party made sure to remind the people of the state of the major achievements and works they had done during their tenure under the leadership of the former CM of Assam, the late Tarun Gogoi. This was done to revive the faith amongst the public towards the party. Lastly, they focused prominently on the promises or guarantees, as they have called them, for the people of Assam. Once a rather mute voice on social media platforms, the Congress party in Assam has made sure to fully utilize the new media platforms for this election.

But in spite of such measures the parties campaigning strategies had few lapses which the opposition took full advantage of it. BJP got the chance to mock Congress when its social media team used tea garden pictures of Sri Lanka and Taiwan to showcase the Assamese tea gardens on their social media pages (Nair, 2021). Moreover, DesignBoxed an organization that handled the social media campaigns for Congress in Assam also struggled with various miss spellings, such as "Save Assam in Axomiya" (Nair, 2021). In contrast to BJP, Congress did not have a proper leadership who felt comfortable becoming the public face of the party like Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma. Therefore, despite an innovative campaign with its offers of 5 guarantees the Congress final tally dropped its vote share from 30% in 2016 to 28% in 2021 (Deka, 2021).

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