

Understanding the Election in Assam (Part 2)

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Introduction

According to the 2011 Census, Muslims comprise 34 percent of Assam's population, the highest proportion of any state in India outside of Kashmir. Understandably, this has led to fears of communal violence taking root in a state that has been habitually plagued by social discord. From the standpoint of electoral politics, many view the Muslims as a large “vote bank” that has the power to act as a kingmaker in Assam's elections.

In order to understand the political dynamics of the Muslim population, we traveled to Lower Assam. Muslims comprise at least 50 percent of the population in seven of the thirteen districts in this region (the two other districts that reach this bar are in Barak Valley, which we discussed in our first piece). Practically, this means that the Muslim population is heavily concentrated in Lower Assam, and constituency-level politics is plausibly defined by the preferences of the Muslim population.

We quickly learned that the political preferences of Muslims in the region defy any simple characterization. Our travels led us to a village deep into a reserve forest area, the sort of illegal settlement that can only exist with political accommodation. We struck up a conversation at the village tea shop with a few young Muslim men. One quickly took control of the conversation; he was clearly a *neta*.



Although the young *neta* had been with the largely Muslim party All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), he declared, “Yesterday we met the ACP (Asom Gana Parishad) and we have reached an understanding.” The ACP is in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), not exactly where one would expect Muslims to cast their votes. When we asked him to explain his choice, he simply said, “We have to stay here, we need to be on the winning side.” The implication was clear; the villagers, following this *neta*, would vote for whom they perceived to be the likely winner for continued political accommodation.

This may be a special case, as one wouldn't expect a large share of Muslims to vote along with the BJP's coalition, but our travels uncovered a few more “special cases.” Apart from strategic voting incentives, the Muslims in Assam are divided by region, language, and, of course, patterns of religious practice. This is to say nothing of competing political appeals from the Congress and AIUDF.

We soon laid to rest the idea of a well-coordinated Muslim vote bank that effectively decides who wins the election in Assam. Nonetheless, the notion of such a Muslim vote bank has produced a powerful and pernicious narrative that fosters religious

polarization within the state. In the remainder of this piece, we use the lens of Lower Assam to unpack the complex contours of the Muslim vote in Assam.

The Myth of the Muslim Vote Bank

In Hajo constituency, we stopped for snacks in the marketplace of a Muslim village to get out of the hot afternoon sun. A pair of traders in their early 30s greeted us, both well-traveled within Assam and, while Bengali-speaking, equally conversant in Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese. The first man who owns a fishery, declared his support for the BJP, which he believed would help ease of his business in particular and develop the state in general. The second man, an AIUDF member, would strategically vote for Congress this time to try to halt the rise of BJP in his constituency. We asked if, as a Muslim man, he was afraid of BJP's ascent. He looked at us dismissively, remarking, "No. What are they going to do? I have my documents."



The *documents* the man refers to are those that demonstrate that he is a citizen of Assam (and India). Assam adheres to a peculiar arrangement, in which individuals must demonstrate that their ancestors were living in Assam by 1971 in order to be placed on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to obtain "citizenship" within the state. These requirements have predictably given rise to a covert industry of producing necessary documents if no such documents exist.

These rights to citizenship are the number one issue for the large Bengali-speaking population in Assam, but this is not a Muslim-specific issue. The Sylheti population of Muslims, found primarily in Barak Valley, has been in Assam for generations, and the large wave of Muslim migration that took place from Mymensingh District in present-day Bangladesh started in the early 20th century. The influx of Bangladeshis that came to Assam after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 was comprised of Hindus and Muslims alike.

Therein lies the practical problem for consolidating a Muslim vote bank. The phrase vote bank, which has become common parlance in discussions of Indian electoral politics, was coined by eminent sociologist M.N. Srinivas. It refers to a population, usually a caste or religious identity group, that trades its votes wholesale for patronage from a political candidate or party. But there is no issue, as such, which unites all Muslims in Assam and can serve as the basis for such patronage. Most salient issues in Assam, whether land rights or citizenship, cut across religious boundaries in complex ways.

