

## Saffron Surge in Assam

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Assam was among the few States where the Congress party had been confident about pulling off a good performance based on Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's performance and the fact that the party had retained its alliance with the Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) which had proved successful in the 2009 Lok Sabha and the 2011 Assembly elections. The other main parties in the state, namely the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) contested the 2014 election on their own. However when the final results came, it turned out to be an embarrassing loss for the Congress and Gogoi himself.

### The Verdict

The state which recorded a massive voter turnout of 80 percent, an eleven percentage point jump since 2009, threw up a big surprise. The BJP finished on top winning half of the state's 14 Lok Sabha seats, its highest ever tally in the state (*Table 1*). In terms of changeover from 2009 when it had contested in alliance with the AGP, it was a gain of three seats for the BJP. The party also notched up an impressive vote-share of 36.5 percent (up by over 20 percentage points since 2009). The Congress with a vote-share of 29.6 percent (down by 5 percentage points from 2009) managed to win only 3 of the 13 seats which it had contested. Its ally the BPF lost the only seat it had won in 2009. The other gainer, apart from the BJP, was AIUDF, which retained its hold over the state's heavily Muslim-dominated areas winning three seats, an addition of two since 2009. The party managed to secure 15 percent votes, down marginally by one percentage point. The AGP could not win on any of the twelve seats that it contested and polled merely 3.8 percent of the total vote.

Table 1  
Assam Lok Sabha Election Results 2014

Party	Seats contested	Seats won	Seat change since 2009	Vote (%)	Vote change since 2009 (percentage points)
Congress	13	3	-4	29.61	-5.27
BPF	2	0	-1	2.19	-3.22
BJP	13	7	3	36.51	+20.30
AUDF	10	3	2	14.83	-1.27
AGP	12	0	-1	3.83	-10.77
Others	126	1	1	13.03	+0.23

Source: ECI data compiled by CSDS Data Unit

### What Actually Happened?

Dissidence and infighting within the state unit of the ruling Congress, which enjoys overwhelming majority in the state legislature and had performed splendidly in the Panchayat and Municipal polls held a year earlier, took its toll and contributed heavily to the party's defeats. Its main losses were in the Brahmaputra valley where it won just one seat (Koliabor, won by the CM's son, a political newcomer) and lost four of the seats that it had won in 2009, three of them (Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Jorhat) to BJP and one (Barpeta) to AIUDF. In the Bengali-speaking Barak valley the Congress wrested one seat (Silchar) from the BJP but lost its other seat (Karimganj) to AIUDF (*Table 2*). The partial erosion of Congress's hold over its traditional bastions, i.e. the Muslims and tea workers, impacted the poll outcome. While the party's support among Assamese Muslims remained largely intact, the division of Bengali Muslim votes between the Congress and AIUDF contributed to losses for Congress and gains for both BJP and AIUDF (*See Table 3*). Among the hill tribes, the Congress mustered strength through the support of its local units for their demand for statehood and retained the lone seat in the tribal hill areas. The Congress' alliance with the Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF), a party seen as patronising tribal militants in their bloody anti-non-tribal campaigns, seemingly irked Muslim voters

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who had been targeted by the militants; the Congress-BPF alliance broke down after the polls.

The AIUDF, by giving voice to their grievances, became the preferred choice for the Bengali-speaking Muslims in Lower Assam; it secured an equal number of seats as the Congress with just half the vote-share as the Congress, indicating the concentrated nature of its support base limited to a few constituencies in both valleys of the state. Its founder-President and his brother emerged victorious in the Lower Assam constituencies of Dhubri and Barpeta respectively, the other seat for the party coming from the Barak valley. A surprise element was the victory of an independent candidate, a tribal ex-ULFA cadre claiming support of the non-tribal population in the trouble-torn Kokrajhar (ST) constituency, wresting the seat from the BPF representing the Bodo tribals in the backdrop of severe communal (Bodo versus non-Bodo) tensions. Here Bodo militants unleashed massive post-poll anti-Muslim violence seemingly in retaliation to their support for the non-Bodo candidate (Hindustan Times). As per the NES-2014 (Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study) survey, 15 percent of the Muslim votes went to 'others' (candidates not belonging to the four main parties); presumably, a large chunk of these went to the winning candidate in Kokrajhar. The events indicate the state's blunder in creating the Bodoland Territorial Council in areas inhabited mostly by non-Bodos and subsequently tolerating the surge of militancy.

