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Youth Activism and Democratic Politics in India's Northeast: 2014 Election in Perspective

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THE HINDU CENTRE
for
Politics and Public Policy

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Abstract

T his Report attempts to understand how the youth in the northeastern region of India look at the electoral and political processes. The region, comprising eight States, has had a turbulent political history and has since been a sensitive area for policymakers in the country. There were, since India's independence, several volatile social and political movements spread across the eight States. In many of these movements, students and youth have been the driving force. The biggest example of such a movement and its impact on the politics of the State is the All Assam Students Union (AASU). After six years of struggle against alleged illegal immigration, it signed an accord with the Union Government in 1985, called the Assam Accord, formed a political party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), and came to power through the electoral process twice.

Student-youth politics and activism has formed the backbone of most political and social movements in region. This Report looks at the critical mass of the youth voters and their attitude and perspective towards elections. Through a survey across seven university campuses spread across six States, the study attempts to discern a pattern to the youth vote and the various factors that influence their judgment or their electoral preferences.

Finally, the Report makes a case for engaging the youth in community-based programmes and its impact on policy-making. In line with the National Youth Policy, which India has been drafting and implementing since 2003, the Report recommends a focus on region-specific approach to policymaking and the creation of a Youth Development Index.

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I. Overview

T his study addresses the question as to what extent and how do elections matter to the youth of India's northeast? The northeast region (NER) has been politically and geographically sensitive about its place in the scheme of nation building in independent India. Student-youth politics and activism has been the driving force behind many of the volatile social and political movements that have emerged in the northeast. Thus, any sincere attempt to engage with the issues thrown up by these movements and protests in the region needs to be addressed through the language of demands and aspirations of the youth of the region. This assessment becomes imperative when it comes to the 2014 general elections in the region. Elections have historically played the role of revitalising peoples' faith in democracy at times and that of alienating some sections further at other times.

Through a survey conducted among university students on seven university campuses across the region and through

interviews with representatives of a few select student-youth organisations of the northeast, this study attempts to understand how the youth in India's northeast look at the electoral process specifically and the prevalent political system in general. The findings and indicators are expected to provide valuable insights to further policy prescriptions on the region and to emphasise the importance of adopting a youth-centric approach to public policy formulation.

India has the largest youth population in the world that is poised to increase further in the coming decade. Seventy per cent of India's population is below the age of 35 years. According to the initial figures of the 2011 Census, the youth population in the country, including adolescents, is around 550 million.[1] This phenomenal rise in the youth population has made India the youngest nation with a demographic dividend appearing to be a reality. Some other indicators shown in the 2011 Census that aid in understanding the emerging picture of a demographic dividend are instances of

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[1] Report of Working Group on Adolescent and Youth Development, Dept. of Youth Affairs (2011)

declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR), higher level of Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and increased Literacy Rate.

Is there a youth vote in the northeast? Or, more crucially in the case of the NE, does the youth vote constitute the crucial pulse of democracy? One has to keep in mind that regionalism had historically emerged in the northeast through the paths paved by student-youth movements. The youth in the northeast in that sense has been playing a consistently anti-establishment role.

For instance, in the mid-1980s in Assam, a student organisation, the All Assam Students Union, led an intense anti-government agitation. In 1985, the Asom Gana Parishad emerged from this movement and formed the State government in an unprecedented move after contesting and winning the Assembly elections held soon after the signing of an accord between the government and the movement's leadership. With this new-found legitimacy and road to power after the Assam movement, student politics in India's northeast has progressively become an essential mechanism to articulate different agendas, socio-cultural assertions and political ambitions of the different ethnic groups in the

region. This led to the argument that students and the youth have become the agents of identity formation and student movements have turned into *de-facto* identity movements, or at least the fora strong articulation of an identity politics.

However, in the last two decades or so, the growing sway of a globalised worldview and the influence of a pan-Indian market outlook on the region's youth/students is discernible. As in the case of most of India, the last two decades have transformed the northeast region in ways incomprehensible to an earlier generation. A narrative of neglect is seen to be flowing alongside that of participation. Though such politics has evolved into a platform for voicing the grievances, frustrations and demands of the lot whose regional-local reality falls far below their 'globalised' aspirations, it now has to make space for the emergent aspirations and ambitions of its participants.

In essence, youth politics and activism in the region remains an effective platform of protest that reflects the ethnic paradoxes as well as ethnic coalitions. The multipronged reality of the region is apparent through contradictory trends that co-exist in the region. While some youth groups are

formed in parts of the region that demand fair and corruption-free elections, others take critical positions on the electoral process accusing the elected representatives of non-fulfilment of pending demands and promises made. Thus, trends of electoral apathy and election boycotts by the youth now mingle with calls for free and fair elections from the same population group in the region. This complex reality needs to be probed further and understood better.

The perception of the youth towards elections will crucially reflect on the evolving political trends in the region. This study seeks to assess the predominant mood and perception amongst the youth of the region towards the general election 2014, as expressed both through some prominent representative youth organisations as well as through a randomised survey conducted amongst a sample of 700 university students in the region.

As students unions and other youth organisations have been at the forefront of many of the social and political movements, it can be said that youth culture in the northeast is predominantly one of protest against perceived or felt odds. In other words, the manner in which the political attitude and

the behaviour of the youth in India's northeast is channelised, may either pose challenges to democratic governance, thereby affect the region's development, or reinforce democratic participation.

This research paper tries to get answers to the following primary research questions,

- How do the youth in the northeast region (NER) view the general election in the country in 2014? Is the predominant emotion one of participation, alienation or a combination of both?

- What are the major influences on the way the youth in the NER look at the electoral processes?

- What are the major issues of the 2014 election as far as the youth of NER are concerned?

- How aware are the youth of the NER about the many policy-level initiatives of the government involving the youth and how do they relate to the wider evolving socio-political environment outside the region?

Research Methodology

I conducted a survey that tried to measure the knowledge, attitude, behaviour, belief and practices of the students on seven university campuses in the Northeast towards the electoral process. For this purpose, a random and representative sample of seven hundred was collected from seven university campuses from across the region and a subsequent data set has been generated.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with student-youth leaders/activists belonging to some of the most active student-youth groups in the region during the months between November 2013, and January 2014.

Who are the 'youth' in India?

The first obvious question one needs to address here is the difficulty in defining who constitutes the youth in India. Notwithstanding all the internal differences and contradictions in the conceptualising, in this study, we go by the definition adopted by the National Youth Policy, 2014.

1.1 Youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age-group. 'Youth' is often indicated as a person between the age where he/she leaves compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/ her first employment. Often, Youth age-group is defined differently by different countries/agencies and by same agency in different contexts. United Nations defines 'youth' as persons between 15 and 24 years of age.

1.2 In the National Youth Policy-2003, 'youth' was defined a person of age between 13-35 years, but in the current Policy Document, the youth age-group is defined as 15-29 years with a view to have a more focused approach, as far as various policy interventions are concerned.

1.3 However, it needs to be recognised that all young people within this age-group are unlikely to be a homogeneous group. Different segments of the Youth would have different needs and concerns, which need to be addressed. [2]

Is there a young vote in India?

Youth form an integral part of any society and are an essential part of the development process. India is a young nation. The

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[2] National Youth Policy, 2014; Rajiv Gandhi National Institute for Youth Development, Last accessed November 28, 2015

2014 Lok Sabha elections had one exceptional feature: 10 per cent of eligible voters were those who exercised their franchise for the first time. This "youth bulge," potentially reflects the peak of India's 'demographic dividend', as fertility declines and India's population begins to age.[3]

As per the data released by the office of the Registrar General of India and the Census Commissioner for the single year age data for the 2011 Census, India's working age population (15-64 years) is now 63.4 per cent of the total, as against just short of 60 per cent in 2001. The numbers also show that the 'dependency ratio' — the ratio of children (0-14) and the elderly (65-100) to those in the working age — has shrunk further to 0.59 from 0.67 in 2001.

As fertility falls faster in urban areas, rural India is younger than urban India: while 51.73 per cent of rural Indians are under the age of 24 years, 45.9 per cent of urban Indians are under 24. However, urban India still has a higher proportion in the key 15-24 age group than rural India. As per calculation done on this data by a report in *The Hindu*, overall, India has

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[3] Rukmini S, *The Hindu*, 2014 Lok Sabha polls will see most first-time voters; February 21, 2014. Last accessed, December 09, 2015

472 million people under the age of 18, and 49.91 per cent of its population is under the age of 24.[4]

It is interesting is to observe that according to the population projection 2001-2026 released by the National Commission on Population, the average median projected age of the population of India in 2026 will be 31.39. The same average for the States in Northeast India (excluding Assam) is 33.59 and for Assam it is 30.80.[5]

Nearly half of the total voting population in India fell under the 18-35 years age category, as the latest Census data revealed. This meant that 378.6 million out of a total 814 million were people who could vote and fell under the category of youth. However, the proportion of youth voters to the total eligible voters had slightly declined from that in 2001, when youth comprised 52 per cent of the total voting population.

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[4] Rukmini S., Demographic Dividend at its Peak, *The Hindu*, September 7, 2013. Last accessed December 11, 2015.

[5] Population Projections for India and the States 2001-2026, Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections constituted by the National Commission on Population, May 2006.

Experts believe that this is a huge number and youth are always a crucial target for the success of any political party in India. Offering an insight is the Youth Survey 2013, carried out by the *India Today* Group and C-Voter. This survey revealed that 90.2 per cent of the first-time voters were looking forward to voting in the 2014 general elections. Of this, 73 per cent boys and 58.2 per cent girls were optimistic that their votes would make a difference to the country's political set up.[6]

Out of the total young voters, 51.4 per cent were male and 48.6 per cent were female. At least 66 per cent of the youth voters lived in rural areas and only 44 per cent of them were in cities. Hence, the political parties needed to have their campaign focussed on this rural youth section as well to register substantive gains in the elections.

Innovative measures by the Election Commission of India (ECI) also led to a gradual increase in the enrolment of first time voters. The ECI, through its three-year outreach, had dramatically increased the voter base from 714.10 million in

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[6] Mail Today Bureau, 2013. Decoding the debutant voter, India Today, September 20. Last accessed December 22, 2015.

2009 to about 814.59 million as on February 14, 2014 — an increase of about 100 million voters. The Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation Programme had made its mark since its launch in 2010. However, as a voter metric data — the first time voters in the age group of 18-19 — released by the Commission revealed, the number of first time voters in this category was 23.16 million. Taken together with the comparable age data from Census 2011, it showed that the voter registration was only 45.87 per cent of the 50.47 million youth falling in this age group of 18-19 years. In other words, more than half the voters between 18 and 19 years were not registered to vote. The registration was only marginally above the existing enrolment rate of 35-40 per cent for this category and way below the internal target of 80 per cent for this election set by the Commission.[7]

An interesting depiction published on the Youth Ki Awaaz website shows the first time voters in the 2014 elections as below:

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[7] Padmanabhan A 2014. First time voters: myth and reality. Live mint, December 25. Last accessed December 25,2015.

