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## **FORMATION, GROWTH AND BREAKDOWN OF IMMIGRANT VOTE BANKS OF CONGRESS IN ASSAM**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to understand how immigrant vote banks were formed in Assam, a state from India's northeast, after independence, and eventually how these vote banks disappeared, in a region which has remained peculiar from other states of the country because of its complex immigration problem. Becoming the sole ruling political party after independence, Congress owned these vote banks which started to disintegrate after Assam witnesses an anti-immigration agitation between 1979 and 1985 and by the 2016 Assam assembly elections, the party had lost its entire immigrant vote banks. This paper argues that growing communalism in the politics of Assam is the dominant cause of the breakdown of the immigrant vote banks. It mainly analyses the political developments in Assam surrounding the immigrant vote banks based on official election data.*

**Keywords:** *AIUDF, Assam Accord, BJP, Congress, Jamiat, vote bank.*

## Introduction

Assam witnessed huge immigration during British rule, mainly under the patronage of the government, for fulfilling the need of colonial economy and administration. The independence even could not stop the immigration to Assam, now from neighbouring countries. Because of this, the central government has been giving special treatment to the state concerning illegal immigration. In 1950, just after three years of independence, Indian parliament enacted the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act. In 1962, the central government adopted the scheme of Prevention of Infiltration into India of Pakistani Nationals (PIP) which covered Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Again, in 1964, it formed the foreigners' tribunals in Assam for fair identification and deportation of illegal foreigners. In 1983, the IM(DT) Act was imposed on Assam which remained operational in the state till 2005. During 1983–2005 while the rest of the country followed the Foreigners Act, 1946, Assam followed the IM(DT) Act. Finally, the central government fixed a separate cut-off date for Assam to identify and deport illegal foreigners from the state. Under the provisions of the Assam Accord (1985), the cut-off date for the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners in Assam is fixed as 25 March 1971 whereas the cut-off date for the rest of the country is 26 January 1951. It should be noted that the Assam Accord made all the people who illegally entered Assam from neighbouring countries until 24 March 1971 legal citizens of India. All these explain the peculiarity of the illegal immigration problem in Assam from the other states of India. These also signal that the state has a significant population who are recently immigrated.

Assam is the most populous state of northeast India, comprising 31.2 million inhabitants (2011 Census). During almost seven decades since independence till the 2016 Assam assembly elections, the Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress) ruled the state for most of the time, barring 12 years (1978–1980, 1985–1990 and 1996–2001). It is believed that this has become possible for the party because of its vote banks among three recently immigrated communities of the

state – the Muslims, the Hindu Bengalis and the tea community. Even some prominent Congress leaders openly identify these communities as vote banks of the party. Dev Kanta Barooah, the Congress stalwart from Assam who became the national president of the party (1975–1977), used to say publicly that so long as *Alis* (Muslim immigrants), *coolies* (tea labourers) and Bengalis (Hindu refugees) were with the Congress party, it did not care for anybody (Gokhale and Kashyap, 2004: 32).

For different reasons, Congress formed strong political alliances with the Muslims, tea community and the Hindu Bengalis (hereafter Bengalis) after independence. As a result, these communities became a support base of the party. When Assam witnessed a six years long anti-immigration agitation (known as the Assam Movement) during 1979–1985, these communities, stood behind Congress which opposed the agitation and behaved as a vote bank of the party. However, after the movement had ended, these vote blocs started to desert the party one by one. By the 2016 Assam assembly election, Congress had lost all its traditional immigrant vote banks in Assam.

By the time of the 1972 assembly elections, Assam did not have any formidable political party to challenge Congress and most of the communities supported the party in elections. It faced strong opposition from the Janata Party alliance, for the first time in Assam, only in the 1978 assembly election. Therefore, the Assam assembly elections held since 1978 are mainly analysed here to understand the vote bank behaviour of the communities under discussion. A vote bank is a loyal bloc of voters from a single community, who consistently back a certain candidate or political formation in democratic elections. However, when we discuss vote banks, it should be noted, a community's support for a candidate or a political party can never be absolute in a democratic electoral politics. Considering this, here, continuous electoral support of the majority section of a community is identified as the criteria for the existence of a community vote bank. This vote bank behaviour of a community, in this paper, is examined from the outcome of

the Assam assembly elections from the constituencies dominated and determined by the community.