The BJP attracted mainly the Hindu votes including those of the Assamese Hindus who had once constituted the AGP's backbone, through its consistent stand against Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants. Its gains were in the Brahmaputra valley, retaining its 3 seats and wresting 4 more, while losing its lone Barak valley seat to the Congress. The tea workers constituting a major chunk of population in Upper Assam decisively ensured BJP's win in Dibrugarh and Jorhat where the party put up candidates belonging to the tea worker community that had traditionally backed the Congress. The leadership crisis in AGP (which had twice assumed power in the state but had been on a decline since 2001) led to a shift of its traditional voters towards the BJP. The regional party failed to stem the demoralisation and

Table 2  
Assam Lok Sabha Elections 2014 - Region Wise Outcome

Regions	Total Seats	Turnout (percent)	Congress-BPF		BJP		AGP		AIUDF		Others		NOTA Vote %
			Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	
Barak Valley	3	76.2	2	34.8	0	33.7	0	0.6	1	20.1	0	9.9	0.9
Lower Assam	5	82.6	0	28.8	2	29.1	0	3.6	2	18.3	1	19.5	0.7
Upper Assam	6	79.0	1	33.9	5	45.2	0	5.2	0	9.3	0	5.1	1.3
Total	14	80.1	3	31.8	7	36.5	0	3.8	3	14.8	1	12.1	1.0

Source: ECI data compiled by CSDS Data Unit

subsequent exodus of its cadres towards the BJP in the run-up to the polls; its lacklustre campaign and intra-party squabbles sealed its fate. Most of the top state BJP leaders are ex-stalwarts of the AGP which also worked in the BJP's favour.

### Was Religion a Factor?

Victories for AIUDF and BJP do point to a polarisation of votes along religious lines. The survey reveals a clear Hindu consolidation, with 63 per cent of the Assamese speaking Hindus and 62 per cent of the Bengali speaking Hindus voting for the BJP (Table 3). In the 2011 Assembly polls, 42 percent of Bengali speaking Hindus and only 10 percent of the Assamese Hindus had voted for BJP as per a CSDS Post Poll survey. The NES 2009 survey shows that 23 percent of the Assamese speaking Hindus and 25 percent of the Bengali speaking Hindus had voted for the BJP in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls. The 2014 figures thus show a huge jump of 40 percentage points and 37 percent percentage points respectively since 2009. Given the high turnouts across the state, this may have impacted the outcome this time. Another reason for this Hindu consolidation could well be Narendra Modi's popularity in the state. As per the NES survey, 25 percent of the respondents wanted to see Modi as the prime minister of the country as opposed to 17 percent who wanted to Rahul Gandhi to be India's PM. Moreover, Modi had campaigned extensively in the state in the run up to the elections and had specifically raised the issue of migrants from Bangladesh, drawing a distinction between those who he said were being brought for 'vote bank' politics, and the Hindu migrants who he said were being harassed in the neighbouring country and hence needed to be accommodated (Times of India). On the other side of the religious divide, the Muslims, who are 31 per cent of Assam's population, did not vote for the Congress with the same intensity as the Hindus voted for the BJP. The survey shows that 42 per cent Muslims voted for the Congress and 39 per cent for the AIUDF. Although this was an improvement for the Congress when compared with 2009, it was still nowhere close to the Hindu consolidation behind the BJP. If we look at the voting preference of Bengali Muslims specifically, the AIUDF was ahead of the Congress receiving 45

Table 3  
Voting preference of Hindus and Muslims by language, 2009 Lok Sabha, 2011 Assembly and 2014 Lok Sabha Elections

	Vote for Cong (%)		Vote for BJP (%)			Vote for AIUDF (%)			
	2009	2011	2014	2009	2011	2014	2009	2011	2014
Assamese-speaking Hindus	30	38	19	23	10	63	1	1	Neg.
Bengali-speaking Hindus	45	31	27	25	42	62	2	6	Neg.
Assamese-speaking Muslims	75	59	69	9	4	4	6	15	17
Bengali-speaking Muslims	21	32	36	Neg.	1	3	78	54	45

Note: The rest of the respondents voted for other parties; Note: Data weighted by actual vote share secured of parties in each election. Neg. means Negligible.

Source: National Election Study 2014 conducted by CSDS in Assam; Sample size: 716; Post Poll Study 2011 conducted by CSDS in Assam; Sample size 3,348; National Election Study 2009 conducted by CSDS in Assam; Sample size: 1402.

