

The Assam Elections: The Politics of Little Change

The only thing going for Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi is his longevity in electoral politics

The Needle's Eye



CHAITANYA KALBAG

Voter turnout in the first phase of Assam's election on Monday was very high. By the time polls closed it had hit 78%. Assam's voters usually turn out in large numbers, but this time the numbers bode ill for the Congress party, in power for an unbroken 15 years. Voting in the remaining 61 constituencies takes places on April 11.

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it is a make-or-break election. Of the four states and one union territory going to the polls in April and May, Assam is the only one where the BJP stands a decent chance of snatching power. The BJP is fighting for 88 of the 126 seats in the state legislature, and has given its coalition partners the remainder.

If the BJP and its allies win, it will be the first time since the 1979-85 anti-foreigner agitation that an Assam government has ruled without the support of a Muslim party.

The only thing going for Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi is his longevity in electoral politics—six terms as a member of the Lok Sabha, stretching back to 1971, and three terms as chief minister. Gogoi shrugs off allegations of corruption and inefficiency, but the state's comatose economy is testament to the do-nothingness of prolonged incumbency. The state's GDP grew by 5.87 per cent in 2013/14. About a third of the population lives below the poverty line. About 86% of Assamese live in the countryside, but the share of agriculture in the economy has fallen steadily from about 55 per cent in 1950 to about 17 per cent last year.

The 2011 Census showed that Assam was one of India's worst-off states in regard to health and sanitation. Only 54.8 per cent of households in Assam had access to drinking water within their premises, and only 10.5 per cent had tap water.

Despite this dismal track record, Gogoi maintains his hold on his Titabar bailiwick; his 35-year-old son Gaurav, a political rookie, easily won his father's old parliamentary constituency in 2014.

Gogoi's anointing of his son as the heir apparent triggered the exit of his best organiser and fund-raiser—health and education minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who was with the party since 1991 and who clearly saw his ambition for the top post thwarted.

A 47-year-old ex-lawyer, Sarma joined the BJP in August last year with nine other defectors and was quickly made the BJP's campaign chief. He started his career as a schoolboy courier for All Assam Students Union (AASU) leaders during the agitation.

Sarbananda Sonowal, youth and sports minister in Modi's cabinet, is the BJP's chief ministerial candidate. He masterminded a stunning setback for Gogoi in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections with the BJP winning seven of Assam's 14 lower house

seats. The BJP's 'vision document' promises to "(work) closely with central government to achieve complete sealing of the Indo-Bangladesh border in Assam".

The savvy 53-year-old asserts that he is serious about the honour of Assam and the expulsion of illegal immigrants. Sonowal told me at the BJP's crowded and chaotic office in Guwahati's Hengrabari area that there are more than four million Muslims who have lived in Assam for centuries. He should know his numbers—after all, he is a former president of AASU. As for deportations, which most Assam politicians doubt will ever happen, Sonowal hedges his bets. He says the Assam and Bangladesh governments will have to talk.

One sign of simmering tensions in the state was the violence that erupted

won 18 to become the state's main opposition party. In the 2014 parliamentary election the AIUDF won three of Assam's 14 Lok Sabha seats, the same as the Congress party. In fact, it is now the largest Muslim party in parliament's lower house. "If there is a hung assembly, we will be a decisive force," says Aditya Langthasa, the working president of the AIUDF.

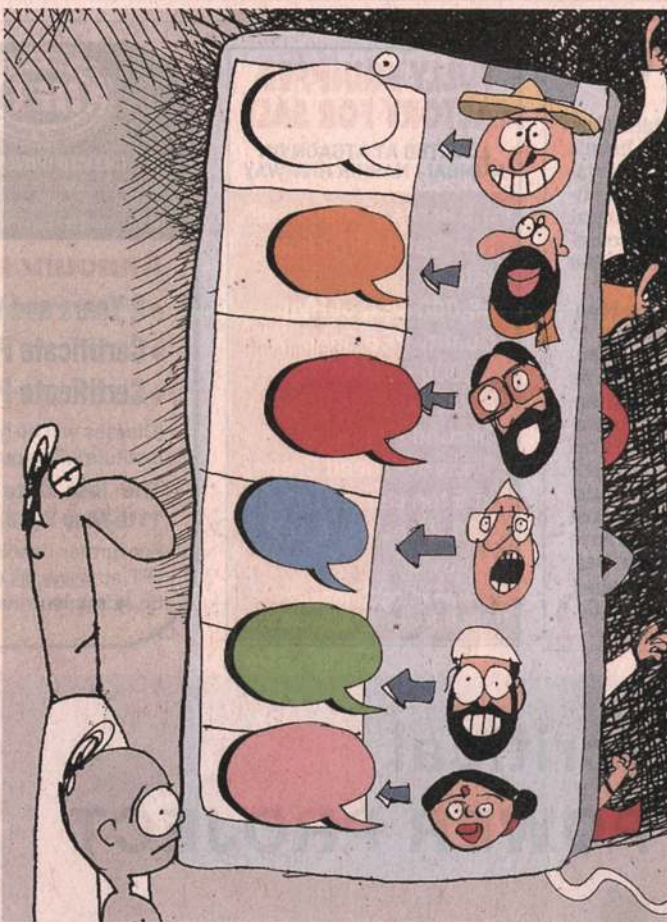
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HIGH TURNOUT