Table 1: State-wise First Time Voters to Existing Voters
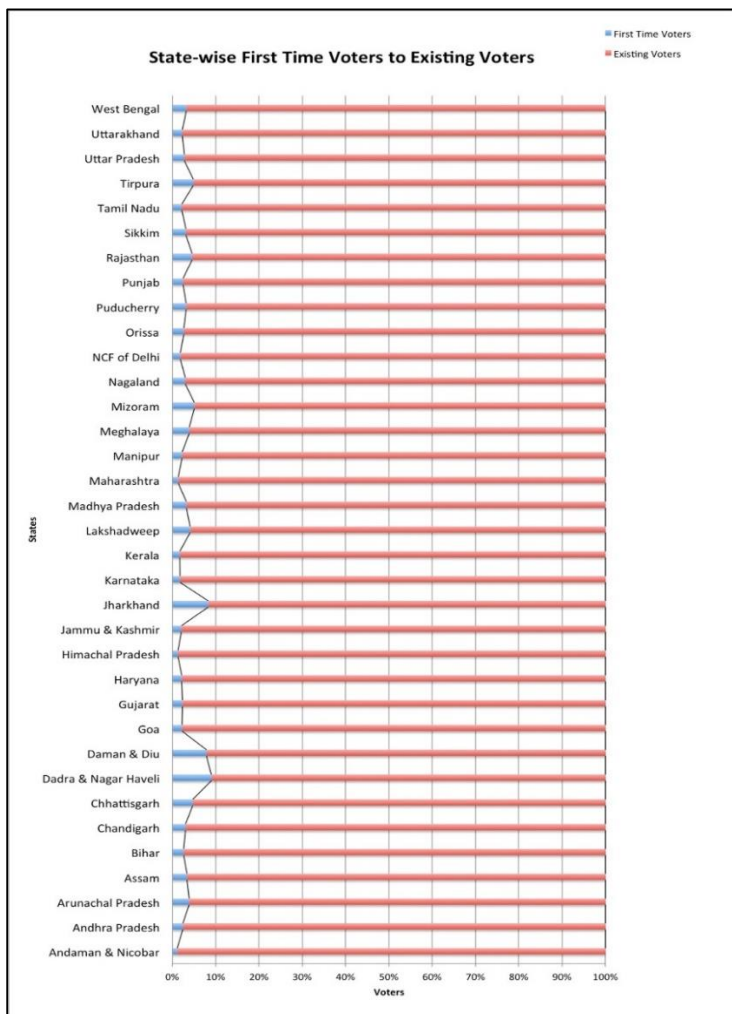
Source: Youth Ki Awaaz Last accessed: December 25, 2015.

Is there a pattern to the youth vote?

It is evident that there was a significant body of young voters in the 2014 elections, but the crucial question was whether youth voting conformed to a pattern.

The need is to view youth as a demographic category differentiated based on their socio-economic and political location in society and the polity rather than being a homogenous category. Is there a youth constituency in the northeast? Or, more crucially, in the case of the northeast, does the youth vote constitute the crucial pulse of democracy? One has to keep in mind that regionalism had historically emerged in the northeast through the paths paved by student-youth movements. The youth in the northeast in that sense have been playing a consistently anti-establishment role.

However, like any other Indian voter, the young voter shares multiple identities of caste, class, region and religion, besides gender and age. The caste and class identities of Indian voters are much stronger than their other identities. To some extent, they do share identity of region and religion as well. Therefore, the youth are divided on the basis of their other

identities — caste and class — rather than being united because of their age or on issues that particularly concern them.

Data from research conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) over the last several years indicates that the identity of Indian voters (even among the youth) with respect to gender or age is very weak. Studies indicate the youth have never voted *en bloc* for any political party, at least not in the last five Lok Sabha elections (1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009). They have remained divided between various political parties like voters of any other age group are divided between various parties.[8]

The National Election Studies conducted by CSDS in recent years have shown some interesting trends on youth electoral behaviour in India. The two broad significant trends observed were:

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[8] Ibid.

- The voting pattern of youth is not very different than the voters of the other age group

- The youth do not seem to be inclined particularly for or against any political party.[9]

These observations make it difficult to assert that the youth will determine the outcome of the 2014 Lok Sabha election. In a large country such as India, with enormous diversity of language, religion, caste and region, local civic issues or the caste of the candidate or other identities of the young, become important for political mobilisation. The youth not only become a part of that mobilisation process, but also are divided on these lines while voting.

However, there are indications of some change. Observers like Sanjay Kumar have pointed out the youth may not have voted *en bloc* in the past, but they do show signs of being a bit more cohesive as a "youth group" this time. He aptly summarises the situation in the following words:

[9] Kumar, 2013.

> The Election Commission of India is putting in considerable effort to motivate the youth to vote, and these initiatives have shown a degree of success, especially in the urban centres. However, it is up to the political parties who are contesting in the elections to come up with a positive and honest agenda which for the young voters will be worth voting for.[10]

Defining the 'northeast as a category':

India's northeast is one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots. The battle for power, riding on sub-national aspirations, is an ongoing phenomenon in the region.

The eight States in the northeast — a 2,55,000 square kilometre (sq. km.) stretch wedged between China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh — are witness to a continuous struggle by organisations for what has been described as the 'right of self-determination'. It could be an armed insurgent group fighting for an independent homeland, an ethnic group fighting for a tribal council that could give it more autonomy, or a student organisation pressing for constitutional safeguards to protect the interests of the community it represents.

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[10] Kumar, 2014.

Even mainstream political parties, which are otherwise
players in the normal electoral exercise, cannot help playing
to the gallery by harping on sub-national themes during
elections. At times, the dividing line between this continuous
battle for independence, maximum autonomy and even for
legal safeguards for certain communities gets blurred. Often,
these movements come to overlap — with groups trying to
achieve more or less the same or comparable goals through
different means. This leads to a more complex scenario when
groups of different hues are engaged in a turf war that, more
often than not, results in bloody internecine feuds.

This study is very much aware of the problems encountered
and paradoxes faced while trying to develop an analytic frame
like that of the 'youth of the Northeast'.

Separate departments and even ministries have been set up by
the Government of India that is meant specifically to address
this region, thus giving enough credence to the category of
Northeast India as a unit of bureaucratic importance and as a
field of policy implementations and experimentations.

At another level, the deployment of the category of northeast
India is also useful to understand the interplay of the socio-

political processes in the regions, precisely because social movements and protest politics in the region often have had an interconnected resonance. In other words, social movement narratives bring out the realities in the northeast. The story of unity and fissures between the different social movements in the region brings out the common character and widespread peculiarities of the place.

A winning entry at Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG) initiative compiled by a young team of researchers[11] has culled out interesting data from the PWC/Indian Chamber of Commerce report titled 'India's North-East: Diversifying Growth and the Opportunities'.[12] The following table compiled by the team highlights the paradox in the Northeast:

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[11] http://indiancag.org/manthan/entry/badlaav
[12] India's North-East Diversifying Growth Opportunities

Table 2: Comparative figures: NER vs National Average
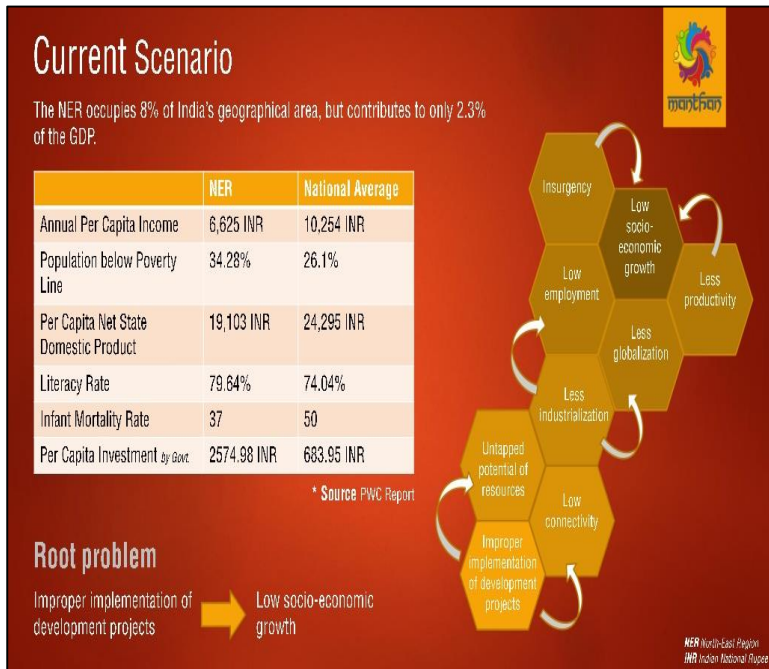
Source: Manthan indiancag.org Last accessed: December 25, 2015

Despite having a better literacy late and child mortality rate than the national average, the annual per capita income in the region is far lower than the national average and the population below the poverty line much higher. This is despite the fact that the per capita investment in the region by the government is much higher than the national average. This indicates a policy disconnect at many levels.

However, as the focus of this report is on the youth, it argues that we must focus on the youth of the region primarily through two thrust areas:

1. From the viewpoint of the transitional importance of youth as stepping stone to promote active citizenship.
2. From the point of view of engaging with the protest culture of the youth as potential influencers or deterrents of social change.

The increasing salience of ethnic identity and its convergence with political mobilisation and representation has in contemporary times sought to reformulate our notions of sovereignty and institutional arrangements. The result is that in many multi-ethnic states of both the developing and developed world, ethnic consciousness and the recognition of ethnic difference have begun to structure policy initiatives that often split the 'sovereign claims' of the state among numerous institutional constituents.

In an extremely heterogeneous state like India, ethnic diversities have been considered simultaneously its "spectacular strength and its most formidable challenge".[13]

In its efforts at consolidating a state built around liberal democratic principles, in the post-Colonial phase, the Indian state sought to accommodate the diversities by sharing its sovereignty with a wide array of autonomous and largely self-governing communities. A clear example is the set of arrangements arrived at with the tribal communities in India's northeast, particularly the areas governed by the VI Schedule of the Constitution. Nonetheless, efforts for negotiating these apparently contested claims between two sets of claimants were furthered by the establishment of dual structures of jurisprudence and 'recognition of layered sets of institutions'[14] that effected a 'differentiated citizenship' criteria in the enjoyment of rights and privileges within the nation state. The ensuing politics of 'recognition' employed by the federal state has only fashioned a multiplicity of institutions that see-saw between cooperation and conflict.[15] Francine Frankel has

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[13] Beitelli :2002
[14] Dev :2001
[15] Baruah :2004

pointed out that the process of democratisation in India revolved around the principle of individual equality, imposed on interlocking hierarchical social structures and cultural norms, whose configurations differed across regions.[16]

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[16] Frankel : 2000

II. Conceptualising Youth: Different Lenses to View Student Activism

At a fundamental level, this research has sought to emphasise the emergence and prominence of students as a political category arising out of a complex interaction between state and society. Paul Brass writes, "Ethnicity and nationalism are modern phenomena inseparably connected with the activities of the modern centralizing state"[17] and goes on to contend that "ethnic identity and modern nationalism arise out of specific types of interactions between the leadership of centralizing states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups, especially but not exclusively on the peripheries of those states."[18]

Taking a cue from Brass, we observe that different movements led by the student organisations have often been crucially influenced by the symbiotic interaction between the state and society to the extent that most of these movements

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[17] Brass. P.R 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison,* (Sage, United Kingdom, 1991), p.8.
[18] Ibid, p.9.

are characterised today by the dual narratives of resistance as well as complicity.

For the purpose of this paper, it will be useful to look also at the different scholarly approaches that were adopted to understand what causes and sustains the social and agitation movements by students.

Most well-documented studies of student movements that have led to theorisations and development of typologies have been conducted in Western societies. Often these have been reform movements in which participants aimed to change institutional policies, replace leaders of institutions such as government officials, or provide wider access to participation in institutions.[19]

Studies establish that although students have been prominent actors in many revolutions and revolutionary movements and other forms of contentious politics, student movements — social movements comprised wholly or mainly of students, especially university or college students — are a distinctively

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[19] Gill, J., and Defronzo J. 2009. "A Comparative Framework for the Analysis of International Student Movements", *Social Movement Studies*, (Vol. 8, No. 3, 203–224, August), p. 8

modern phenomenon. Their emergence is predicated upon the existence of a critical mass of students within a society. Student movements have emerged in all manner of modern and modernising societies, often as agents of change, sometimes in reaction against change, but usually as challengers of regimes perceived to lack legitimacy or moral authority.[20]

In the decade of the 1960's in advanced industrial societies, youth, as a distinct stage of life, was born with the university as its ideal locus. The subsequent development of student movements was the product of interaction between the movements, their environments, and their internal social and political dynamics.

Definitions and Typologies of Student Movements

Attempting to compare different student movements, Aileen Ross puts students' protests of various kinds under these analytical heads: (1) political protests; (2) economic protests

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[20] Rootes, C. 1980. "Student Radicalism: Politics of Moral Protest and Legitimation Problems of the Modern Capitalist State". *Theory and Society*, Volume 9, no.3), p. 473–502.