M.N. Srinivas wrote about vote bank politics when a single party (Congress) essentially ruled the entire country. Much has changed since then. Parties and coalitions must stitch together a plausible collection of ethnic, caste, and religious groups to win an election.

But, unlike the era of vote bank politics, there is competition for each of these social groups. For instance, the well-entrenched Bodoland People's Front (BPF) has recently allied with the BJP to bring Bodos into BJP's political coalition; even then, newcomer United People's Party (UPP) is also contesting this election trying to win over Bodos. This holds true with Assam's Muslims to a much greater extent, with Congress and AIUDF aggressively vying for their sympathies. The upshot is that most social groups are no longer beholden to a single party, and this has led to a "split" of erstwhile vote banks as the population negotiates between competing appeals.

The AIUDF: An Emerging Political Force?

As we made our way through the green landscape of the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), we came across a series of small tin houses. A close look at these houses revealed signs which read, "Donated by the Ajmal Foundation." The houses, we are told, were built in the aftermath of the violent episode in 2012 in which many villages were burnt to the ground. Across Bodoland, structures like these and institutions like schools and vocational training centers are managed by the Foundation, chief of which is Badruddin Ajmal. Referred to as "*Huzoor*" (Sir) out of respect, Ajmal dons many hats – owner of a flourishing perfume and real estate business, a religious leader and most importantly, the head of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). The AIUDF first contested in the 2006 state election, winning 9 seats, after which it won 18 seats in the 2011 state election to become the principal opposition party to the Congress. The party won three of the ten parliamentary constituencies it contested in 2014, winning as many constituencies as the Congress. The AIUDF has made strong inroads into the Muslim community, eating away at Congress' vote share.



Yet, the party remains controversial, even among the Muslim population. A Muslim shopkeeper in Dudhnoi constituency was direct, "The AIUDF is bad for Muslims. If they come to power, there will be (communal) violence." Those troubled by the AIUDF see a party that is exploiting vulnerable Muslim migrants who fear expulsion from the state in order to gain power. In doing so, there is a fear that a wedge is being driven between Hindu and Muslim populations.

Others view the AIUDF as a critical alternative voice which has the capacity to change the state of affairs if it gets power. The party sells itself as a defender of the vulnerable, not just Muslims, in direct opposition to the Assamese-speaking population, and it espouses an explicitly numerical/electoral rationale. Their website notes, “The Muslims and Hindus of Bengal origin as well as the Koch Rajbangshis and Garos were branded as the illegal Bangladeshi mostly in the Brahmaputra valley irrespective of their nationality and contribution to the nation building. These communities consist of more than half of the total population...” Indeed, the party in these elections gave tickets to people across religious groups, a fact Ajmal repeats at various forums and also in briefings with journalists.

The AIUDF has cropped up all across former and current Congress strongholds. We stopped to chat roadside with some AIUDF activists in a village. Pointing to a village on the opposite side of the road, they complained about how the local strongman, an MLA from Congress, managed to get an electricity line to his village but didn't extend it further. “If the party [AIUDF] comes to power, our village benefits,” remarked one party member as others in the tea shop (doubling as a party office) nodded their heads in agreement. A well-dressed, eloquent young man described the poor economic conditions of the village in detail. “The people also have to benefit,” he concluded.

“He is a contractor, he will benefit,” responded a man sitting on the floor, as the others started laughing. Our travels suggested that this class of small-time businessmen and contractors, who aspire to be local elites but many of whom have been excluded from the existing Congress system structure, make up much of the AIUDF's party structure. They see the further emergence of the party as a profitable proposition.