### **Immigrant Communities**

The Muslims, Bengalis and the tea garden workers are three large communities in Assam. According to the 2011 census, Muslims constitute 34.2 per cent of the total population of the state. However, there is no authentic figure of the exact population strength of Bengalis and according to some unconfirmed estimates, they consist of almost 14.19 per cent of the population<sup>1</sup> of the state. On the other hand, the tea community account for around 15 per cent of the total population of Assam (cited in Ahmed, 2018: 15).

These communities are recent immigrants in Assam. The Muslims started to immigrate into the state since the beginning of the thirteen century. Till Assam was taken over by the British in 1826, they immigrated mainly as artisans and religious preachers. A section of Muslim war prisoners who were left behind here as a result of the defeat of the Muslim invaders from East Bengal and north India who repeatedly attacked the Ahom<sup>2</sup> kingdom also settled here. Large-scale Muslim immigration happened to the state after British colonial administration wished to grow jute in Assam as a cash crop. It imported Muslim cultivators from East Bengal, settled them and allotted them land for growing jute. This started huge waves of immigration of poor and landless Muslims from East Bengal since the late nineteenth century. The immigration got a new boost when Assam was ruled by Muslim League consecutively from 1937 to 1946, as the party attempted to make Assam a part of proposed Pakistan by increasing the Muslim population of the state.

In present Assam, the Barak valley is considered as the home of Bengalis, although the community has a strong presence in Brahmaputra valley and hills also. The Barak valley is the undivided Cachar district of Assam after independence. The 'Cachar' is the region once ruled by the Kacharis, an aboriginal tribe of Assam.

Since the beginning of the seventeen century, the Kacharis extended its rule into the plains of Cachar. However, in the present Barak valley, the Kacharis are almost non-existent and the valley has been taken over by the Bengalis and the Muslims. The immigration of Bengalis to the Brahmaputra valley started with the beginning of the British rule in Assam. By then, the British started to employ a section of Bengalis from West Bengal who was educated in the English language to run their administration. The colonial administration imported many such Bengalis to be engaged in administrative works in Assam. After this, Bengalis immigrated to the Brahmaputra valley from West Bengal in droves to grab the employment opportunities created by the British administration in the state. Meanwhile, under colonial rule, immigration of Bengalis from former East Bengal to the Barak valley became an internal affair. During 1905–1912, Assam was even made a part of East Bengal with Bengali dominated Dhaka as its capital. Eventually, lakhs of Bengali families took refuge in Assam and were settled in different parts of the state, particularly in the Barak valley, after the Partition at independence. In a letter to Union Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on 22 June 1950, Assam Premier Gopinath Bardoloi disclosed that his government had already shouldered the responsibility of rehabilitating one lakh new refugees in addition to 1.25 lakh who came one and a half years ago and some ten thousands of the earlier batch was already allotted land (Pisharoty, 2019: 259).

The tea labourers had been imported to work at the tea gardens as labour by the British tea planters since the beginning of the 60s of the nineteenth century. They were recruited mainly from Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Chottanagpur, Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh), Madras (now Tamil Nadu), Bombay (now Maharashtra) and United Province (now Uttar Pradesh), where, at that time, the population was denser, less secure and more accustomed to working for wages (Hazarika, 2006: 32). The import of these labourers continued until the end of the 30s of the twentieth century.

The immigration of the tea community to Assam stopped before independence. But the immigration of Muslims and Bengalis from East Pakistan

continued even after independence. Because of this unabated immigration, the Assam Accord fixed 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date for the identification and deportation of illegal foreign nationals from the state, a provision made only for Assam among the states and union territories of India. Based on the time of immigration into the state, the Muslims are categorised into indigenous and immigrant in the broader contexts of society and politics of Assam. The Muslims immigrated to the state before it was taken over by British in 1826 are known as indigenous while those immigrated during British colonialism and until 1971 are known as immigrant Muslims. The immigrant Muslims are also known as East Bengal-origin Muslims, as they immigrated from East Bengal. Among the Bengalis, there is no such categorisation. On the other hand, the tea community is an umbrella term of different groups who were imported to Assam by British tea planters from different places of British India to work as labourers in tea gardens in Assam.

