

BJP's gains in Bengal, Assam

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In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved unprecedented success in West Bengal and Assam. In Bengal, BJP's tally went up from two to 18, while its vote share surged from 17.01% in 2014 to 40.25% in 2019.

In Assam, BJP's tally rose from seven to nine seats by defying the expectation that the process of National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the dissent against the proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB - allotting citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries) would dent BJP's electoral prospects. A close analysis of the electoral result in Bengal and Assam indicates that the open lobbying of citizenship for the Hindu refugees by BJP through proposed CAB, has found resonance in the eastern borderland.

The citizenship status of a large number of Hindus, primarily belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, such as Matuas, have remained unresolved over the years as they migrated from Bangladesh over time. The BJP performed remarkably in the border districts of South Bengal and the Barak Valley in Assam, both regions hosting significant population who stand to be affected by NRC, but gain from the CAB.

In Bengal, BJP wrested the Ranaghat and Bangaon seats from Trinamul Congress (TMC), both seats having a significant number of Matua voters. In Assam, BJP wrested two seats in the Bengali dominated Barak Valley - Silchar from Congress and Karimganj from All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF).

Significantly, when the Assamese-dominated Brahmaputra Valley was rocked with protests against the CAB, Barak Valley had largely supported the CAB as it stood to benefit a large section of the Hindus who had migrated to Assam from Bangladesh in the past and faced issues over citizenship, such as being tagged as D-Voter, imprisonment in detention camps after being adjudged as foreigner by the Foreigner Tribunal of India.

Muslims also face similar harassment, while both the Hindus and Muslims from the Bengali community have been largely excluded from the latest draft of NRC.

However, the volatile trajectory of ethnic politics in Assam has splintered the Bengali community by religion long back, resulting in different organisations proliferating in Assam for respective religions under the pretext of upholding Bengali concerns and interests.

In Bengal, all the seats with sizeable Muslim votes, paraded the TMC candidates to victory, except the two seats of Bahrapore and Maldaha where Congress retained their traditional belt, albeit with diminished margins.

Similarly, in Assam, Muslim-dominated seats like Dhubri, Barpeta and Nagaon went to AIUDF and Congress. If NRC managed to create an ethnolinguistic fault line in Assam, CAB deepened it further by adding the quotient of religion.

The protest against the CAB was led by several Assamese organisations, with All Assam Students' Union (Aasu) being the prominent one. Ironically, the language of protest, including wall posters, against an allegedly communal bill exhibited ethnic prejudice against alleged Bangladeshis and in particular Hindu Bangladeshis, who are anticipated to migrate to Assam, according to the organisations.

While the Bengali Hindus in Assam with strong East-Bengali roots and memories, didn't openly respond to such insinuating language used in the anti-CAB protests, the election result shows that they overwhelmingly voted for BJP across Assam as CAB would put a rest to their citizenship issues, and it would also weaken the Assamese hegemony in Assam considerably.

Securing the Bengali Hindu votes, the BJP managed to prevent any ethnic polarisation against itself by the Assamese speaking electorate, by re-allying with Assam Gono Parishad (AGP), a regional party formed to address the Assamese sub-nationalistic concerns.

The AGP had registered meek protest against CAB earlier and resigned from the Assam state cabinet. The separation was short-lived as CAB was not placed in Rajya Sabha and therefore not passed.

This provided the AGP with a much-needed excuse to realign with BJP, which was necessary for its survival as AGP has performed dismally since the 2011 assembly election. Therefore, the few segments of the Assamese society which vehemently opposed the CAB were left with practically no electoral choice, except the weakened Congress and AIUDF.

Significantly and paradoxically, at the crescendo of the anti-CAB protests, which was carried out in the name of securing the interests of the indigenous groups in Assam, BJP and its allies were sweeping the polls in the tribal autonomous councils across Assam, beginning from the Rabha Autonomous Council in Lower Assam to the Mising Autonomous Council in Upper Assam.

The Lok Sabha result further consolidated BJP's position and effectively drove home the point that electorally, the Assamese sub-nationalistic concern and aspiration has become insignificant.

The swelling of support for BJP in Assam and Bengal is likely to embolden its stance on NRC in Bengal and CAB. In Bengal, TMC is yet to have a clear understanding of NRC and CAB, and this has clearly not gone in its favour in the border districts.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, since coming to power, has been particularly attentive to the welfare of the Matuas regularly visiting the late Binapani Devi, the matriarch of the Matua community, while nominating members of Devi's family, for Lok Sabha and Assembly elections.

But the BJP has successfully made massive inroads with the promise of citizenship. The exclusion of Muslims in CAB will not allow TMC and other anti-BJP parties to openly lobby for CAB, neither can they protest against it vehemently, as the number of beneficiaries is significant.

Therefore, unless there is a clear stance on the question of citizenship, with an alternative in case of opposition with BJP's parameters of Indian citizenship, BJP is likely to go ahead with its mandate which would lead to a new regime of citizenship.

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