

Understanding the Election in Assam (Part 1)

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Introduction

We were warned not to take the bus from Silchar to Guwahati. Unfortunately, the train was fully booked, so we had no other option. As soon as we left the city limits of Silchar, we began to make our way through the soggy, bumpy mess that was supposedly the route to Guwahati. We could only discern that this was intended to be a road by the fact that a few other buses, trucks and cars were similarly trying to maneuver through this muddle. A fellow traveler offered, “Roads in Sikkim and Meghalaya have improved in the last five years; here we still search for a pucca road.”

Over the last few years, Assam has also seen its youth migrate out of the state in unprecedented numbers. On the Rajdhani leaving Dibrugarh, we struck up a conversation with a group of young boys heading to Guwahati for the IIT JEE, the entrance examination for the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). After some time, a downcast exam-goer said, “I won’t clear the exam and I will not be able to get a government job. I can’t pay for it.” He’ll probably have no other choice than to leave Assam for work. Throughout our travels, we met many families who have at least one son serving as a security guard somewhere in Bengaluru or a plywood factory in Kerala or Tamil Nadu.

The mainstream narrative on Assam is defined by an excessive focus on linguistic, ethnic, and religious strife, but many of the voters we met spoke of development and economic growth, not social conflict, as the key issues in this election. The incumbent Congress government has now ruled Assam for 15 years, with Tarun Gogoi at the helm. The Congress has brought peace and stability to the region, but Assam seems to be falling behind the rest of India with regard to economic development. This is the real subtext for the voters seeking “change” in this election. For the first time in a long time the Congress is being challenged in Assam.



The Political Players

Politics has a way of making strange bedfellows. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has put together a seemingly incoherent coalition of parties and leaders under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) banner to try to defeat the Congress. The Bodo People’s Front (BPF), which has ruled the Bodo tribe dominated areas of Assam for over a decade, has switched sides from the Congress to the BJP in this election. And while the BJP has a large Hindi-speaking base both inside and outside of Assam, it has joined forces with the linguistic nationalist Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which was once aggressively opposed to those same Hindi speakers. Perhaps most importantly, the charismatic and popular Himanta Biswa Sarma, until recently chief minister Tarun Gogoi’s righthand man, has left Congress to become BJP’s star campaigner.

Congress is quick to remind people of the civil unrest that once gripped Assam and has intimidated through its billboards and advertisements that the BJP is run by a bunch of outsiders to Assam that may heighten communal tensions in the state. In a state where over one-third of the inhabitants are Muslim, and social frictions are always bubbling underneath the surface, this is genuine cause for concern. Do voters take a chance on a party that is promising greener pastures but has the potential to set fire to a social tinderbox, or do voters stick with the safety of a party they know inside and out after 15 years of rule?

All of the votes have been cast now in Assam, but it will be a month before we know the election results. It's a strange period in which people can bicker about politics, but nothing they say or do can change the outcome of an election that has already been decided. The cherished Bihu festival started two days after the final vote was cast, a time of feasting when families gather together to celebrate, perfectly timed to take their minds off of the political uncertainties in Assam.

The Congress System in Assam

In 2001, the Congress came to power at a particularly tumultuous time in Assam and is widely credited with bringing a sustained period of peace and stability to the region. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the number of insurgency related deaths in Assam dropped from 758 in 2000 to just 59 in 2015 after a steady decline in violence in the intervening years. The voters of Assam duly rewarded the Congress by re-electing the party for 15 years running with Tarun Gogoi as the chief minister.

In order to bring stability to the region, the Congress has developed a party structure reminiscent of the Congress at the center in the 1950s and 1960s. This structure is characterized by accommodation and co-optation of local elites who pose a threat to Congress' rule in the state, what Rajni Kothari famously called the "Congress System." For example, in response to demands for self-governance in areas with significant Bodo populations, one of the earliest actions of Assam's Congress government was to facilitate the creation of the autonomous Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). This effectively transitioned insurgent leader Hagrama Mohilary into politics, where he continues to lead the Bodo People's Front (BPF), an ally of the Congress until this election.

Cracks in the System

Yet, the government's record on economic growth and development remains uninspiring. The most recent Economic Survey of Assam shows incomes are growing much faster in the rest of India. In 2004-2005, Assam had a per capita income of Rs. 16,782 as compared to Rs. 24,143 nationally. By 2014-2015, the gap had grown significantly; in Assam, the per capita income stood at Rs. 23,392 as compared to Rs. 39,904 nationally (in 2004-2005 prices). Assam is also suffering from high levels of unemployment. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) for 2011-2012, Assam displays an unemployment rate of 47 persons per 1000 persons in the labor force, more than double of the all-India average of 23 persons per 1000 persons in the labor force.