In this paper, while ‘Muslim’ indicates only the immigrant Muslims living in the state, the ‘Bengali’ covers the Hindu Bengali community living in the Barak valley (Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts). The ‘tea community’, here, includes all tea labourer groups residing in upper Assam of the Brahmaputra valley (Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts). While the tea community lives mainly in upper Assam, they live in some pockets of the Barak valley also. Besides lower Assam of the Brahmaputra valley (Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Nagaon, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Mangaldoi districts), the immigrant Muslims live in the Barak valley. On the other hand, Bengalis live in entire Assam. To specifically address the topic of the present study, we will consider the regions where these communities are electorally dominant: Muslims in lower Assam, Bengalis in the Barak valley and tea community in upper Assam. An overwhelming majority of the Muslims, Bengalis and tea community live in these regions. It should be noted that Assam at present has five administrative divisions – North, Lower, Central, Upper and the Barak valley. Here, we have not followed this administrative division; rather considering the traditional regional divisions of the state: Upper and Lower Assam of the Brahmaputra valley,



the Barak valley and the hills. Moreover, in the present paper, the electoral behaviour of only the immigrant Muslim community is studied. It is because the indigenous Muslims immigrated before Assam was colonised. It should also be noted that the immigrant Muslims are an overwhelming majority over their indigenous counterpart, and they dominate the Muslim electoral equations of the state<sup>3</sup>. The indigenous Muslims, living mainly in upper Assam districts of the Brahmaputra valley, cannot determine the electoral equations of even a single Assembly constituency in Assam, as they do not live in contiguous areas like their immigrant counterparts. Moreover, Congress has been benefitting mainly from the support among the immigrant Muslims. Finally, the present discussion on vote bank is based only on the assembly elections held in Assam. The parliamentary elections have different electoral geography and demography than assembly elections, and they are contested mainly on national issues.

### **Congress and Electoral Alliances**

The immigrant communities, in any society, can easily be politically manipulated if they are socio-economically vulnerable. The formation of immigrant vote banks is possible in such situations. The Congress, in early years after independence, tried to create political alliances with the Muslims, the Bengalis and the tea community in Assam, as they became crucial for the party to maintain its political dominance in the state. Present Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya were parts of Assam at the time of independence. But the central government faced a revolt by the Nagas for a sovereign state just after independence. The Indian government had to deal the Nagas with force until Nagaland was made a separate state in 1962. Amid these developments, the Congress leadership in Assam was not sure of the electoral support of the entire tribal population which constituted a large chunk of the population of the state at that time. So, the Assam Congress leadership tried to create political alliances with some communities of the state which could significantly help the party's prospects in electoral battles in both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, even if the tribal population did not rally behind the party.

Congress identified the immigrant Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and tea labourers as the communities with whom such alliances could be long-lasting. These communities were recently immigrated, large in number, socio-economically backwards and were in need of the support of the government in new situations created by independence and the partition.

#### *Congress – Muslim Alliance*

After independence, the most vulnerable community in Assam was the Muslims. In the last decade of the freedom struggle for India's independence, Assam emerged as a playground because of the communal politics of the Muslim League. An overwhelming number of Muslims rallied behind the party in support of its demand for the inclusion of Assam into Pakistan. In the 1946 provincial assembly election, the Muslim League bagged 31 seats out of the 34 seats reserved for Muslims. However, the partition of India shattered the dream of the Assam Muslims. The Assam Provincial Muslim League was dissolved in June 1948 and several prominent League leaders, including Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, the most prominent leader from the immigrant Muslim community, left the country for East Pakistan, which created a leadership vacuum for the Assam Muslims, creating a feeling of being vulnerable. Against this backdrop, they did not have any other option but to join the Congress. Before the first general election of 1952, there were hectic activities of Muslim leaders from both Congress and former Muslim League to ally with Congress and the Muslim of Assam. As a result, a Congress-Muslim electoral alliance was formed just before the 1952 election. In this regard, Congress even took the help of Jamiat-ul-ulema-e-Hind (Jamiat) to influence the entire Muslim community of Assam to lend their support for Congress. The party imported Muslim religious leaders of Jamiat from Cachar and Uttar Pradesh to help build its support base among the Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley (Hoque, 2007: 310). During the freedom movement, Jamiat stood for undivided India against the demand of the Muslim League for the division of the country in communal line. There is no denying the fact that the League had more influence over the Muslims of Assam

compared to Jamiat. After independence, while the League ceased to exist, Jamiat became non-political. Then, the Congress used the Jamiat to gather Muslim votes for the party who were supporters of the League till independence. This had provided Jamiat a new lease of life in the politics of Assam after independence, as they had virtually no influence over the Muslims in Assam before independence.

