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Secularism under Stress? Electoral Polarisation in Assam and West Bengal: A Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Electoral Politics

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Abstract:
India's constitutional framework envisions a secular state that maintains equal respect for all religions while ensuring political neutrality in religious affairs. Unlike Western notions of secularism based on strict separation between religion and state, Indian secularism has historically emphasized religious pluralism and accommodation. In recent decades, however, electoral politics has increasingly revolved around religious identity, citizenship, migration, and cultural nationalism. Electoral campaigns frequently employ narratives that differentiate communities based on religion, ethnicity, and language. Assam and West Bengal provide important case studies for understanding these developments due to their unique socio-political histories, demographic diversity, and strategic political significance. This paper seeks to examine the relationship between secularism and electoral polarisation in these two states and assess the implications for democratic governance.

Keynotes: Secularism, Electoral Polarisation, Assam, West Bengal, Identity Politics, Democracy, Citizenship, Elections

Introduction:
The structural durability of secularism in India has traditionally relied on regional variations that tempered the homogenizing impulses of central majoritarian politics. In the sub-national landscapes of Eastern and Northeastern India—specifically West Bengal and Assam—secularism was historically maintained not through strict ideological neutrality, but through complex regional social coalitions. In West Bengal, this took the form of syncretic cultural sub-nationalism (*Bengali Asmita*) rooted in Left-liberal and reformist traditions. In Assam, it was shaped by a linguistic nationalism that historically prioritized ethno-cultural indigenity (*Khilonjia*) over pan-Indian religious binaries.
However, the outcomes of the 2026 state assembly elections signal a profound paradigm shift. The electoral maps of both states have been completely redrawn. The 2026 Electoral Mandates of West Bengal and Assam are discussed as follows:

West Bengal (Total: 294 Seats)
- BJP & Allies: 208 Seats (Historic Landslide / Majority)
- AITC (Incumbent): 80 Seats

- Left/INC/Others: 6 Seats

Assam (Total: 126 Seats)

- NDA (BJP/AGP/BPF): 102 Seats (Two-Thirds Majority)
- Asom Sonmilito Morcha (INC-led): 21 Seats
- AIUDF / Others: 3 Seats

This paper conceptualizes these outcomes not as standard electoral shifts, but as structural symptoms of a deeper institutional crisis. By examining the mechanics of these elections, we evaluate how the constitutional baseline of "principled state distance" has evolved into an administrative and rhetorical process of competitive polarization.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the structural shifts in the discourse of Indian secularism during the 2026 state legislative elections in Assam and West Bengal.
2. To analyse the role of administrative and legal mechanisms (voter roll purges, land evictions) in creating deep electoral polarization.
3. To examine the intersection of gendered welfare populism and security concerns in altering traditional cross-communal voting blocs.

To build a comparative sub-national framework explaining how majoritarian breakthrough (West Bengal) and majoritarian consolidation (Assam) occur simultaneously in borderland regions.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design.

Sources of Data

The research is based on secondary data collected from Election Commission Reports, Academic Journals and Books, Newspaper archives, Policy Reports and research papers, Political Party Manifestos, scholarly analyses of Political Behaviour

Result and Discussion:

West Bengal: The Collapse of Asmita and the Bureaucracy of Disenfranchisement

The 2026 election in West Bengal represents a watershed moment in the state's modern history, marking the end of fifteen years of populist governance under Mamata Banerjee. The BJP's rise to a commanding 208-seat majority dissolved the conventional political science assumption that Bengal's syncretic political culture was structurally resistant to right-wing majoritarianism.

Two key structural factors drove this transformation:

1. The Bureaucracy of the Ballot: The Special Intensive Revision (SIR)

The election was preceded by intense institutional friction regarding the integrity of the voter rolls. The Election Commission of India's implementation of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) resulted in the deletion of approximately 90 lakh voters from the state's electorates.

While framed administratively as a technical cleanup to eliminate duplicate entries and deceased voters, it quickly became a central focus of political polarization. The opposition harnessed these deletions to build a powerful campaign narrative around illegal migration, national security, and demographic

subversion. Conversely, the ruling AITC positioned these purges as targeted bureaucratic disenfranchisement aimed at minority and borderland populations. This dynamic effectively transformed standard electoral bookkeeping into an existential struggle over citizenship and belonging.

2. The Limits of Gendered Welfare Populism

For nearly a decade, the AITC insulated itself from anti-incumbency through a comprehensive matrix of direct benefit transfers (DBTs), most notably Lakshmir Bhandar, which cultivated a highly loyal base of women voters. However, the 2026 election exposed the structural limitations of relying solely on welfare populism to maintain cross-communal coalitions.