The AIUDF seems to do well among the most vulnerable segments of Muslim population, particularly recent immigrants from Bangladesh, whose preferences are often shaped by risk and fear. At a construction site in Barpeta, a laborer tells us, “Congress betrayed us and made many of us ‘D’ voters, so we will vote for AIUDF.” A ‘D Voter’ or “Doubtful Voter” is one who has been declared a foreigner (or has a pending case in a Foreigners Tribunal) and is thus likely to be deleted from the voter list. But now that AIUDF is a mature party, many voters have begun to evaluate the party on its recent performance. At the same construction site, another laborer offers, “*Madrassa toh banaya par kaam nahin kiya* (He did make a madrassa, but didn't do any [development] work). We will shift to the Congress this time.”

In many places, we hear that the AIUDF has lost ground to the Congress among Muslims. Some of this has to do with poor performance of their legislators, and some has to do with strategic voting towards Congress, which most see as the only party that has a chance of halting BJP's ascent to power in Assam.

The Bodo Areas in Assam

We visited a Muslim village just outside BTAD's largest city, Kokrajhar, the region in which Assam's Bodo population has agitated for its own state. As the conversation shifted to politics, the villagers became apprehensive. “We must vote for the BPF, or *they* will come again,” one said. The others concurred. We decided to go for a walk around the village and talk to a few others. A middle-aged woman stopped us on the path and asked, “It's getting late now. Why don't you all stay at my place tonight?” This is the kind of hospitality one typically receives in villages; we politely declined the invitation. The woman's mood suddenly shifted, sheer terror in her eyes, “Then, please leave now. It's not safe here.” We paused momentarily, confused by the sudden change in attitude. Panicked, she pleaded with us, “You don't understand. It's not safe here. Please leave now.”

We had entered a village that had been decimated during a massive eruption of violence in the region between Bodos and Muslims in 2012. The violence in 2012 left around 100 people dead and 5 lakh persons displaced, the majority of which were Muslim. As is often the case, the causes of the violence involve grafting communal rhetoric (that of continued illegal Bangladeshi immigration) on to existing historical conflicts.

Scholars like Sanjib Baruah have argued that, prior to independence, the local population would abandon the claim to land after a single harvest. The British had introduced the property rights regime and encouraged permanent titling of the land. Meanwhile, people from then undivided Bengal, had settled in the region. A symbiotic relationship developed between the “settlers” and the locals as the settlers tilled land for the locals, and these settlers starting farming and sought land titles in the area. Over the years,

however, this migration increased with more settlers coming in illegally and occupying land. Communities have sparred on multiple occasions in the region, leading to serious violence. While there have been many triggers, land continues to remain central to this violence.

The land question has also shaped the politics of the region with the Bodos demanding a separate state, a demand which was partially met with the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) – an autonomous body within the state of Assam negotiated between the Bodos, Government of Assam and Government of India in 2003. In the areas controlled by the BTC, the Bodos, however, are a minority – a fact that came to light in the 2014 Parliamentary election, when an independent candidate won the election by consolidating the non-Bodo vote (which again touched off violence).

In Kokrajhar, locals proudly show us the newly built and impressive BTC Secretariat. The roads have improved in the region since the BTC came into being, a fact locals attribute to insurgent turned politician Hagrama Mohilary, the leader of the Bodoland People Front (BPF) and the head of the BTC since its creation. Land is also a prized property in a big town like Kokrajhar where investments need “pre-approval from Hagrama himself.” At times, the area feels like Hagrama’s fiefdom.



Hagrama’s BPF, though, has some competition as candidates bearing the “cup and saucer” symbol have sprung up in all of the constituencies here. This unregistered party, the United People’s Party (UPP), is understood to have the tacit support of the Congress and crucially, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), a student organization that is considered the progenitor of the Bodo movement. The party is firm on the creation of Bodoland as a separate state in the Indian union and posits itself as the true representative of the Bodo people.

Nonetheless, voters tell us, its hard to imagine anyone else in power here other than BPF, even if the non-Bodo population is growing tired of them. The BPF has allied with the BJP this time. The BJP enjoys some popularity among the non-Bodo, non-Muslim populations in region, which effectively undercuts the non-Bodo consolidation that led to an independent candidate being elected in 2014 in the area.