The Congress System in Assam began visibly showing cracks before this election. As is often the case in systems with a dominant party, these cracks emerged over matters of succession of power and divisions in its traditional base. Tarun Gogoi purportedly backed his son, Gaurav, as heir apparent instead of Himanta Biswa Sarma, who had been a key strategist for the Congress in Assam and promptly switched sides to the BJP. An angry Sarma is said to have pulled BPF away from Congress to BJP and brokered a deal between the BJP and AGP to form its peculiar catchall coalition. The distinctions between the AGP and BJP are seemingly stark. The AGP has in the past actively mobilized against Bengali and Hindi speakers (including Sarma himself), whereas Hindu Bengali and Hindi speakers form a core base for BJP in Assam.

The Congress is effectively contesting without major allies. The Muslim population, more than a third of Assam's population, has often thought to be a core vote bank for Congress. In the 2011 state election, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by industrialist-social worker-politician Badruddin Ajmal, emerged as a major political player by cutting into Congress' Muslim vote and winning 18 seats. The Congress and AIUDF were unable to form a pre-electoral coalition this time, and this will likely lead to the splitting of the Muslim voter base in a number of areas.

Barak Valley: The Persistence of the Congress System

Upon entering Silchar, the main city in Barak Valley, we noticed the script on stores, signboards, and even official notices, had changed—from Assamese to Bengali. Here, many study in Bengali medium schools and the population is clearly more comfortable conversing in Bengali than in either Assamese or Hindi. The local language is not the sort of Bengali one hears in Kolkata, but Sylheti, a dialect of Bengali associated with Sylhet district in Bangladesh, which is just on the opposite side of the Barak River.

But it would be a mistake to think these are all Bangladeshi immigrants; Barak Valley has been a Bengali-speaking region since before independence. Rather, this is the result of drawing sharp state and national boundaries in a fundamentally fuzzy linguistic terrain.

The driver who picked us up from the bus stop, and would be our driver for the entire stay in Barak Valley, quickly declared his allegiance to the BJP; a cousin brother had received a BJP ticket in a neighboring assembly constituency. Playing the role of pracharak, he would intermittently recite his chosen party's slogans to bystanders, and anyone else who would listen.

But even he admitted that the BJP had hitherto been weak in Barak Valley. The Election Commission of India (ECI) provides 2014 parliamentary election results broken down by state assembly constituency (AC). In 2014, the BJP won just 3 out of 15 AC segments in the Barak Valley, and it won just 2 out of these 15 ACs in the 2011 state election. In 2011, the Congress had bagged 12 out of the 15 ACs, but this tally came down in 2014 with the Congress winning 7 AC segments and an ascendant AIUDF winning 5 AC segments. Nonetheless, the Congress remains strong in Barak Valley, and may well gain back the ground it lost to AIUDF in 2014.

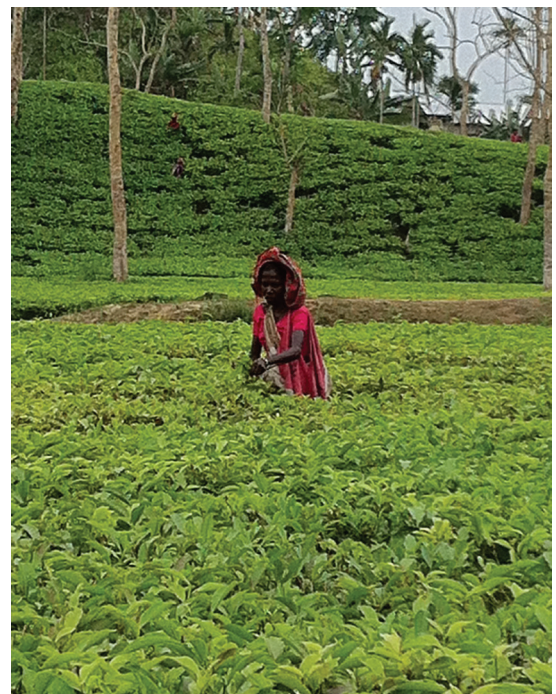
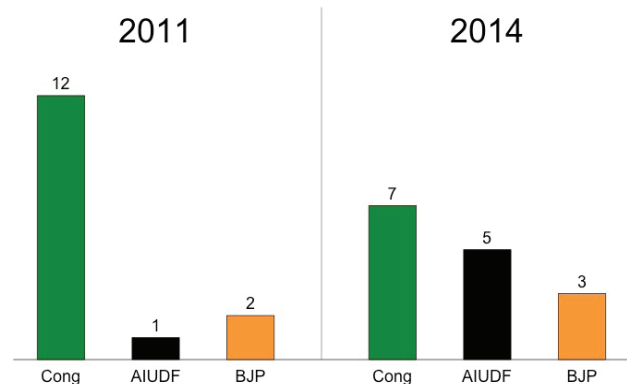
The Congress System is still intact here, characterized by entrenched political dynasties and a strong ground-level presence. Consider, for instance, the family of Gautam Roy, the current MLA from Katlicherra constituency, a position his father, the late Sontosh Kumar Roy, held as well. His wife, Mandira Roy, is the MLA from neighboring Algapur constituency, a seat his son Rahul Roy (also a former MLA) is contesting this time. Or, one may look to family of Santosh Mohan Dev, a former union minister and MP from Silchar, a position his daughter, Sushmita Dev, now holds. His father and grandfather were both well-known politicians from Silchar, and his wife, Bithika Dev, was the MLA from Silchar from 2006 to 2011 and is contesting once again.