Another factor that contributed significantly to create a Congress-Muslim partnership in Assam after independence was the communal clash of March 1950 in the lower Assam of the Brahmaputra valley, when nearly a lakh Muslim immigrant had to flee riot-affected areas of lower Assam for East Pakistan in search of security (cited in Guha, 2006: 271). Most of these displaced immigrant Muslims returned to Assam after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was signed in April 1950. However, this communal clash made the entire Muslims community in Assam to realise that security was their main concern, and they tried to minimise their security concerns by aligning with the Congress which became the sole political party in India after independence.

#### *Congress-Bengali Alliance*

In initial years after independence, the Bengalis of Assam, particularly from the Barak valley, were not satisfied with the Assam Congress led by Assamese leaders from the Brahmaputra valley. They strongly believed that the Sylhet Referendum, as a result which Sylhet was transferred to Pakistan at partition, only happened because of the Assamese Congress leadership. They believed that Gopinath Bardoloi and other Assamese Congress leaders agreed to the referendum because they wanted the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan to bring an end of the Muslim domination in the state. But the truth was that the referendum was agreed to by the Congress Working Committee and even Hindu Bengali Congress leader from Sylhet like Basanta Kumar Das did not oppose it (Pisharoty, 2019: 254).

Although the Bengalis were not satisfied with Congress leaders of Assam, they aligned with the party after independence because of the proactive role of its

central leadership in settling the Hindu refugees in Assam after the partition. There was a huge influx of Hindu Bengalis from East Pakistan to Assam during and after the partition. The state shouldered the burden of lakhs of Bengali families immigrated from East Pakistan as refugees. The then Assam Premier Bardoloi communicated to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that the independence of the country had made little difference to the influx problem of Assam. He argued that not much land was available in the state to settle the Hindu and Muslim refugees coming in droves from East Pakistan. Nehru reacted angrily and wrote to Bardoloi that Assam was 'getting a bad name for its narrow-minded policy' and 'if land is not available in Assam for the refugees, the rest of India had still less land'. Nehru also threatened in the letter that 'if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help will obviously suffer' (cited in Deka, 2015: 37-39). Because of the strong stand of Nehru, the Assam government had to settle all the Hindu refugee families immigrated to the state. However, Bardoloi continued his demand for the expulsion of illegal immigrants living in Assam. Against this backdrop, the parliament enacted the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950. But this act was to expel only 'certain immigrants' from Assam. The clever wording in the act was designed to put an end to the identification of a Hindu Bengali as an illegal immigrant in Assam<sup>4</sup>. All these convinced the Hindu Bengalis of Assam that the central leadership of Congress was really concerned about their interests. This realisation made them rally behind the party although they were apprehensive about the Assamese Congress leadership of the state.

#### *Congress-Tea Community Alliance*

The entire tea community, till independence, was a disintegrated, underdeveloped and depressed class under the British tea planters. In the early years after independence, the community did not have a middle-class to join the mainstream social and political lives beyond the boundaries of the tea gardens. They have remained vulnerable for political manipulation in a democratic polity where number

counts. They rallied behind Congress in elections after independence as the party emerged as the ruler after the British left. Then, Congress, in an attempt to make aware the community about the labour rights under a sovereign country, tried to form a trade union for the community. If this could be done, the party realised, the fragmented community could also be united behind the party. As a result, the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (Assam Tea Labour Organisation; ACMS) was formed in 1958 as a subsidiary of the Indian National Trade Union Congress. During its initial stage, the ACMS was led by non-tea community Congress leaders because of lack of leaders from the community. Gradually, an educated class, though very small in number, started to emerge from the community and the organisation was taken over by them. By now, it is a large trade union with an organisational presence in more than 800 tea estates in Assam and has approximately 3,50,000 active members (ACMS website). Since its formation, the ACMS has remained the strongest trade union in Assam till date. Because of the absence of any strong rival trade unions among the tea labour community, it has started to determine the voting behaviour of a large section of tea community in entire Assam. It has worked as an agent of Congress, like the Jamiat in the case of Muslims, during elections to gather vote for the party.

