



The Congress's assets in Assam

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In Assam, the Congress has notched an impressive victory and Tarun Gogoi, like his predecessor Bimala Prasad Chaliha, is all set to become CM for the third consecutive term. The Congress secured this unambiguous verdict in spite of allegations of corruption by the opposition parties, sections of the media and civil society. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), suffered a humiliation at the hustings, as did the BJP, with several of their bigwigs, including both party chiefs, biting the dust. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) have improved their tally and the Trinamool Congress has managed to open its account by winning one seat. But the big puzzle is: how did the Congress manage to get such a massive victory? Is the troubled state really on the road to recovery?

What has worked in the Congress's favour is its focus on peace, development and identity questions. There seems a real possibility of a political solution to the vexed problem of militancy in the state. By engaging with dominant militant groups across the negotiation table and initiating a much-awaited peace process without any preconditions on the issue of sovereignty after 30 long years, the Gogoi government has won the confidence of the state's peace-loving people who have greatly suffered from the violence and insecurity generated by insurgent activities. The emergence of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) did cost the Congress a portion of immigrant Muslim votes, but the Congress regained its lost strength reasonably well by wooing Assamese-speaking Muslims and some Assamese-speaking Hindus who had earlier allied with the AGP and the BJP respectively. Thus the gains of the Congress were across all sections, making it a catch-all party in Assam.

Further, the major indices of development such as education, health, law and order, roads, electricity, drinking water, etc, indicate that the party has done better in the last five years than in its previous terms. Gogoi's image also helped his party considerably. The high rating of the chief minister as well as the satisfaction of the people on the performance of the government have translated into votes that helped the party retain its stronghold.

The AGP, once in power for two terms, meanwhile, suffers from organisational weakness and internal factionalism. Its agenda, to unite people to form a cohesive Assamese nationality, has failed to take off. The party put up a united front in this election, after a period of painful separation from its incongruous faction, the AGP (Progressive). Still, it failed to capitalise on the failure of the government to adequately address issues like floods, erosion, the impact of big dams, population growth, etc. The AGP's sole mobilisation plank revolved around the institutionalisation of corruption. But in reality, corruption did not seem to have been a big issue for the people, beyond a few urban locations. Besides, the AGP's seat adjustments did not improve its tally, as those parties are influential only in small pockets.

However, it is to be remembered that the structural reasons that produced regional parties in Assam have not totally disappeared; they may be present in some areas in a dormant state. The future of the AGP lies not in short-term political alliances to occupy a few seats in the elections but in working to fulfil that dormant political desire of hitherto unrepresented social forces to come under a large federal political umbrella.

For the Congress, it will be helpful in their own long-term interest and for the progress and prosperity of the state to focus on some of the pertinent issues raised during the election, like corruption, rising prices and shadow areas of development which, if left unattended, could snowball into major irritants in the future.

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