How Voters Make Decisions

The success of political dynasties is not mere idol worship; it has much to do with the capacity of these politicians to deliver to their constituents. Congress party workers openly tell us that much of their work during the electoral campaign is “booth management” and the identification of voters who require benefits. For all of the talk of religious polarization and ethnic strife in Assam, virtually every voter we met was focused on the delivery of benefits and infrastructure. Even erstwhile BJP supporters told us that they would vote for Congress' Rahul Roy because he had used personal connections to prop up a flagging tea industry and built roads during a previous term as MLA.

The election campaign offers an opportunity for voters to calculate which party or candidate will do more for them; it is a carefully considered, strategic decision, and voters look for as much information as possible to make choices. In the tea gardens outside Silchar, we met a middle-aged woman doing the torturous work of plucking tea leaves in the hot sun. She had been forced into this work after the death of her husband due to cancer, leaving her to raise four sons from the wage of a tea worker; she told us that all the tea workers here work vote for Congress. As we looked to leave, she asked, “You are from Delhi. Can you help me?” We assumed she was asking for a job. She corrected us, “No, that's not what I mean. You are from Delhi. You know the political parties. Who should I vote for?” Our driver took this

Figure 1: Seats Won By Major Parties in 2011 and 2014 (Barak Valley)



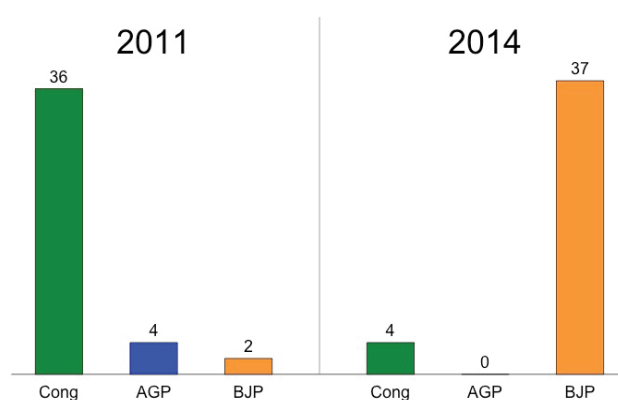
opportunity to lobby for BJP again. We told her to vote her conscience. As we left, she offered, “Congress has done work here, but what if BJP can do more? Perhaps they can end my miseries.”

We finally left Barak Valley on voting day after observing the polling process. Our driver, the exuberant BJP supporter, cast his vote and came to drop us off at the bus stand. We asked him, “So you say BJP will sweep?” He answered, “I’m not sure; I actually ended up voting for haath (Congress).” He looked at us sheepishly and said, “There was some trouble at home.” Upon further investigation, it turned out that a Congress worker had arranged for Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) benefits for his home, which was sorely in need of repairs. A portion of the funds had been electronically deposited into his account already, and he voted for Congress in turn.

Upper Assam: The Decline of Congress

In Upper Assam, one of the largest tea growing regions in the world, the ‘tea tribes’ — a term referred to those working in tea gardens—will likely be a key factor in this election. The tea tribes, most of whom were brought by the British to work in tea gardens, initially came from Jharkhand but later from Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. These tea tribes, however, identify themselves as Assamese and have lived in the region for generations. A daily wage of Rs. 126, 3 kg rice per person every fortnight for 55 paise, and 1 kg of inferior quality “labour chai” every month constitutes the pay package of a worker. “They don’t leave the tea estate ever. After the father retires, the son takes over and hence the house remains with the family,” said a tea estate supervisor, describing the limited mobility and the hardwired patronage that characterizes the life of the tea tribes.