(3) moral protests (4) educational protests (5) psychological protests.[21]

Going by social movement theories of scholars like Paul Wilkinson who defined it as an effort by

> [A] large group constituted in support of a set of purposes or beliefs that are 'shared' by the members . . . and represents an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem that they feel they have in common[22],

one can argue that the important aspect of treating student activism as social movement is to put emphasis on the mutually constitutive role of the students and the unfolding of a society's history, especially the crucial role students occupy in this process.

Similarly, McAdam defines social movements as "rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilise sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through non-institutionalised means"[23], while Rochon sees social

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[21] Ross, Aileen D, *Student Unrest in India*, (London: McGill- Queen's University Press, 1969).

[22] Paul Wilkinson, *Social Movement*, (London, 1971), p. 27.

[23] McAdam, D. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930—1970. (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 37.

movements as networks of individuals and groups, based on
shared collective identities, engaged in political or social
conflicts[24]. These definitions help in placing student power in
a social movement framework. Gill and Defronzo define
students' movement as:

> A relatively organized effort on the part of a large
> number of students to either bring about or prevent
> change in any one of the following: policies,
> institutional personnel, social structure (institutions),
> or cultural aspects of society involving either
> institutionalized or non-institutionalized collective
> actions or both simultaneously.[25]

The authors attempt to develop a new, more comprehensive
typology for classifying student movements. They argue
about two antecedent conditions of student movements,
which they categorise into two general categories of prior
contexts. One is the nature of the conditions provoking
student opposition and the other is the source of the
conditions. The nature of the conditions is conceived in

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[24] Rochon, T. 1998. *Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values*,
  (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 32.
[25] Gill, J, and Defronzo, J. 2009. "A Comparative Framework for the
  Analysis of International Student Movements" in *Social Movement
  Studies*, (Vol. 8, No. 3, 203–224, August), p.208.

terms of two dimensions: a structural dimension and a cultural dimension.

However, a look into the unfolding of the history of student movements reveals that student movements have not always been animated by the professed values of their society and educational system. Students sometimes rebel in non-liberal contexts or in support of non-liberal agendas. Students' pro-democracy protests in China, for example, emerged in an illiberal and undemocratic educational context. Again, as it has been pointed out that the ideology of al-Qaeda, though far removed from the official values of Saudi Arabian and Egyptian society, took shape in reading groups on campuses in those societies.[26]

Neil Smelser has classified the various types of student's activism into "norm-oriented and value-oriented movements".[27] Norm-oriented student movements are generally defined as being concerned with a specific grievance or goal, and not having a broader ideological overtone. On the other hand, value-oriented movements are

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[26] Wright, L. 2006. *The Looming Tower*, (London: Allen Lane)
[27] Smelser, N. J. 1962. *Theory of Collective Behaviour*, London, p.275.

concerned with broader ideological issues and their involvement in concerted actions and activities are directly linked to the broader concern. Altbach, however, points out that while norm and value orientation offer some useful models for the study of student movements, they often do not function within the tight compartment of either category.[28]

In a review of student agitations all over India, the cases of Gujarat and Bihar, for example, clearly show that at certain historical times, student movements that began as norm-oriented eventually transformed into value-orientated ones.[29] These distinctions are helpful for two reasons. First, they serve as a valuable tool in understanding a specific student movement, and second, as student movements have the potential to manifest different orientations over a period time, such constructions help us understand separate phases of the movement.

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[28] Altbach, P.G. 1967. "Student Politics", *Transition*, No. 28. (Jan), p. 12.

[29] Shah, G. 2004. *Social Movements in India: A Review of literature*, (New Delhi, Sage), p. 160-165.

Development in the theories of social movements by scholars like Allen Touraine[30], through his interventions of 'post-industrial" society and "new social movements" literature, offered new explanations of the student protest as alternatives to Marxist understandings of the same. Developing a model of 'sociological intervention' for the study of social movements, Touraine attempted to seek the meaning which actors themselves attribute to their action and thus focused the debate on the question of agency in a student movement in a significant way.

However, since the publication of Sidney Tarrow's *Power in Movement,*[31] much of the focus on understanding student activism is focused on what Tarrow calls 'cycles of contention'; that is to say, the emergence of very active student movements often coincides with a more general rise in the level of political contention in societies from which those movements hail.

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[30] Touraine, A. 1985. *An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements* **(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).**
[31] Sydney, T. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Scholars like Nella Van Dyke developed these social movement theories to explore the factors that influence the location of student protest, and developed the hypothesis that a history of activism is strongly associated with student protest. She also emphasises on the phenomenon of the influence of activist subcultures, which underlie movement families within a protest cycle, influencing the ideology and tactics of activist organisations.[14] Along similar lines, Nick Crossley in his study on the University campuses in the UK proposed a theory of campus-based politicisation focused on special functions of social networks. Building on the literature of theorists like Doug McAdam on relations between networks and collective actions, Crossley argues that networks are the key to understanding politicisation on campus. He argues that networks allow interested individuals to find one another and form a mass and, therefore, it is a critical network that is important, not a critical mass. "Politicisation on campus presupposes a small but big enough (critical) network within the student body, who are already politicised and have sufficient (subjective) interest in politics to initiate activities", he writes.[15] Most importantly, he draws attention to the special role of students' unions in

a campus environment in building up a critical network. Being networks of 'political entrepreneurs' or 'agitators', the unions "organise groups and actions but they also seek to draw others, including political novices, into their groups and activities. These efforts politicise the wider student body. They create a political environment on campus which draws others in and politicises them."[16] It generates the critical mass necessary to form political groups and mount political actions. Thus, comparing the different student groups, one would be able to focus on the serious consideration of structure (movement organisations, communities, and fields), strategies and collective action (challenges, protest events), and meaning (collective identities and discourse). Interactions between movements and external contexts shape the content, type, and relative intensity of movement organisation, collective action, collective identity, and discourse within different movements.

Asraf Patel and others[32] have divided the three approaches through which policy makers tend to look at youth.

    a.   Youth as consumers and the future workers

    b.   Youth as clients of development programmes

    c.   Youth as instruments of social change

Scholars like Jeffs and Smith have tried to approach the place of youth in a polity and society from the point of view of youth transitions'- the pathways that young people make as they leave school and encounter different labour market, housing and family situations as they progress towards adulthood. They claim that a young person's transition are the outcome of individual agency informed by local sub-cultural and class cultural values and constrained by the contingencies of social structural opportunities.

The six aspects or 'careers' within a person's transition that they have identified are 'school-to-work' (e.g. experiences of training, jobs, unemployment); family (e.g. becoming a parent, partnerships); housing (e.g. leaving home,

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[32] Patel : 47:2013

independent living); leisure (e.g. changing peer associations, identities); criminal (e.g. offending, desistance); and drug-using careers (e.g. the movement from recreational to dependent drug use). Non-chronological traditions in the sociology of the youth include youth transitions, youth development, youth subcultures, and generational theory

Contextualising Youth and Student Politics in India

The key political role played in anti-colonial struggles has legitimised the participation of students in national politics in developing countries.[33] However, in the Indian context, like many other de-colonising societies, the tensions between student movements and the political establishments and political class have been palpable from early on. The non-political desirability of student movements were emphasised by political stalwarts like Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Addressing a Students Congress Conference at Banaras on February 15, 1946, he observed the 'defects' in the student movements in India in the following words:

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[33] Philip G. Altbach, "Student Politics in the Third World, *Higher Education*, Vol. 13, No. 6. (December 1984).

> To offer political leadership to the country is not the
> function of the student movements in India. They
> cannot recommend any action to the country. Of
> course, this does not apply to conditions that are
> created in a time of crisis. Students instead of taking
> active part in politics should go to the villagers when
> they find time and there they should try to improve the
> conditions of our poor countrymen. The student
> movements all over the world are of a non-political
> nature, whereas in India they are linked to politics. This
> is the main defect with the student's movements in
> India.[34]

Nehru's sentiments on the desirability of student politics to

be connected more to ground level problems (the call 'to go

to villagers') is reflective of the wider expectations of the

times that 'the universities poised to produce not only much

of the elite who must modernise the society, but they are also

almost solely responsible for the conduct of intellectual life

in general.'[35]

In fact, at the time of independence, there was an

unquestioned acceptance of the dynamic link between

universities and modernisation. As such, substantial financial

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[34] *The Times of India*, 16.02 1946, New Delhi, p.1.

[35] Philip G. Altbach, "Student Politics", *Transition*, No. 28. (Jan. 1967),
pp. 25-27.

outlays were allocated to higher education in the initial Five Year Plans. Of the sum reserved for education in the Third Plan, 20 per cent was designated for higher education despite the disproportionately small number of students involved. In 1965-66 primary to secondary enrolments (ages 6-17) totalled 64 million while all university enrolment was slightly over one million.[36]

Phillip G. Altbach[37] has taken a position that the student movements in the developing countries/third world have been more successful in affecting political change. He points two features of Third World student activism. Firstly, Third World nations often lacked established political institutions and structures of the industrialised nations and it made it easier for any organised group, such as the student community, to have a direct impact on politics. Third World students have acted historically as the "conscience" of their societies. Secondly, it is the location of the major universities in many developing nations in capital cities – national or

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[36] Shah, G. 2004. *Social Movements in India: A Review of literature*, (New Delhi, Sage), p.111.
[37] Altbach, P.G. **1996**. "The Transformation of the Indian Student Movement", *Asian Survey, 6(8),* August.

regional - that makes access to the seat of political power easier. The simple fact of geography makes demonstrations easier to organise and gives the students a sense of being closer and capable of accessing the centres of power. Thus, the students in developing societies have been seen as a uniquely mobilisable group, as a kind of "incipient elite" destined for power and responsible for exercising their political power even while being students.[38]

Thus, the debate on the 'political' nature of student movement builds up in the wake of increased political activity on the part of the student of India in the post-independence decades.

Aditya Nigam's essay *Student Movement and Education Policy* published in the Social Scientist in 1986, throws some useful light on this phenomenon. He traces the resurgence in student activism in India in the decades of mid 1960s to the increasing disillusionment amongst the students about the Congress party abandoning the socialistic agenda.[39] Similarly,

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[38] W. J. Hanna, and J. L Hanna, "Students as elites," in W. J. Hanna and J. L. Hanna (eds.), *University Students and African Politics*. (New York: Africana, 1975).

[39] Nigam, A. 1986. "Student Movement and Education Policy", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 14, No. 2/3 (Feb- Mar), p. 79-86.

the Rudolphs point out that the development of the youth as a new class in independent India within the two broad developments — the creation and prolongation of youth as a distinctive life stage with its attendant cultures and social arrangements, and in the relatively rapid build-up of the relatively large educational sector — "a result of political capacity (in the sense of the ability to make demands effectively within the political system) outstripping economic capacity (in the sense of the economy's ability to supply resources)."[40]

Similarly, sociologist T.K. Oommen explains increasing activism on the part of the youth-students in the light of the intensification of urbanisation and argues that the spread of higher education and the consequent occupational diversification led to spatial mobility and the subsequent demand for more freedom by the two traditionally subservient segments in the family — the women and the youth. Accelerated by social and ideational mobility the growth of individualism among them became a source of

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[40] Rudolph, L. I., Rudolph, S.H., Ahmed, K. 1971. "Student Politics and National Politics in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 6, No. 30/32, Special Number (July), p. 1655, 1657-1659, 1661-1663, 1665-1668.

inter-generational conflict.[41] Youth protest, in fact, was a world phenomenon in the 1960s and its reverberations were felt in India too in the form of widespread unrest among college students.

> If *Swaraj* was the main motive force of the Indian youth in the 1930s, 'nation building', seen in terms of participation in politics, professions, and the bureaucracy, was the propelling force in the first three decades (1959-1980) of free India. With the onset of the globalisation and liberalisation of the economy, 'nation-building' is perceived primarily as creation of wealth. Thus, there was a considerable shift in the value orientations of the Indian youth, which was reflected also in their lifestyles by the 1990s. However, these shifts/changes in the value orientations were/are not entirely shared by the older generations and are in fact an important source of inter-generational conflict.[42]

Some later studies on postcolonial settings suggest that educated unemployed young men engage either in democratic social action by acting as intermediaries between the rural

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[41] Oommen, T.K. 2002. *"Twentieth Century Indian Society in Retrospect"*, in. N.N. Vohra, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, S. (eds), *Looking Back: India in the Twentieth Century*, Ed, (National Book Trust).