In the wake of profound public outrage surrounding the 2024 R.G. Kar Medical College tragedy, the state's political economy fractured along gendered and class lines. The BJP successfully decoupled the "women's vote" from state-sponsored economic dependency by framing the incumbent regime as a structural threat to public safety and institutional integrity. As a result, the AITC's secular coalition collapsed, splitting along sharp identity lines: sub-regional scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities (such as the Matuas and Rajbanshis) consolidated overwhelmingly with the BJP, while minority voting blocs became highly concentrated but geographically isolated.

Assam: Legal Majoritarianism and the Sarma Model of Territorial Securitization

In contrast to the dramatic regime change in West Bengal, the 2026 election in Assam consolidated the existing political order. The BJP-led NDA secured a historic third consecutive term, winning 102 seats under the leadership of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. This outcome solidifies a governance framework that seamlessly blends aggressive cultural majoritarianism with hyper-efficient welfare delivery.

THE ASSAM "SARMA MODEL" (2026)

Legal & Spatial Control
- Targeted Land Eviction Drives
- Post-NRC/CAA Citizenship Rhetoric

▼

Hyper-Targeted Social Welfare
- Orunodoi Scheme (Gendered DBTs)
- Lakhpati Baideo (Micro-credit)

▼

Electoral Result: 102 Seats
- Complete Isolation of "Miya" Bloc
- 85.96% Record Voter Turnout

The Assam trajectory highlights a different strain of secular stress, characterized by two primary features:

1. Spatial and Legal Ordering as Electoral Strategy

In the years leading up to 2026, the Assam state apparatus systematically utilized land laws and eviction drives to redefine the state's political geography. By framing these actions as the protection of indigenous (Khilonjia) lands against demographic expansion from East Bengali Muslim settlers (the "Miya" community), the state re-engineered the classic linguistic anxieties of the 1980 Assam Agitation into an explicitly religious binary. This legal majoritarianism successfully fractured the opposition Asom

Sonmilito Morcha coalition, rendering traditional secular platforms focused on unemployment and inflation secondary to concerns over cultural preservation and territorial security.

2.Welfare as a Insulator Against Ethno-Nationalism

The underlying engine of this polarization was a highly sophisticated system of state patronage. Programs like the Orunodoi scheme, which provides monthly cash transfers directly to female heads of households, alongside the Lakhpati Baideo initiative, created a durable base of beneficiaries. This economic support effectively neutralized traditional anti-incumbency sentiments and insulated the ruling party from critiques regarding its departure from constitutional secularism. By ensuring material security for the majority community while legally and rhetorically marginalizing the minority population, the state achieved an unprecedented **85.96% voter turnout**—the highest in Assam's legislative history—driven by high participation among women across diverse regions.

Comparative Analysis: Two Paths to the Post-Secular State

A comparative evaluation of Assam and West Bengal reveals that while their political trajectories differ where one experiencing a majoritarian breakthrough, the other a majoritarian consolidation both reflect a broader structural transformation of Indian secularism. From the analytical dimension it can be seen that in West Bengal it was a major breakthrough for the BJP and it's allied to come to power whereas in Assam BJP and its allies consolidated its power and form the government for 2nd consecutive term. The primary catalyst of West Bengal election was the Bureaucratic contestation the SIR voter purges & institutional security crises whereas in Assam the Spatial and Legal ordering for eviction drives, post-NRC/CAA remains a rhetoric dimension. If the welfare dynamics is put into concerned it is seen that in West Bengal Welfare Dependency is countered by deep concerns over public safety and Rule of Law whereas in Assam Welfare is used effectively to build political consensus and insulate the state from anti-incumbency. The main pivotal point of polarization in West Bengal is Sub-national cultural identity v/s pan Indian majoritarianism whereas in Assam the indigenous linguistic rights transformed into religious territorialism. In both West Bengal and Assam there is total opposition failure. In West Bengal, there was total collapse of Left Congress alternatives and also fragmentation of the Secular Vote. In Assam the ideological fragmentation within Asom Son Milito Morcha and the collapse of regional bases.

Conclusion: The Realignment of Borderland Democracy

The 2026 state assembly elections in Assam and West Bengal demonstrate that secularism in India's borderlands has entered a distinct historical phase. The historic political transition in Bengal and the deep majoritarian consolidation in Assam suggest that the traditional institutional mechanisms used to balance diverse social coalitions are undergoing a fundamental shift.

For political scientists, these developments require a conceptual update. Secularism is increasingly less effective as a broad moral appeal or an electoral shield against majoritarian politics. When political parties use state infrastructure to address deep-seated anxieties over demographic change, citizenship status, and public safety, secularism can find itself reduced to a defensive rhetorical posture. The findings from Eastern and Northeastern India suggest that the future of Indian democracy may be increasingly defined by a highly competitive political landscape, where citizenship status, regional identity, and targeted public benefits routinely overshadow traditional pluralistic principles.

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