Table 4  
Muslim Concentrated Seat Wise Analysis – Performance of Parties and Alliances, 2014

Muslim population	Total Seats	Turnout %	Congress+BPF		BJP		AGP		AIUDF		Others		NOTA Vote %
			Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	Seats Won	Vote %	
Less than 10%	2	77.8	0	32.5	2	50.6	0	5.8	0	1.8	0	7.9	1.3
10-19.9%	2	80.0	0	27.7	1	21.2	0	2.2	0	0.3	1	47.1	1.5
20-39.9%	6	80.2	2	33.7	3	38.5	0	4.9	1	17.3	0	5.0	0.7
40% and above	2	83.0	0	26.1	0	24.8	0	0.7	2	42.3	0	5.6	0.4
No information	2	78.5	1	36.4	1	47.7	0	3.2	0	0.0	0	10.8	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>80.1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>36.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>1.0</b>

Note : The classification of constituencies by religious groups is based on Census 2001 and description of constituency boundary provided by the Delimitation Commission. However, it may be noted that census does not provide information on religion below Tehsil/Taluka/Block level and that a constituency often cuts across these administrative units. So, in order to arrive at constituency level estimates of religious groups, the "principle of proportionality" was used to aggregate and disaggregate population below these administrative units.

per cent of the Bengali Muslim vote (down from 78 percent in 2009) whereas the Congress netted 36 per cent (up from 21 percent in 2009). A consolidated Hindu vote and a divided Muslim vote could be one of the key reasons for the BJP's victories in constituencies with substantial Muslim populations, like Nagaon. Nagaon is significant because despite all its nine assembly constituencies being represented by other parties including Congress, AIUDF and AGP, the BJP has been able to retain the Lok Sabha seat since 1999. Overall out of the six Lok Sabha seats with a Muslim population in the range of 20 to 40 percent, the BJP won three and AIUDF one. There are two seats – Karimganj and Dhubri - where Muslims constitute over 40 percent of the total population and both were won by the AIUDF (Table 4).

The NES 2014 survey reveals that limited literacy/educational levels, and lack of media access of large sections of population implied that the impact of political mobilisation through internet/SMS was minimal (less than 7 percent), while local channels of TV and radio, and local newspapers may have influenced only up to 40 percent of voters. In such a situation, political mobilisation through public meetings as well as through informal channels including social and religious gatherings makes a considerable impact. Local religious leaders may have effectively mobilised mass support for the AIUDF led by Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, himself a distinguished religious cleric as well as business magnate: his party, founded in 2005, draws strength from the fear of persecution and deportation among migrant Muslims settled in central and western Assam. The AIUDF and the BJP, with opposing political and ideological positions cater to different communities and their support bases do not overlap: religious polarisation thus works in favour of both, though such polarisation may not hold for long in the backdrop of linguistic and ethnic tensions.

### Future Prospects

In Assam's diverse society, parties both national (such as Congress) and regional (such as AGP) having support bases cutting across ethnic/religious cleavages could have had a good chance of garnering widespread support.

However, severe organisational and leadership problems led to losses for Congress and a complete rout for the AGP. Any rejuvenation of Congress or AGP may lead to changes in the state's political scenario in the near future, with by-polls for three Assembly seats due on September 13 this year, and state Assembly polls due within a couple of years. In the aftermath of the polls, the Congress leadership has acted against key dissidents who have been removed from the state ministry. However, as stated before, the crisis for Congress stems from the erosion of its two traditional ethnic/religious support bases: the migrant section of Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley, and the non-Christian section of tea workers. The Congress is wary of making open attempts to win back the Brahmaputra valley's migrant Muslims or to forge an alliance with AIUDF as that might invite a Hindu backlash in favour of BJP.

Politics in Assam since the 1980s has been dominated by issues of illegal migration, militancy and tribal separatism. The AGP which rode to power in 1985 on Assamese anti-migrant sentiments developed into a broad-based party with strong local units by the mid-1990s enabling its return to power in 1996. Its rapid decline from the late 1990s onwards was more due to a leadership crisis at the top than at the local level. Till 2011, AGP was the main opposition party in the state Assembly, and going by the results of the 2009 LS polls and 2011 Assembly polls, was expected to garner at least 10 percent of votes this time and to be able to take a good chunk of Hindu votes away from the BJP, lessening impact of the Modi wave in the Brahmaputra valley. This did not happen. The AGP leadership remained inert and simply appears to have crumbled in the face of the BJP's vociferous campaign; BARPETA was the only constituency where AGP had any impact at all on the results. In terms of issues, the main issue for AGP and the BJP in Assam had always been the same, that of illegal migrants, with one important difference: while the AGP was against all illegal migrants irrespective of religion, the BJP targeted only the Muslim migrants. Rather than issues it was organisation and leadership which made all the difference for the two parties this time, with BJP getting ten times more votes than the AGP.

The AGP's feeble attempts to revitalize itself appear to be ineffective. The flow of AGP leaders towards the BJP had started way back in the 1990s, but the trickle turned into a stream after Modi's elevation as the PM candidate. In the 2011 Assembly polls both AGP and BJP got an equal number of seats (5 each in a House of 126) while the AIUDF won 18 seats and became the main opposition party in the state. While the scope for AIUDF to increase its strength in the Assembly seems to be limited because of its inability to expand beyond its ethnic-religious support base, the BJP is expected to perform far better while the AGP seems poised to be further eliminated from the state's political scene.

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