[42] Ibid, p.185.

poor and local state[43] or in reactionary class-based political activity, as when they become involved in aggressive forms of brokerage.[44] Echoing similar viewpoints, recent studies by scholars like Craig Jeffery conclude that economic reforms in India have triggered both progressive and reactionary practice within a lower-middle class of students.[45] Existing work on lower-middle class youth suggests that those in this section of society may respond to the vicissitudes of neoliberal economic change either by exploiting their advantages vis-à-vis the poor, as self-interested entrepreneurs exploiting their advantages relative to poorer groups[46], or by joining with the poor to protest against the bourgeoisie and powerful

[43] Krishna, A. 2002. *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Craig, J. 2010. *"Time pass: Youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India", American Ethnologist* (Vol. 37, No. 3), p. 465–481.

[44] Hansen, T.B. 1996. "Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu Nationalism, Violence, and the Exorcism of the Muslim "Other.*" Critique of Anthropology* (16-22), p.137–172.

[45] Jeffery, J. 2010. *"Time pass: Youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India", American Ethnologist* (Vol. 37, No. 3), p. 465–481.

[46] Harriss-White, B. 2003. *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

institutions as instigators of broad-based social development.[47]

Nature and Character of Youth Movement and Politics in Northeast India

Niru Hazarika in her book *'Profile of the Student organizations in Assam'* (Guwahati, 1998) identifies some broad points that highlight the 'general' context of student politics in northeast India. Some of these are,

1. The deep-rooted feeling of negligence, deprivation, exploitation and the sense of insecurity.

2. Persistence problems relating to land, language and employment issues.

3. Manipulations of youths by political parties.

4. Poor analysis and evaluation of government policies as well as lethargic administrative response in the said context.

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[47] Partha, C. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World.* Delhi: Permanent Black.

5. Dysfunctions of institutions like family, education, political parties, and administrative departments.[48]

The substantial introductory essay by A.K. Baruah, "Approaches to the study of student movements", in his edited volume, "Youth Power in North-east India", deals at length with various theoretical problematic and methodological issues that one encounters in trying to conceptualise the phenomenon of student movements in the region. Baruah also contends against a Parsonian understanding of student movements as the self-conscious sub-cultures and movements among adolescents that tend to develop when there are sharp distinctions between the values and the expectations embodied in the traditional families in a society; and the values and expectations prevailing in the occupational sphere. Bringing on a Marxist analysis for understanding student movements, Baruah points out that since the societal position of each class and its consciousness in the final analysis are determined by the position of these classes within the process of production, the students belonging to various classes in a society therefore cannot

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[48] Hazarika, N. 1998. *Profile of Youth Organisations in North-East India*, (V.V.Rao Institute of Micro Studies and Research, Guwahati), p. XV.

have similar consciousness. Baruah locates the capability of students to unite as a social group partaking in a movement, in the dynamics of the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony', and not definitely as an outcome of processes of unmediated social change alone.

Later, Sanjib Baruah in his significant publication *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality[49]* approaches the study of these social movements from the perspectives of "the continuation of a "contentious politics". In another place, commenting on the perseverance of the movements and the organisations, he writes:

> [T]his constituency can derive a sense of representation, meaning, and even identity through a social movement, an insurgency, or a political party — not necessarily in that order. Not only can these political phenomena all relate to one another, but together they can be understood in the context of a society coming to terms with historical social change.[50]

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[49] Baruah, S. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, (Oxford University Press).

[50] Baruah, S. 2001. "Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India: The Limits of Counterinsurgency"*, Asian Survey,* (Vol. 49, No. 6 November/December), p. 952.

Recently, Pahi Saikia in her work *Ethnic Mobilisation and Violence in Northeast India*[51] also draws from the literature on contentious politics, particularly the mobilising process approach that focuses on the development of movement-supporter networks, as well as the political process approach that emphasises the relationship between movements and the responses of the political system. She prefers the usage of 'contentious politics' "as it encompasses a range of movement outcomes from small-scale protest demonstrations to large-scale violent rebellions. In this sense, the violent and non-violent ethnic rebellions of the Bodos and Misings can be considered two different movements.

These points will be better emphasised in the context of the following section of the paper where I take stock of the various activities and developments unfolding in the arena of student-youth activism in the region.

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[51] Saikia, P. 2011. *Ethnic Mobilisation and Violence in Northeast India*, (New Delhi, Routledge).

III. The Pulse of Youth Activism: Conversations in the Northeast

During the fieldwork, I tried to meet some student-youth organisations in India's northeastern States that have had an active and prominent presence here. I had the following questions to ask them, apart from many other aspects that had come up during our conversations:

- **Q1:** Does your organisation have any election-specific program? If yes, can you please elaborate?
- **Q2**: What in your organisation's view should be the most important issues from the region that should get top priority of the electoral agendas of parties in coming election 2014?
- **Q3**: Are you aware of the Campus Ambassadors project undertaken by the Election Commission of India under Systematic Voters' education and Electoral Participation programme (SVEEP) in your State?

In this chapter, I provide the gist of these interviews and conversations.

A.   Assam: A legacy of student-youth activism

The role of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), after its emergence as a powerful platform for student politics in the 1970s, has been crucial in shaping the contours of subsequent student politics in Assam. The parliamentary elections of 1979 till the signing of the accord, including the "blood-stained" elections of 1983, bears testimony to the AASU's strong influence in creating a crisis of legitimacy in Assam.

More significantly, most of its political work evolved as part of the negotiation. Manoeuvring between the movement and State have since then become part of established political practises or a feature of the political culture adopted by subsequent movements in their negotiations with the State. In February 2014, the AASU released a set of demands urging political parties to take them up as their electoral issues.

The chief demands of the AASU from the political parties are:

- Solution to the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants' problem in Assam.
- Make better educational facilities and employment opportunities.
- Creating special constitutional mechanism for Assam
- Declaring the northeast as a separate time zone.
- Constitutional protection for the indigenous people,
- Solution in the perennial flood issue, erosion problem and protection of Majuli Island
- Scheduled Tribe status to six ethnic groups in Assam.

Dr. Sammujal Bhattacharya, advisor to the AASU and its former President, in an interview to me, had placed special emphasis on the fulfilment of the different provisions under the Assam accord to be the major electoral plank as far as the AASU is concerned. Clauses VI and VII of the Assam Accord have been emphasised by the AASU in the post-accord years in its pursuit of fulfilment of the accord. Here, some of the proposals put forth by the organisation towards fuller implementation of these two clauses are worth mentioning.

- Demanding measures to preserve and protect the large river island Majuli and take necessary steps to get it UNESO heritage site status.
- Demanding re-opening of the Ashok paper mill at Jagiroad.
- Demanding declaration of flood and erosion as national problem.
- Demanding constitutional protection mechanism for the indigenous people of Assam in terms of 100 per cent seat reservation to the indigenous populace in the local councils, State Legislatures and Parliament.
- Demanding the northeast as a separate economic zone and necessary steps for its uplift.
- Demanding that the northeast be declared a separate time zone.

Another powerful youth organisation in Assam is Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chattra Parishad (AJYCP). Formed in 1978, the AJYCP had been an influential youth organisation in Assam right from the days of Assam movement. The President of this organisation, Manoj Baruah, pointed out that time to time his organisation had been taking different election specific measures around election time.

Some issues in their manifesto were:

1. Corruption, Inflation, Price control

2. Right to self-determination and right over land and resources

3. Safeguards to indigenous people against infiltration and illegal immigration.

Interestingly, the AJYCP had been holding consultations with different political parties as per their choice on different issues that they seek to include in the different party manifestos for the election. As Baruah opines, "The use or misuse of youth power in the election process depends on the maturity of the political leadership."

However, he did agree that the anti-corruption movement had stirred hope amongst the youth of Assam creating a new wave of possibility. "We sense it through our contacts and our cadre," he said. The AJYCP had been one of the organisations taking pro-active part in organising the events of India Against Corruption initiatives in Assam in 2013. However, his organisation was firm on instructing its members not take any active part in campaigning for any political party.

Issues like good governance and corruption found key emphasis alongside demands for right over land entitlement and resources. "We need sensible representatives; we do have frustrations for the lack of it. But due to lack of alternatives, we have to make the best of the situation," Baruah said, explaining the mix bag of demands.

Some New Sites of Student-youth Politics in Assam:

Clean electoral politics will have to begin from the campuses itself, and that is why the first focus had to be to cleanse student politics itself. This is one of the mottos of the North East Youth Foundation based in Guwahati. The Chairman of the Foundation, Ranjan Kumar Baruah, was hopeful that though the youth in the region have been mostly used and manipulated by the political class, including the established big student groups with a closed leadership, a new youth force focused on electoral and political reform more than participation was slowly but steadily forming. As a constituent of all-India civil society initiatives, the NEYF was involved in drafting people's manifestos before the election time and approaching the political parties with that document. "Awareness of voting and rights-based voting are two

different things, so our goal is more for electoral reform than mere enhanced participation'', Baruah commented.

Some of the agenda that the NEYF wanted to be addressed by parties in the 2014 elections included:

- Clear cut stand on the issue of separate State formation

- Clear position on immigration issue and the issue of the updating of the National Registrar of citizenship (NRC).

- Clear position on Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)

- Issue of police reform

- Issue of community control over resources

- Clear articulation of the Look East Policy

B. Manipur: a sense of democratic deficit

Photo: Kaustubh Deka

Images like these of armoured military vehicles roaming the streets of the University campus is very common in Manipur. Assam Rifles has a camp in one of the prime localities within

the university premises, on the top of a hillock overlooking the parameters. The setting, which does not provide the ideal environment for students to continue their studies, is reflective of the situation in Manipur where the student-youth grapple with the expectations generated by the practices and norms of democracy.

Because of largescale allegations of corruption, electoral politics is not a priority and there has been low levels of interest among the young population. Despite Manipur's legacy and history of student movements and active participant in socio-political issues, conversations with student activists and other observers indicated that their interest in electoral participation has been waning due to diminishing credibility of the government. Instead, the focus of youth activism has been on issues other than electoral reforms and participation.

Issues of human rights abuse, drugs and corruption have found more importance for organisations like All Manipuri Student s Union (AMSU). Most of the student activists and other students in the University that I spoke to expressed their general non-interest in the electoral process. It is

perhaps reflective of the apathy that the youth in Manipur, especially in the valley, feel in the treatment meted out by the political system.

However, in Manipur too, and interestingly in the hills district, some alternative youth voices have found utterances through initiatives like "Meet your Leaders" organised in Churachandpur District on March, 2014 by groups like Young Men's Christian Association and Bosco Mangaal as part of 'My Space, My unManifesto' campaign — a nationwide campaign initiated by ComMutiny-the Youth Collective, New Delhi.

The top-13 demands that were taken up for discussion during the meet were repealing Armed Forces Special Power Act, passing and enforcing a strong Lokpal and Lokayukta Bill to fight corruption, introducing youth friendly policies for their all-round development in education, sports, and employment; ensuring the safety and protection of women and children and set up fast track court in every district; giving more power to the Hills Autonomous District Council for better development of tribals, providing 40 per cent seat reservation for youth in the State Assemblies, setting up a library centre

and a sports academy in every block headquarter; and improving transportation facilities like road, bridges.

The demands raised in rural areas were for better connectivity and development, providing full education scholarship for the economically poor students for higher/professional studies, providing Job Oriented Vocational Training Centre at block level, making power supply regular both in urban and rural areas, and making health centres functional and ensuring regular attendance of doctors and nurses with ambulance services and free medicines supply.[52]

C.   The Case of Mizoram: A conscious effort towards clean election

In the State of Mizoram, the Young Mizo Association, or YMA in short, is the premier youth organisation with an illustrious history. Described as "the largest and most comprehensive non-profit, secular and non-governmental organisation of the Mizo people", it was established on June 15, 1935, originally as the Young Lushai Association (YLA), before being renamed the Young Mizo Association in 1947.