Figure 2: Seats Won By Major Parties in 2011 and 2014 (Upper Assam)



The BJP won 69 of the 126 AC segments in Assam in 2014, and Upper Assam, where the BJP won four of the five parliamentary constituencies, provided a significant share of these victories. Upon entering Dibrugarh, we were greeted with flags, posters and vans - all bearing BJP’s lotus, suggesting that the BJP’s popularity has not waned much since 2014. In 2014, the BJP led in 37 of the 42 AC segments in this region, while the Congress led in just 4 AC segments. This was a huge shift from 2011, when BJP won just 2 of the 42 ACs with the Congress winning 36 ACs in the region (BJP ally AGP won 4 ACs in the region in 2011). As the BJP struggles to create a strong base in politically factionalized Lower Assam, a repeat of the 2014 sweep in Upper Assam would provide substantial momentum to form the next government in the state.

In 2015, the Union government decided to cover the tea tribes under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and discontinued the sale of subsidized Food Corporation of India (FCI) grains to the tea companies. It was this subsidized FCI grain which the company was selling, albeit at cheap rates to the tea workers. In 2016, the Guwahati High Court, stayed the order asking the government to continue disbursing food grains to workers by tea companies. At the same time, the NFSA was rolled out and the tea tribes started receiving more than usual ration. Doubly blessed, a tea worker on being inquired who he thought has brought this change said, “Modi sarkaar laaya hai.” In a place where mobility is limited and secession a rarity, the tea tribes seem to be happy with piecemeal promises of more goods and yearly wage revisions.

The Shift

But the move towards the BJP has been in the making for years. Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), along with unions and organizations representing tea tribes, has been active and playing a critical role in impacting electoral outcomes in the region. “It is not easy to see the RSS because they work door-to-door and mobilize workers,” said a lecturer at Dibrugarh University. “Bol Bum, a Hindu festival hitherto unheard of in Assam, is being celebrated everywhere. You cannot have a simple answer to know what is bringing that change – but here is some slow conditioning that is changing the politics here,” he added.

For decades, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) led Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh, the Congress’ frontal tea tribe workers organization, had helped the party reap electoral benefits, but with other parties also setting up their unions, its vote bank has eroded. “People have started becoming more politically aware and a few educated youth talk to the workers about their opinion on whom to vote for and why,” remarked a tea garden worker. Most of the union demands until now have been confined to immediate, short term economic benefits, but the new organizations, particularly led by educated youth like the All Assam Adivasi Students Association (AAASA) and All Assam Tea Tribe Students Association (AATTSA), are moving away from vote bank politics and rally around the larger issues concerning the tea tribe community.

In fact, many of the current BJP leaders in the region are products of these youth organizations. The declining hold of the Congress in the unions along with unfulfilled promises like the grant of land pattas and scheduled tribe (ST) status to tea tribes, has opened the door to alternatives. In the 2014 elections, the BJP catalyzed upon this yearning for an alternative, as the party’s sudden rise provided a credible alternative to the Congress. Many in Upper Assam seem ready to see BJP at the helm in Assam, to see if the BJP can indeed do more than the Congress.

Concluding Thoughts

Assam is an immensely complicated state to study. It is really a collection of regions with vastly different histories and cultures, from largely tribal areas to regions with great linguistic and religious diversity. For an analyst, making sense of all Assam’s moving parts can be daunting. It is far more challenging for political parties, which must find ways to bridge these great differences among the people of Assam and win their votes.

In our next piece, we take a closer look at Lower Assam where the parties had to deal with the extraordinary social heterogeneity, religious, linguistic, and tribal, that characterizes the region. This region provides a window into understanding how the party machines are operating on the ground, how well the coalitions are working together, and how these coalitions and parties are able to vary their appeals across regions in Assam.

In Goalpara district, we met with a middle-aged Muslim shopkeeper; he openly supports Congress and has a keen interest in politics across the state. He admits that the Congress is in for a fight and is aware of media reports that the BJP is ahead in Assam. He tells us, “The BJP is ahead right now, but the Congress always wins the battle in the last 48 hours. Congress will come out on top.” Privately, workers from both the Congress and the BJP seem nervous. This is as strong a challenge the Congress in Assam has seen in many years, but the BJP workers understand just how difficult it is to defeat the Congress System. Unfortunately, election results won’t be announced for another month. Until then, party workers can just wait, worry, and hope.