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ANIRBAN BORA

NOT SERIOUS PLAYER



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on Monday in Majuli, the huge river island constituency where Sonowal is standing. Dominated by the Mishing tribe and home to some of Assam's most sacred Vaishnavite 'chatras', the shrinking island is criss-crossed by deep ethnic animosities.

Assam's most influential Muslim party is just 11 years old, but so confident that it is fielding 67 candidates. Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, 66, a cleric, founded the AIUDF in 2005 after the Supreme Court struck down the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983. The court said the act, which was applicable only in Assam, was unconstitutional.

In the 2006 state election the AIUDF won 10 seats; in the 2011 election it

ble perfumery empire based in Mumbai and Dubai, owns huge Agar tree plantations in and around the town of Hojai. Alongside his businesses, Ajmal's political dynasty is also expanding, with his brother and two of his sons turning lawmakers.

The AIUDF's rise was inevitable. Nine of the state's 27 districts are now Muslim-majority. In the 2011 Census, Assam had India's second-highest percentage (34.22, up from 30.9 per cent in 2001) of Muslims after Jammu and Kashmir.

So desperate has been the quest for power by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)—the state's most indigenous party—that it has agreed to be a junior partner to the BJP; it was allocated 24 seats.

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the 63-year-old former president of AASU, was the youngest chief minister in Assam's 70-year history. The thorny issue of illegal immigrants was not resolved during his two terms (1985-89 and 1996-2001).

The AGP is also upset by an extraordinary order issued by the Modi gov-

ernment on September 8, 2015 that amended passport rules to read that all non-Muslim minorities in Bangladesh, if they claimed they were persecuted, would be granted Indian citizenship, no questions asked. This was a U-turn by Modi, who had vowed during his 2014 election campaign to throw all infiltrators out of Assam.

Mahanta is clearly unhappy about his party's poll alliance with the BJP. "It was a decision of the party," he told me at his quarters in the Old MLAs Hostel in the Dispur legislative complex. "We want that the Assam Accord should be implemented in letter and spirit," says the man who signed the accord in 1985. He argues that if Modi adopts a different policy, he should rehabilitate the migrants outside Assam. "Otherwise local Assamese people will become a minority in Assam."

Bangladesh's Hindu minority totalled 20 million in 2013, and they could all seek asylum in India under the new citizenship rules. Mahanta asks how Assam can bear that burden. "Certainly I am disappointed... (Modi) swore he would not give an inch of Indian land to Bangladesh. Now he has also given away land to Bangladesh."

Still, Mahanta feels it was important for opposition parties like the BJP and the AGP to come together to topple Congress.

Assam's poverty and ethnic and religious schisms have not benefited the Communists. In 1978, just before the anti-foreigner agitation erupted, the Left parties together won 28 seats in the state assembly. They have never tasted such success since. Although the Left parties have put up 59 candidates this election, their leaders are not brimming with confidence.

In 2001 the Left did not win a single seat; in 2006 they won just two; and in 2011 they went back to zero. Their cadres came under fierce attack when the Bodo tribals launched their own protests in 1979 (the Bodoland People's Front is now an electoral ally of the BJP and the AGP).

Isfaque Rahman, a senior member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) state secretariat, meets me at the deserted Hedayetpur office where a forlorn sign reads "There is no alternative to socialism". He says identity politics and ethnic divisions have made things difficult for the communists. Even in the tea gardens, which used to once be strongholds, trade unions have dwindled from 59 to 25. The CPI(M) has only 119 full-time workers in all of Assam.

"It is very difficult to attract the younger generation," Rahman tells me as he lights up another cigarette. The senior leader complains good-naturedly that he himself has to get by on a monthly stipend of just Rs 5,000.

Rahman is still better off than the homeless in Guwahati. Walking the crowded and ramshackle streets of the state capital, stepping carefully over cement planks covering open and stinking sewers, I recall a shocking statement from the Guwahati city boss and chairman of the Housing Board. Dwijen Sarma, a Gogoi man who was refused a ticket for the election, boasted that his picture was everywhere in Guwahati. What achievement was he proudest of? "I have put up roofs at bus-stands so that the homeless can sleep somewhere at night".

It was time to look elsewhere for clues to Assam's future.