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[52] E-Pao. 2014. Meet your leaders held at CCpur. Last accessed December 22, 2015.

It was initiated by the Welsh Christian missionaries who understood the need of cultural conservation of the Mizo tribe, who were under pressure of political and social modernisations. It was registered as SR No. 4 of 1977 under Indian Societies Registration Act (XXI of 1860) on May 14, 1977 to the Government of Mizoram. The association is administered by a central committee (Central YMA), headquartered at Aizawl, and under which there are five sub-headquarters, 47 groups and 772 branches, which cover all of Mizoram and some parts of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura. In its own words,

> YMA is the biggest and most popular organisation in Mizoram. It derives its strength from public support. Even though it has not any legal sanction for any action taken, the YMA could achieve many results what the government sometimes could not do. Therefore, no party or individual will wish to openly oppose the advice or dictum of the YMA in Mizoram.[53]

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[53] Role of YMA in Time of Election p.2,

The YMA had played an important role in the initiative that had culminated in the establishment of the Mizoram People's Forum in 2006 as

> [A]n organisation constituted by a conglomerate of Churches and major NGOs in Mizoram to reform politics and elections in the state in order to have a transparent, accountable and reliable government and establish good governance in the state of Mizoram.[54]

One of the foremost stated goals of the MPF is

> [T]o work towards establishing democratic government through free and fair election and to reform the electoral process and do away with the corrupt and malpractices in the electorate system in the state."

Thematic Focal Areas of the organisation include:

i)   Electoral reforms
ii)   Political education and reforms
iii)   Good governance
iv)   Awareness

Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) or Mizo Student's Association is the oldest students association in the State that was established in 1935.

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[54] Young Mizo Association-Profile

The MZP president Lalhmachhuana also feels that in the traditional Mizo society the head of the family exercises a lot of political influence on the others, especially if he is affiliated to any political party. However, he feels that slowly youth are becoming more assertive as it reflected in elections during recent years where the young voters usually preferred better and new candidates.

As is the practice, the YMA released a list of Dos and Don'ts for the political parties before election time. The document said,

> In order to have a free and fair election, YMA have considered it necessary to caution the political parties to avoid any malpractice or not to indulge in extravagance involving heavy expenses to influence the voters to gain weightage. On the other hand, we have encouraged the public and the political parties to show decency at the time of election and set an example for the entire country to follow. To achieve our goal, we have issued Public Appeal well in advance before each election for the public and the political parties to observe the Dos and Don'ts enumerated by the Central YMA.

In fact, apart from the YMA, both MZP and MSU are part of the initiative to forge the MPF. Many people that I talked to in Mizoram attributed the ability of the Congress to read the

mind of the young people in Mizoram as one main factor of it retaining power in the State.

The MZP's electoral demands are:

1. The MZP formed a draft committee on the Jan Lokayukta bringing different civil society groups together. They would like to see it pursued by different political parties.

2. The issue of bifurcating the education directorate in Mizoram into two separate directorates of elementary and secondary education.

3. Coaching classes to be provided to the students aspiring for all India civil service examinations.

4. There should be a cell monitoring the boundary disputes, both inter-State and international, as well as to oversee the development of these neglected areas.

The MZP did not see much relevance of parliamentary elections for Mizoram, as the State had only one representative in Parliament. However, the organisation agreed that the Lok Sabha election in 2014 would have a special significance as the atmosphere had been charged up with new initiatives such as campaigns against corruption and for free and fair election.

The MZP has actively been a part of the campus ambassador scheme. They train their members on how to choose the right candidates by going for the right credentials. However, they strictly stop towing any party line.

The issue of 'control' and emerging changes

Both MZP and MSU leaders were unequivocal about the larger exercise of control by elders and institutions like the family and Church hold on the exercise of a Mizo youth's individual opinions. Electoral politics is seen as the domain of the 'seasoned and hardened' politicians. "Politics is a different ballgame. Young people are often exploited and manipulated by older politicians when it comes to election", a senior MSU member said, referring to the big influence that elders in the Mizo society had on the exercise of opinions and viewpoints by the younger lot. "Youth can gather and mobilise as much as they want. But when it is dinner time in the family, only the mother and father talk, we sit quietly," he added.

However, gradually, forums like Mizoram University Students Union Discussions Forum have emerged that have attempted to expand beyond and outside the reach of formal

students' organisations and reaching for students who are not part of any organisation as such. There are forums that dealt with issues that are seen 'outside' the purview of traditional big organisations like the MZP and the MSU. As Vanlalruata, the President of the Mizoram University Student's Council and convenor of the discussion forum, stated, ways of looking at things and seeing the world of a Mizo youth is gradually changing with increasing interaction with and exposure to the outside world.

Educated youth who have returned to the State after a session of education outside is influencing this gradual change, he explained. He further pointed out another feature of the new generation in terms of increasing receptiveness to the 'outsider' — the non-Mizo.

Interestingly, as I found out during my conversation, young student activists like Vanlalruata are also involved in all-India youth leadership training programmes run by institutes like Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development. Government of India schemes like the National Service Scheme (NSS) was also making a steady impact.

This increasing participation in initiatives based outside Mizoram seemed to have made a new generation students turn critical to the otherwise overwhelmingly assumed and accepted authority of the Church as well as overarching youth bodies like the YMA, MZP and MSU. Though this dissent is more in the nature of an internal critique alone, it marks the beginning of a new trend nonetheless.

D.   Meghalaya: Role of Youth organisations in political education

It would be interesting to note that most of the student-youth organisations in the northeast not only acted as training grounds in formal politics for the students and youths but also as bodies that around election time acted as sites of political education.

In Megahlaya, the KSU (Khasi Students' Union), for example, talked of conscious attempts to encourage people to go out and participate in voting. They claimed that the success rates vary from place to place as per the strength of the outfit and the influence of their leaders in the respective area.

The organisation tries to influence the manifestos of the different parties by highlighting and campaigning for issues that they consider is in the larger interest of the State. For this, it distributes pamphlets and other materials and campaigns across the villages. Some of the negative features of an election that it attempts to warn the parties against are the massive use of money during elections, voting on religious lines and rampant corruption during the campaigning phase. Besides, some of the critical issues that were raised during the run-up to the 2014 elections were:

- The issue of Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in Meghalaya

- The issue of land alienation of the tribal population

- The issue of Uranium mining in the hills

However, the KSU General Secretary, Robertjune K. Jahrin, lamented that the "elections have become scheme-based. Over 80 per cent - 90 per cent people will not be influenced by stated manifestos of the party, but by prospects of personal benefits, linkages, religious affiliations etc." It is the long-standing betrayals and false promises being made by the political class that has turned the voters disillusioned and

self-centred, the senior KSU leader alleged. "We hope for a transformation of electoral politics under a strong and effective leader," he concluded.

The KSU's electoral demands were:

- Public declaration from all the parties on the mechanism of the influx issue to Meghalaya.

- Declaration on Land Laws to address the matter of land alienation

- Strong and effective human resource development policy

- Measures to tackle inflation and poverty

- Proposals to bring in an anti-corruption bill

The frustrations mentioned by Mizo students over interference from other sections of society are echoed by KSU activists as well. However, the student leader here added a note of optimism: "If we give room and space to young people, they can matter. Although being students their dependence on others makes them easily influenced by their parents. It is high time the youth of Meghalaya come out and take a stand," Jahrin, the student leader, said.

E. Sikkim: Nascent stage of youth activism

Student-youth activism is a very recent development in Sikkim and, in some sense, it is in a nascent stage. This fact makes it an interesting place for policy makers and researchers to observe and understand.

The Sikkim Students' Union (SKU) established only in 2012, came through an agitation against some decisions of the administration of the Sikkim University.

Ugen Bhutia, the President of SKU, said their newness and formative stage makes them consciously avoid any political campaigning around elections. Apart from the highly contentious nature of politicisation, the student organisations also lack the necessary resources for imparting political education to people, he said. However, organisations like the SKU in Sikkim were already involved in extensive community services in the spheres of education and health. The SKU had been organising special guiding camps in rural and remote areas of the State where they took help from local panchayat members in identifying shelters. In these camps, SKU members imparted free education to young students.

The unfolding of the development paradigm seemed to be the overarching factor for student-youth politics in Sikkim. "Developmental needs vis-a-vis the issue of extinction and threat to community identity has been the difficult choice in front of us," Bhutia conceded.

The issue of Gorkhaland in the adjacent Darjeeling region that has an intimate history with Sikkim itself also brings some new dynamics to student-youth politics in Sikkim. It has in a way, ignited student politics in the State. In fact, one of the proactive student groups formed in Sikkim is the Sikkim unit of the Gorkha Janamukti Vidyarthi Morcha, which is a student wing of the parent party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), the political party spearheading the movement for a separate state of Gorkhlanad comprising the Darjeeling hills and Siliguri region.

A patron of the students' body, Tenzing Kungphel, said the idea behind the organisation was to tell students how they could influence politics and to garner support for the issue of Gorkhaland.

Pema Wongchuk, a veteran journalist from the State and the Editor of *Sikkim Now*, felt that democracy and democratic

culture itself being nascent in the State, the youth there were yet to show signs of political maturity. In Sikkim, there had been a top-down approach and a feudal legacy due to which students are not prone to questioning authority. What aggravated matters, according to Wongchuck, was the fact that the first-time voters in the 2014 elections would never have seen any other government in the State, apart from the ruling SDF-led one, which had being at the seat of power for over four terms consecutively.

However, as Wongchuk and other leaders of movements like Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) pointed out, things were gradually changing with the onset of some environment-related movements, especially a movement against the proposed hydel projects in which youth and youth organisations had been playing a prominent role.

The fact that perhaps the youth were coming of age in Sikkim politics was reflected on the conscious effort by different political parties in Sikkim, including the newly formed Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM), to reach out to the youth and adopt youth-oriented programmes, especially on employment, education and sports facilities.

However, the youth were likely to play a bigger role as they were a middle class in the making.

F. Nagaland: Prominent role by the Church and the NGOs

The Naga Students' Federation (NSF) is the oldest students' body in the State, established in 1948. In their own words,

> The history of the formation of the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) October 29, 1947 is indeed a memorable process towards a noble aspiration of youth for solidarity and unity through a common platform. As a student community, the federation is committed to 'Intellectual Fight' against the forces that threatens its existence, right, freedom and identity. Therefore the Federation considers a moral obligation and duty to protect and thwart all the negative forces that hinders, counters, or deludes the rightful aspiration of the Nagas.[55]

From the description, one could gather the close links of this federation with the discourse on Naga nationalism and Naga identity. Thus, interventions that the federation had been making in the field of elections were often from the perspective of safeguarding these causes.

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[55] Naga Students Federation

For example, in January 2014, the NSF cautioned the State election department in Nagaland "on issuing of EPIC to the illegal immigrants in a recent exercise of certification of de-publication and error correction of electoral rolls for Summary Revision 2014". In a statement, NSF president Tongpang Ozukum, and general secretary Esther Rhakho, pointed out that as per the election department's draft e-Roll 2014, "nearly one lakh possible duplicate voters have been identified".

The federation urged the department concerned, district administration and all officials involved in such certification and detection of illegal voters to exercise their authority without fear or favour. For student groups like NSF, the chief focus remains 'Naga issues' of unification and political solution to the disputes. Elections are seen as either instrumental or impediments to the larger cause. However, as far as the issue of electoral participation and reform is concerned, it is the 'traditional' authorities like the Church in Nagaland, which is seen to be playing more of a frontal role.

The role played by the Church: NBCC and the clean elections drive

Admittedly, taking inspiration from the YMA and the Mizoram story, the Nagaland Baptist Christian Church (NBCC) has been taking some significant initiatives since 2012 for clean and corruption-free elections in Nagaland. The Church has become a facilitator in the process to bring in and connect wider youth to the process of electoral reforms. As part of the effort, various seminars and rallies were held across the State on Clean Election. The NBCC had also brought out a booklet on Clean Election, which had been translated into various dialects at the association level.