The Politics of Lower Assam and the Impact of Muslim Consolidation

Lower Assam, which went to the polls in the second phase of Assam's election, is comprised of 13 districts, seven parliamentary constituencies and 64 assembly constituencies, making it the biggest piece of the electoral pie in Assam. Seven of these districts display a Muslim majority, although it is difficult to discern how many assembly constituencies have Muslim majorities given that the Muslim community is highly clustered over the region.

Data provided by the Election Commission of India allows us to break down the results of the 2014 parliamentary election by assembly constituency (AC) segment. In 2014, the BJP alone won 27 AC segments, while an ascendant AIUDF captured 19 AC segments, with Congress capturing 8 AC segments. In the Bodo areas, an independent candidate captured 9 of the 10 AC segments, with the BPF winning just one. In short, despite the preponderance of Muslims in Lower Assam, the BJP still performed quite well in the region in 2014.

In these elections, the Congress eschewed an alliance with the AIUDF, while the BJP formed an alliance with AGP and BPF. This has the effect of potentially splitting the Muslim vote in Assam, but one may wonder what would have happened if the Congress and AIUDF had formed an alliance or if the Muslim community were able to coordinate on voting for one of the two parties. In order to assess what would happen in this scenario, we compared the joint vote share of the BJP and AGP against the joint vote share of Congress and AIUDF using 2014 data (leaving aside the 10 ACs that correspond to the Bodo areas where none of these parties contested).

Despite being two major parties drawing Muslim votes, a coalition between Congress and AIUDF would not have had a major electoral impact. In the 116 (non-Bodo) ACs across Assam, the BJP won 69 ACs in 2014. Even if the AIUDF and Congress had contested the election together against the BJP/AGP coalition, this BJP coalition would still have won 65 seats, with the joint coalition of Congress and AIUDF winning 51 seats. In Lower Assam, the BJP/AGP alliance would still have bagged 23 ACs even if the Congress and AIUDF contested the election together in 2014 (down slightly from the 27 the BJP won in the region).

This simple analysis yields three important lessons. First, the idea that the Muslim community is so large that it is a kingmaker in Assam is simply false. Even if the two major parties drawing Muslim votes, the Congress and AIUDF, formed a coalition, it would have little impact on electoral outcomes. Second, the BJP's coalition with AGP and BPF entered the election quite far ahead of the Congress, and the Congress had much ground to make up to win in this election. Finally, while at first blush Congress may have seemed hardheaded to avoid a coalition with AIUDF, further analysis shows that there was little electoral benefit from doing so. At the same time, given that the AIUDF is largely focused on the Muslims of Assam, a coalition between Congress and AIUDF may have had the long-term impact of weakening Congress' support among Muslims.

Concluding Thoughts

The large Muslim population has become central to any electoral understanding of Assam. Yet, as we have argued here, Muslim politics in Assam is quite complex, if not fractured. There is no consolidated Muslim vote bank, nor is it necessarily meaningful to consider such a possibility. The Muslims are still far from a kingmaker in Assam.

With the BJP a rising force in Assam, and the state's large Muslim population, many were concerned the election would take on heavy communal overtones. Yet, the BJP focused its campaign rhetoric on development outcomes, learning from its mistakes in Bihar. Here, the BJP worked more effectively with coalition partners and made state-level politicians, such as Sarbananda Sonowal and Himanta Biswa Sarma, central to the campaign instead of trying to capture the election only through the charisma of Narendra Modi.

None of this is to deny that there is significant underlying tension regarding the Muslim community in Assam. If the BJP is to come to power in Assam, it would be wise to stay away from stoking communal passions, given the state's violent past. It is precisely such violence, and a desire for stability, which ushered in the long period of Congress rule in Assam that began in 2001.