The Committee had also drafted and distributed sermon material, guidelines and many slogans on Clean Election. A play by Clark Theological College (CTC) students was brought out in DVDs towards this end. Besides, youth camps were being set up specifically for educative purposes.[56]

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56 TNN, 2012. Nagaland Baptist Church Council launches 'clean election campaign', *The Times of India*, June 26. Last accessed December 22, 2015.

Some new sites of Youth activism: YouthNet, the Young's Club, and NEW

Forums like YouthNet are emerging in Nagaland over the past few years that made some rapid strides in the sphere of youth mobilisation. Launched in 2006, it calls itself "the voice of Young Nagas, the platform for young Nagas". In its own words, "YouthNet is a non-profit organisation with a mission to help youth acquire knowledge, develop life skills and form attitudes to enable them to become self-directing, positive, productive, responsible and contributing members of society through active participation and involvement."

Before the Nagaland Assembly election in 2008, YouthNet, in association with the Association for Democratic Reforms and other concerned citizens, formed the Nagaland Elections Watch (NEW), a non-partisan civil society effort for creating accountable and transparent governance in the State. The NEW collected the affidavits filed by candidates along with their nomination papers and collated them for better comprehension of the voter. The main objective was to raise voter awareness about the candidates in the fray in order to enable them make an informed choice before casting their vote.

As a follow-up of the electoral reform initiative, YouthNet conducted a survey to assess how much money was spent during the 2008 elections to address the existing culture of election-related corruption in the State, which has become a deeply disturbing trend. To carry out the survey, youth representatives from all the 11 districts came together to collaborate and collect information from their respective districts before being compiled into a report.

In a more recent initiative, some civil society youth groups in Nagaland entered the unManifesto campaign. This campaign claimed to create spaces for young people to raise their voice, their rights, and their efforts to bring in changes in society through manifestos that would later be handed over to different political parties.

The primary supporter and partner of the "My Space, My unManifesto" campaign is the UNFPA and initiated by ComMutiny, the Youth Collective (CYC), Delhi. *Youth ki Awaaz*, Pravah, Bosco Institute and over 40 Civil Society Organisation came together to run the manifesto across the country and Youngs' Club took the initiative in Nagaland

with local support from YouthNet, Naga Blog and Peace Channel.

After successfully holding seminars, workshops, one-to-one contacts and campaign through social networking sites, the youth of Nagaland compiled top ten issues confronting the State and listed them in the "Top Ten Nagaland Youth Manifesto 2014" under the nationwide campaign "My Space My unManifesto". The same manifesto was also submitted to the representatives of major political parties in the State at a heavily attended function at IMC Hall, Dimapur.

The "Top Ten Nagaland Youth Manifesto 2014" include passing of Lokayukta Bill in Nagaland Assembly along with a CBI branch at the earliest; subsidy in public transport for students, aged people and physically challenged; MLAs and ministers to ensure implementation of projects under respective constituencies; better road connectivity; youth hostels in every districts and hostels for working women in district HQs; five ambulances in every district hospital; setting up of law college, engineering college and IT institutes; promotion of meritocracy and not nepotism; establishment of youth centres in all districts, including upgradation

of sports facilities; and introduction of Nagaland Youth Policy at the earliest. The function also announced the formation of a core committee to follow up the manifesto with the political parties.

Once again, as we saw in the case of Mizoram and other NE States, these alternate youth groups like YouthNet were more involved with the pan-India civil society network that had a reformist agenda in essence.

Student-Youth Politics in the NER: A Contentious Area

From the conversations, one could sense that the 'mainstream' student and youth groups in the Northeast today were fragmented along ethnic lines, each representing particular ethnic groups or groupings and aspirations, which have become the main rallying force behind the different autonomy and identity discourses. Most crucially, these developments had an impact on the way they perceived or approached elections.

The background of change is the historical sense of neglect that has marked the region's narrative about itself, a narrative that influenced its oppositional politics and manifested in the movement against illegal immigration and in the emergence

of regional political formations deemed necessary for articulating aspirations and fears otherwise ignored by successive central governments. The impetus for change is also provided by the continued violence in the region and people's growing disillusionment with the agents responsible.

The actual shift, however, was brought about by the skilful use of the oppositional discourse. There is, at the same time, a relationship with the Centre expressed in acknowledging that the northeast could continue to be out on a limb by itself (the acceptance of facts like students having to study outside the region, or the region having to appeal to the central government for talks and changes in policy). This is the inevitability of the Union-State relationship in a political system that is partly federal, and in a country that is large and multi-ethnic, is bound to resort to such a duality of approach.

In most parts of the northeast, it takes the form of a play between a neglect narrative with a long history and an emerging narrative that is both oppositional and participative.[57]

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[57] Dutta, N. 2012. 2012. "Civil Society Politics", *Seminar,* (December). Last accessed: January 10, 2013.

An understanding of the politics of student movements, thus, refers to an understanding that the boundary between "movement" and "context" can be quite blurred, reflecting the interpenetration of institutional and extra-institutional agents of social change and that the boundary between institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics has been sufficiently challenged.[58]

One useful way to understand student movements and politics is by looking at them as instances of contentious politics defined as

> [E]pisodic, collective interaction among makers of claims and their opponents when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims or a party to the claims, and (b) the claims would, if realised, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.[59]

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[58] McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., and Tilly, C. 2001. Dynamics of Contention, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), p.2.
[59] Ibid: 5

IV. Youth and Elections in India's NE: Key Observations

In this research paper, I approach the question of attitudes of the youth in the northeast towards electoral processes based on a few key attitudinal indicators. Based on the survey conducted containing the 35 questions, I identified the following broad inquiry themes:

1. How many youth, who vote (indicative of the nature of participation), have taken part in different protest actions and think that their vote has a real effect (indicative of the level of political awareness and trust)?

2. Voting behaviour of the youth vis-à-vis their socio-political background (membership in political party, student group, membership of family member in political party etc.) as well as the socioeconomic background of the respondent (income level, locality, and lifestyle choices.)

3. Voting behaviour of the youth vis-à-vis identity in order to understand if participation in election or the lack of it is influenced by one's sense of identity and perception on the political system.

We will take up section-wise analysis under these themes as well as try to place the survey findings under these few

themes. However, first, it is essential to have a sense of the data one has in hand.

1. Profiling the sample

A random sample was picked consisting of seven hundred respondents, from seven university campuses - one campus each in the States of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim and two university campuses in Assam. However, the final number of questionnaires administered and responses collected was 668. We collected data that was representative of gender, income level, identity affiliations and locality type. [Due to rounding off at one decimal place, percentages given below may not add up to 100.]

Males were overrepresented in the sample with 54.2 per cent male and 45.8 per cent female respondents.

More than half the respondents (54 per cent) belonged to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. Respondents from the general category constituted 23.9 per cent and Other Backward Castes (OBC) were 17.4 per cent. Scheduled Caste (SC) were 4.7 per cent of the sample. As much as 82.4 per cent recorded their monthly household income at

Rs. 5,000 or less, while 8.8 per cent respondents recording their household income levels at Rs. 5,001 - Rs. 10,000. Four per cent of the respondents recorded their income levels at Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 50,000, and, 3.8 per cent recorded their income between Rs. 10,001 and Rs. 20,000. A mere one per cent recorded their monthly household income level at Rs. 50,000 and above.

As many as 49.5 per cent respondents recorded their domicile to be in a village, followed by 42.1 per cent respondents who reported living in a town (with population below one lakh). As many as 8.5 per cent of the respondents said they lived in a city (population above one lakh).

2. Findings

2.1 Political participation

Studies have shown that political interest and political participation are connected.[60] Widespread support exists for the argument that participation of citizens is essential if democracies are to be viable, sustainable and healthy.[61] Political and, more broadly, civic participation occurs when

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[60] Almond and Verba, 1963
[61] Crick, 1998, 2002; Power, 2006; Putnam, 2000

citizens become part of the body politic/polity as engaged members.

Voting is a significant indicator of democratic engagement, a minimal sign of an individual's democratic participation as a citizen and a useful indicator of the health of a democracy. Though there is some debate about the effectiveness of an individual's vote in a democracy, there exists widespread support for voting as a valuable expression of one's participation in a political entity.[62] If these arguments are accepted, then it is clear that young people need to participate in their democracy and need to vote. However, the first and foremost question that comes to mind is who votes?

My field study shows that 57.3 per cent of the sampled youth in the northeast claim to have been voting regularly, whereas 42.7 per cent did not vote regularly. About 63 per cent of the male respondents said they voted compared with 50 per cent of female respondents. Nearly 67 per cent of the youth interviewed recorded their decision to vote in the 2014 general elections, while 25.2 per cent had not made up their
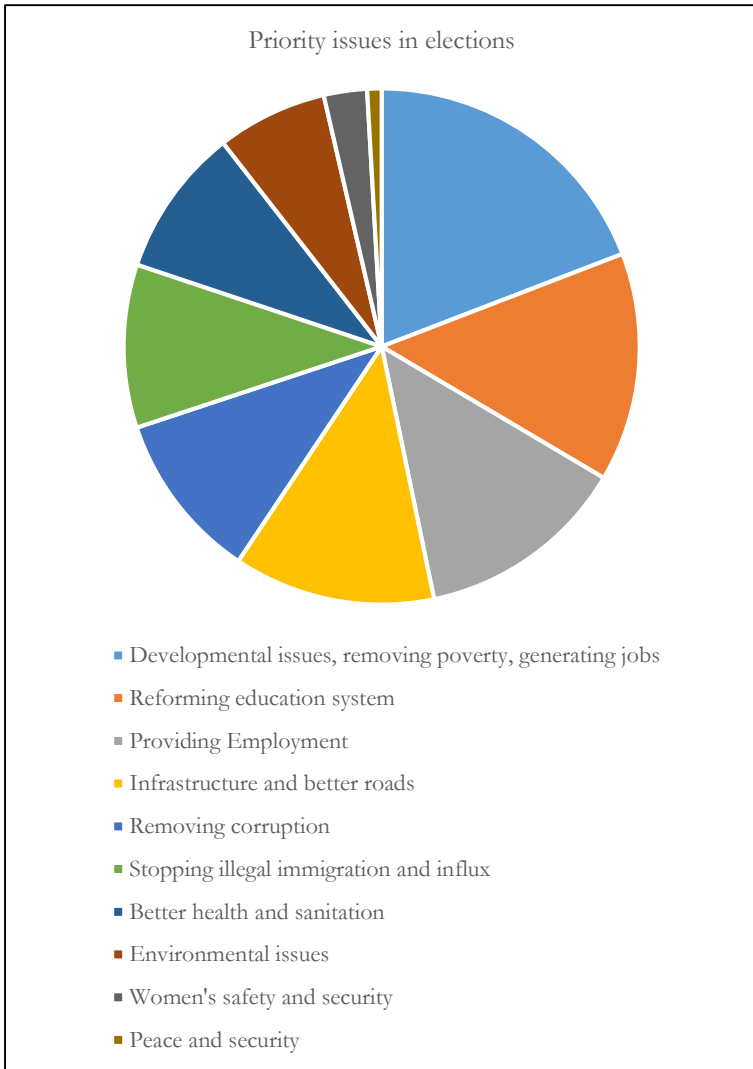
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[62] International IDEA, 2002

minds. A minor 8.2 per cent ruled out voting in the general elections.

Analysis of the data as per the income category showed that richer students tended to vote lesser. My data showed that amongst those who recorded themselves in the income bracket of Rs. 50,000 and above, only 14 per cent voted regularly.

We tried to assess the expectations that the youth in the NER had from political parties and their electoral agendas.

The following diagram reveals priority issues that the youth wanted to see taken up by the parties in the 2014 elections.

Figure 1: Pie chart showing priority issues in elections for the young voters

Priority issues in elections

- Developmental issues, removing poverty, generating jobs
- Reforming education system
- Providing Employment
- Infrastructure and better roads
- Removing corruption
- Stopping illegal immigration and influx
- Better health and sanitation
- Environmental issues
- Women's safety and security
- Peace and security

This was followed by seeking their views on the elections as a systemic phenomenon, with the respondents associating it with the campaigning process (8.3 per cent), the voting process (6.3 per cent), and political parties (3.4 per cent).

About 51 per cent of the respondents believed that their vote had an effect compared with 28 per cent who thought that their vote made no difference. This was closely followed by the 21 per cent of youth who were not sure about the impact their vote had.

Figure 2: Opinion of young voters on whether their votes have any effect
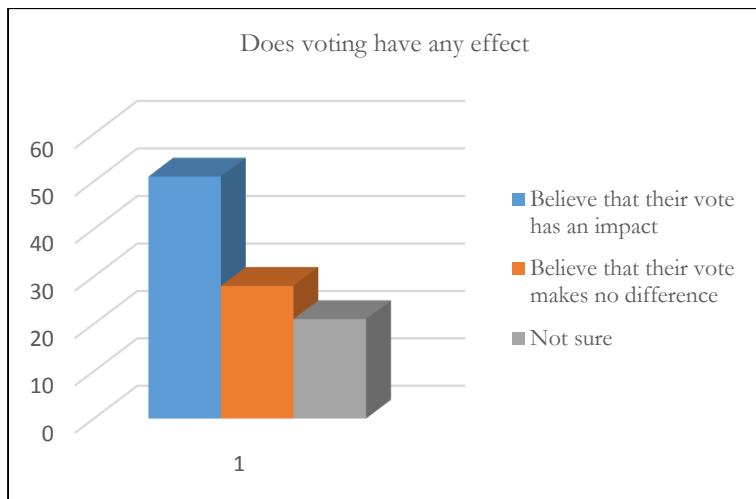
When asked about their opinion on whether the youth should take active part in politics in terms of contesting in elections, 52 per cent of the respondents fully agreed, followed by 41.1 per cent who thought it should depend on the context. Only 4.2 per cent respondents ruled it out, with a meagre 2.6 per cent not being sure.

How many times on an average did a respondent participate in any protest, demonstration, struggle or some kind of movement? A substantial figure of 40.9 per cent of the respondents admitted to taking part in these activities at least once or twice, whereas 23.2 per cent of the youth recorded involvement several times. Taken together, around 64 per cent of the youth had some experience or the other of some social protests/movements. At the same time, 31.4 per cent of the youth admitted to having never participated in any such affairs and 4.4 per cent of the respondents preferred not to comment on it.

2.2 Factors influencing political behaviour of the youth

Extensive research on political socialisation over many years shows three primary sources of influence on young people's learning about politics and democracy — the family through

role modelling, discussion, and media use; the media, mostly
television and newspapers; and school experience providing
knowledge, skills and values from non-partisan educators.[63]
Other sources such as peers, the extended family, community
and church, count for little. One of the ways that young
people are seen as taking a lead in political participation is
through their use of new information and communications
technologies.

Who influences the voting choices of the youth? The largest
section of the youth reported being influenced by their family
members in their electoral choices (32.6 per cent), followed
by the impact of the local political leaders and their
performance etc. (26.3 per cent). The impact of community
leaders (caste/tribe etc.) on the electoral choice was rather
low at 11.2 per cent. Peer groups accounted for the lowest at
9.1 per cent. However, a significant 20.7 per cent of the youth
gave their response as 'other factors'.

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[63] Delli- Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Hooghe, 2004; Patrick, 1999; Print,
2006a; Saha, 2000; Verba et al., 1995; Youniss et al., 1997

Figure 3: External factors influencing youth voting pattern
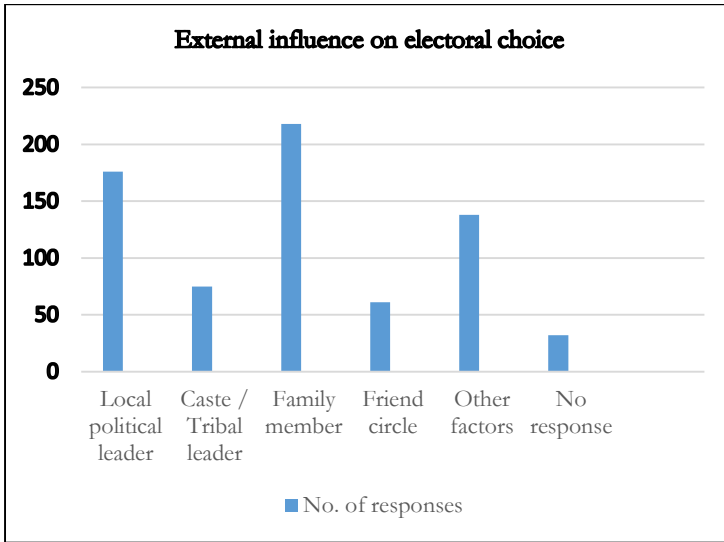
Calculated based on total number of responses of 668

The difference of influence across gender was also interesting. Whereas, the influence of local political leaders was nearly the same for both young men (25.5 per cent) and young women (27.2 per cent), the significant gap was on the higher influence of family on women at 41.3 per cent, compared to 26.1 per cent for the men. Significantly, the influence of the community leaders was lesser on young women at 8.7 per cent, against 13.6 per cent on young men.

Our data analysis also showed that 74.5 per cent of the respondents recorded that their family members voted regularly, while for 15.4 per cent respondents, members in their family voted irregularly and for the remaining 10.1 per cent, members in their family had no interest in elections.

2.3 Influence of the media on voting behaviour and choices

I tried to assess which media had the largest impact on the youth while making their electoral choices. I found that newspapers still had the highest influence on the youth in the region - 65 per cent respondents claimed very high influence of the newspapers. Television came a close second at 58 per cent. However, the rise of the internet as medium of strong influence at a significant 32 per cent was an important point to note. It had eclipsed mediums like the radio which only 10-12 per cent youth considered influential.

Here, a word or two on the crucial onset of social media is called for. Numerous studies have explored the effects of the so-called "technology tsunami" on politics and society more generally and young people are considered to be "the

beneficiaries of advances to technology" as early adopters of these technologies.[64]

Talking about the strengths and vulnerabilities of networked politics, many scholars have focused on how this technology enables and promotes different forms of engagement. As a result, numerous studies have discussed the ways that activism and more institutionalised forms of political engagement — including voting — have increased with these technologies. Another general finding of many researches is that information and communications technologies facilitate protest.[65] They conclude that "the hallmark of protest in the digital age appears to be rapid and dense networking behaviour that can (though surely does not always) cross issue and organisational boundaries with a minimum of formal coalition brokerage and collective identity framing."[66] As we have seen in the previous section during the ethnography of the student-youth groups, the new forums that came up online often bypassing the traditional youth forums took up issues hitherto not addressed by the 'traditional' groups and

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[64] Winograd and Hais 2008

[65] Van Aelst & Walgrave 2002, B´edoyan et al. 2004, Fisher et al. 2005

[66] Bennett et al. 2008, p. 286

came up specially in societies where room for public dissent was socially rather limited.

2.4 Access, involvements and awareness

Access to the political representative was another important angle to probe. A whopping 92.2 per cent of the youth admitted to knowing who the local MLA was, whereas 7.8 per cent of the youth did not have any information on this. The number of young men with the information was about six per cent higher compared to the woman counterparts.

Of the respondents surveyed, 47.3 per cent of the youth never met the representative. The rest, 37.9 per cent, met the MLA 'occasionally', whereas 14.4 per cent claimed to have met the MLA very often. However, only 41 per cent of the respondents were satisfied after meeting them. Therefore, out of the 52.3 per cent of the youth who met the MLA, around 11-12 per cent felt disappointed or dissatisfied.

2.5 Poor policy level information and awareness

When asked about the scheme of Campus Ambassadors appointed by the Election Commission in their university/town, only 23.3 per cent said they heard about the

scheme. More than half the youth (54.8 per cent) did not know about it and 21.9 per cent were not sure.

The same poor level of information was demonstrated in the case of the National Youth Policy. A little over one-third of the respondents (37.7 per cent) heard of the last National Youth Policy, 2012. A bigger number of 47.5 per cent did not hear of it and 14.8 per cent were not sure.

Surprisingly, only 46.1 per cent of the youth were aware of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), while 40.8 per cent of the youth said they had never heard of it; 13.1 per cent were not sure.

This matched with the fact that 47.1 per cent of youth were aware of curfews imposed or operations conducted by the security forces in their area. However, 42.2 per cent said they were not aware of any such measures and 10.7 per cent were not sure.

On a related issue, it was found that a big majority of 63 per cent of the youth were aware of the presence of security forces in their area, whereas 21.7 per cent were not aware and 15.3 per cent were not sure. However, only 24.5 per cent recorded of being personally threatened by the security forces

or of having any knowledge of any such measures being perpetrated on someone known to them. Here, too, a majority of 64.6 per cent recorded as not having any such experience and 10.9 per cent did not want to talk about it.

These figures showed the near neat division of the perception and experiences of reality for the youth in the NER and spoke in favour of the argument that when it came to contentious issues like AFSPA and the issue of security forces, the felt experience was divided and not uniform for all the youth in the region.

3. The aspiration quotient: Youth driving for change?

A big area of concern for the youths in the northeast, as elsewhere in developing economies, was the issue of employment and resources. As Swamy writes, "Demographers have no more ironclad demographic rule than this: surpluses of frustrated young men lead to catastrophic deficits of peace. In an exhaustive 2006 review of the evidence, Henrik Urdal concluded that "large youth cohorts are associated with a significantly increased risk of

domestic armed conflict, terrorism and riots [or] violent demonstrations".[67]

In this regard, how do the youth in the NE look at the larger world? An overwhelming 74.5 per cent majority of the youth in the NER would like to get settled outside the region/State for a better career and job prospect. Only 15.4 per cent of the respondents preferred not to leave the region/State and 10.1 per cent of the youth were undecided on it.

Moreover, how did the youth in the NER view the globalisation process? The majority opinion seemed to be that it was a mixed force (54.3 per cent), followed by a positive take on globalisation (29.7 per cent). Only 10.5 per cent of the youth looked at it as a negative force, whereas 5.5 per cent of the respondents felt that globalisation had no impact on the region.

[67] Swamy, 2014.

4. Broad trends discerned: unlocking the paradoxes

Based on the data analysis, the following broad trends are noticeable:

- There existed both a sense of dissatisfaction as well as a sense of engagement with the political system amongst the youth of the NER. A big majority of the youth, around 64 per cent, had some experience or the other of some social protests/movements. At the same time, 66.6 per cent of the youth recorded their decision to vote in the 2014 general elections and a significant majority of 57.3 per cent of the interviewed youth in the NER claimed to have been voting regularly.

- When it comes to the electoral phenomenon, the overall image and expectations out of it was low, yet the degree of participation was high. Among many, the image of the elections as a forum of violence, corruption and manipulations topped (39.6 per cent), but yet, the majority seemed to believe at the same breath that their vote did impact the state of affairs (51 per cent).

- The higher the income level background, the lesser the regular voting percentage was among the youth. At the same time, the opinion at favouring youth involvement with electoral politics, in terms of contesting for elections, was an overwhelming yes at over 90 per cent.

- The youth in the NER seemed to be influenced by the opinions of family members and elders the most while making electoral choices, while among the media sources, traditional media like TV and newspaper remained the bigger influence, though new media like social media forums and internet-based information media, too, were catching up fast.

- The awareness level among the youth about youth policy implications and policy information relating to youth and electoral education was found rather low indicating poor policy programme outreach. Compared to the policy information, the information of the youth on local political apparatus was better and even the interaction was better, though the satisfaction level after meeting the political representatives was on the lower side.

- In the order of priority for the 2014 elections, the youth of the NER wanted the issue of development of their region to occupy the top slot, with additional priority sought on issues of infrastructure and healthcare. However, politically contentious issues like the illegal immigration problem and anti-corruption thrust, too, came within the top five in the list.

- Men and women were voting and participating in the political process almost in the same numbers but through different influences and expectations. Women were significantly more influenced by 'family members' while exercising electoral choices and had

far lesser avenues to 'other factors' while making their choice.

- More youth wouldn't mind settling outside the region for better career prospect (74 per cent), and contrary to the dominant image, more youth put their national identity over the state/regional one (45 per cent).

V. Promoting Active Citizenship: Towards Youth-centric Policy Making

Extensive literature exists on the benefits of engaging the youth in community-based programmes, yet there is little research on the impact of youth involvement in policy advocacy and formulations. Helping youth develop a deeper understanding of societal problems can empower them to become more engaged with their civic environment while also helping them to become more active and successful adults with an interest in social justice.[68] Further, providing the youth with meaningful, ecologically valid opportunities for involvement in important community issues is essential for developing future civic involvement.[69] The degree to which the youth are empowered and committed to civic actions is related to their perception of the meaningfulness of their involvement.[70]

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[68] Evans and Prilleltensky 2005
[69] Pittman 1999; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003
[70] Andolina et al. 2002

Youth-centric development refers to processes that are based on the young person's needs in their special stage of development and to using social action for building the leadership potential of youth to be able to fulfil these needs. It recognises the urgent requirement to engage with the youth as individuals with unique identities and a desire to learn, explore and understand their own potentials as active citizens. As Patel notes,

> Youth-centric strategies view the young person as a partner in addressing development problems and impacting the world, but at the same time, studying the impact of the world on the young and nurturing their potential as change agents.[71]

A recent example of youth-centric policy making relevant for this paper has been the launch of the Campus Ambassador Scheme by the ECI. In 2013, the ECI launched an innovative and ambitious scheme titled Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation Programme (SVEEP), especially to encourage first time voters to enrol. As part of this scheme, the following measures were undertaken:

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[71] Patel, 2013:45

1. Campus ambassadors appointed in Universities and large colleges under UGC as identified by Chief Electoral Officers
2. Identification of excluded groups/communities in registration at polling station/AC/district and reasons thereof
3. Consultation on youth and women participation at District Election Officer/Chief Electoral Officer-level every half yearly/yearly.[72]

However, in course my fieldwork, I found mixed reactions and mixed experiences with the experimentations of this project across the States. The most alarming one, as mentioned already, was the fact that merely 23.3 per cent of the interviewed youth were aware of this scheme. The experience with the government departments and different student-youth groups had been a mixed bag.

Special awareness programmes aimed at attracting first time voters through measures like the Campus Ambassador Programme were taken up by the State and district election offices in Assam. The District Election Office in Kamrup Metropolitan in Assam had recorded enrolment of about 10,000 first time voters as part of 'I vote, I am responsible'

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[72] Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation

scheme, for which they had campaigned throughout the city and had set up enrolment booths on educational institution campuses.

Awareness campaigns through posters and leaflets along with messages to the youth through local FM radio channels were carried out, District Election Officer, Chinmoy Phukan, said. Many prominent cultural and sports icons of the State were approached to be the ambassadors for this initiative. However, the students-youth organisation in Guwahati that I spoke to expressed their ignorance in these measures.

The differing experiences of different youth groups in the northeast regarding this crucial scheme indicated the complexities involved with policy implication of this nature. The local political alignments and atmosphere seemed to have produced various ways of implementing policy measures of this kind and, in the process, blunted its targeted effectiveness. At the bottom lay the larger question of administrative autonomy and acumen so that schemes like these could be implemented in the best possible free, fair and wide sense.

The KSU complained that the government and establishment had viewed it more as an oppositional force and had kept it outside any programme or initiative meant for youth awareness, like the Campus Ambassador Programme.

In Assam, it was mostly some NGOs that had been approached by the Commission for this scheme. Groups like AASU and AJYCP resented their absence. Whereas the department had achieved commendable success through their innovative initiatives in this regard, perhaps additionally involving the traditional student-youth groups would have enabled a wider reach.

The ECI needed to show more imagination if it wanted to go beyond a mere swelling up of electoral ranks. This also brought in the issue of the larger span of the national youth policies and the relevance of State youth policies.

Need to bring more perspectives to national and State youth policies

According to statistics supplied by the website Youthpolicy.org, as on January 2013, of the 198 countries, 99 (50 per cent) had a current youth policy. A further 56 (28 per cent) were revising their existing or, in a few cases, developing

their first national youth policy. A total of 43 states (22 per cent) had no youth policy (yet).
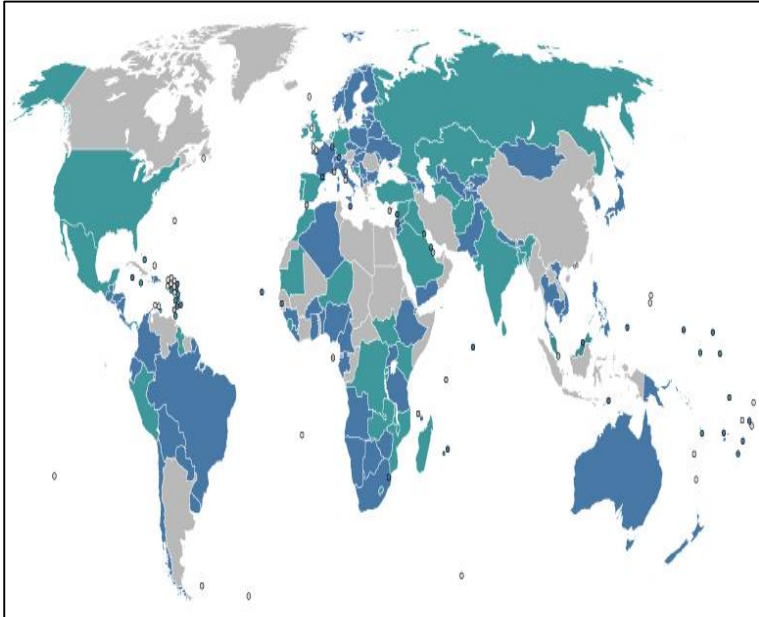
National Youth Policies [January 2013] **Blue**: NYP exists; **Green**: NYP under revision; **Grey**: no NYP

Source: Youthpolicy.org Last accessed: December 25, 2015.

India had been drafting and implementing national youth policies since 2003. Section 8.1 of the National Youth Policy 2013-14, titled "Key strategies for the implementation", harnesses the need for taking region-specific approach at policymaking. It articulates:

The NYP sets out broad parameters for policies and for planning programmes for the youth across the country. In our country, there are numerous variables that impact the life of young women and men and, as a result, there may be some state or region-specific needs and concerns of young people that are not adequately reflected in this document. It is, therefore, suggested that, keeping the overall national perspective set out in this document in view, each state should enunciate its own State Youth Policy. Accordingly, the states may also develop additional programmes to respond to the specific needs of the youth of the respective state.

What is also of importance to the NER is that both tribal youth and youths in violent conflict were considered as two categories of priority group in clauses 6.1.4 and 6.1.6, respectively, in the National Youth Policy 2014.

A youth development Index (YDI) for the Northeast?

The National Youth Policy since 2012 has been proposing the creation of an YDI based on the five domains of health, education, employment, amenities and participation. The creation of a youth development index is expected to contribute in three ways. One, it would help to recognise youth as a population category that requires separate consideration.

For instance, despite the existence of a national youth policy for the past 20 years, in many quarters, youth as a significant category does not have recognition. Second, development of a summary index would help make comparison possible across geographical areas and categories, as human development index has done in comparing the development situation across regions, nations and localities. Third, the proposed index, apart from measuring the achievement made (in comparison with other societies and in comparison with the past), would help in advocacy activities related to youth development in general and of specific categories in particular.

The youth development index would provide a basic idea of the relative level in a particular society or a category of youth within a society, a comprehensive understanding of youth development could be achieved only if the index is studied along with information on so many other facets of youth development.

Based on our findings, we can recommend the following for a better enumeration of the YDI, especially in the NE context:

- **Consult student-youth organisations:** The experienced youth and student organisations and NGOs working on youth issues can be consulted. The National Youth Policy needs to work on certain indicators and criteria for the survey. The abysmal level of policy knowledge among the youth is likely to improve significantly if the significant network of these youth and student organisations are tapped into as collaborators of these many schemes.

- **Regional review groups:** Once the draft has been put out and the recommendations have been given to various ministries, central and State governments, the Government can make use of the same volunteer force, or recruit a small regional staff with more expertise who work on a State-by-State level, to review whether the State governments are implementing the policy at their level or not. At the end of every year, this group can file a review report to the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs about the situation in the respective states, and give suggested

solutions to be implemented for a better functioning of the youth policy recommendations.

- **Awareness drive through national, regional and community media:** Last, but not the least, out of the funds that the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs receives, it should set out a chunk to invest in awareness drives through the national media, the regional media as well as community-specific media to reach out to young people across the board and inform them about their rights, the facilities offered to them, and the recommendations by the Ministry, and generate interest in civic participation and various other aspects of the National Youth Policy. As our data showed, the levels of awareness on the very existence of the National Youth Policy is rather poor.

Perils of an instrumental view of elections

Elections are a key activity around which a representative democracy evolves. The success and legitimacy of elections hinge on citizen involvement in voting, and also in the overall election process. Besides voting, citizen engagement in campaign activities can momentarily bridge the gap between

the elite and the ordinary mass of citizens. Such engagement also prepares the ground for more participation by citizens in politics even when there are no elections.

Most discussions of participation in the 1990s refer to this "democratic upsurge", first systematically outlined by scholars like Yogendra Yadav.[73] However, analysis of the last few elections reveals that this upsurge had slowed down. Yadav and Palshikar recently drew attention to not only a "saturation" of the democratic upsurge but also the inherent dynamics of liberal democratic politics.[74] Therefore, the celebration of participation notwithstanding, voter participation does not effectively bridge the gap between the voter and the political elite.

Popular wisdom is that representative democracy has the capacity to restrain popular upsurges within the confines of routine electoral participation. However, the northeast gives us a different story, where the bullet and the ballot, more

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[73] Yadav, 1996
[74] Yadav and Palshikar, 2009

often than not, go hand in hand. As Sirnate and Verma aptly observe,

> High voter turnout in the Northeast should not be mistaken for compliance with New Delhi. An election in the Northeast is seen by the Centre as an exercise in generating legitimacy, but it may be seen differently in the region. In the Northeast, assembly elections are contests to control the politics of the State, as is the case in any other State in India.[75]

Thus, as our data shows, an overwhelming majority do vote and take part in elections and yet a near similar number of youth hold the event of election in some kind of negative light. The dual narrative of resistance and reciprocity needs to be understood here yet again. The many continuing acts of violence in the region point to a larger reality that the whole of northeastern India is sitting on a powder keg of violence.

The northeast has become a sad battleground of ever changing ethnic coalitions between political groups who feed on the logic of ethnocentric political developments, changing their stakes as per the political exigency of the day. The state

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[75] Sirnate, V., Verma, R. 2013 Where bullet and ballot go hand in hand, *The Hindu*, March 12. Last accessed December 22, 2015.

opting for the mere formalities and prosaic procedures has, in fact, tried to manipulate these very vacillations among social groups and communities, eventually leading to protests of various kinds and even generating some of the conditions for violence. What has perturbed observers are the increasingly visible links of the nature and pattern of this violence to the multifaceted realities of the phenomenon of elections in this part of the country. These observations make one critically reflect on the crucial but often unnoticed gap that sometimes develops between formalities of democratic practices and the fulfilment of the democratic ideals. The urgent need of the hour is to move well beyond knee-jerk reactions and *ad hoc* measures, towards well defined, concrete policy formulations. Repeated setbacks for Indian democracy in its northeastern region are a constant reminder that in a better democracy the substantive promises must be met right alongside the procedural requirements.

However, as the findings of this research shows, the youth of the NER is and has been ready for change for some time now. Their acts of protests have to be understood by placing it alongside the equally zestful participation too. Thus, policy formulation needs to understand the relationship between the activism on the streets, on

campuses and the politics in the realm of legislations. By tracing the full arc of contentious politics from direct action and protest on the streets to political manoeuvres within the halls of the government, we will gain a much clearer view of political participation and the political process more broadly. In what ways can the continuing youth upsurge in India's northeast be converted to a process of democratic upsurge ushering in a process towards peace and development? That remains the crux of the challenge for policy makers engaging with the region. An attempt has been made in this paper to give some pointers towards the answer(s).

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