### **Making of Vote Bank**

Nagaland in 1962 and Meghalaya and Mizoram in 1972 were carved out of Assam and made separate states, and with that, the hill tribe politics came to an end in the state. After 1972, whatever hill region remained with Assam became insignificant in the number game of electoral politics<sup>5</sup>. The present assembly constituencies of the state were fixed just before the 1978 election, which was the first election after the three states were separated. Congress lost power in the state in this election for the first time after independence. Against this backdrop, the existence of immigrant vote bank of Congress in Assam in this election becomes interesting.

#### *Assam Assembly Election 1978*

After the Indira Gandhi-led central government imposed internal emergency (1975–1977), Congress was widely hated in most parts of the country. But the story was

different in Assam. The party fared poorly in most of the other states in the parliamentary elections held in 1977, but it won 10 of the total 14 constituencies in Assam, which shows that the internal emergency hardly impacted the party in Assam. Therefore, the defeat of the Congress in the 1978 assembly elections just one year after a strong performance in the parliamentary election was a surprise.

The defeat was mainly due to the party's division nationally into the Indian National Congress (INC) and INC (Indira) [INC(I)] just before the election. The parallel division of the party and defection of a few prominent Congress leaders to the newly formed Janata Party in Assam just before the election made defeat inevitable for the party in the 1978 elections. How the division contributed to the defeat of the Congress becomes clear from the election outcome. The percentage of votes polled in the elections by both the fractions of Congress [INC – 23.62, INC(I) – 8.78] was higher than the winning alliance [Janata Party – 27.55, Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) – 2.60]. Total 26 candidates won on INC tickets, and the tally of INC(I) was only eight. In total, 21 constituencies, where Congress was defeated, the combined vote of both the fractions of the party was more than the winning candidate.

However, the defeat of the Congress in this election did not signal the breakdown of its traditional vote banks. Of the total 26 constituencies won by INC, while one was Bengali dominated, seven were Muslim dominated, and nine were tea community dominated<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, three of the eight winning INC (I) candidates were Muslims, two Bengalis and three tea labourers<sup>7</sup>. This reflection of *Ali*, *Coolie* and *Bengali* vote bank in favour of Mrs Gandhi's party [INC(I)] in this election even prompted her to strongly oppose the Assam Movement in the succeeding years, as she looked to consolidate her party's vote banks. In the next assembly election held in 1983 amidst the Assam Movement, the *Ali*, *Coolie* and *Bengali* instead fastly stood behind Congress. This election emerged as a clear reflection of immigrant vote banks of Congress in Assam.

#### *Assam Assembly Election 1983*

The Assam Movement was against the continuous illegal immigration to the state, and it demanded the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants. It

demanding that all the people immigrated to the state from the neighbouring countries after the publication of the 1951 National Register of Citizens be identified and deported from Assam. The demands of the movement directly targeted the recently immigrated sections of both Muslim and Bengali communities.

This election was held forcefully by the central government as the leaders of the Assam Movement had opposed and boycotted it. While the central government under Mrs Gandhi was adamant on holding the election, the movement leaders and supporters were committed to failing any such attempt. While Janata Party, BJP and Lok Dal decided not to contest the election, the Congress, Indian Congress (Socialist), PTCA and the left parties decided to participate. Meanwhile, after coming back to power at the centre in 1980, the Mrs Gandhi-led INC (I) started to represent Congress in Assam also, as the other fraction (of the Congress) started to decline mainly because of the defection of its leaders to Mrs Gandhi-led Congress.

Violence marred this election and thousands had to sacrifice their lives in election-related clashes. The election could not be held in 17 constituencies because of the absence of candidates and a large section of ethnic Assamese communities who supported the movement boycotted the elections even where it was held. In several ethnic Assamese dominated constituencies where the election was held, the voting percentage was very low (even below one per cent in two constituencies). From the total of 105 constituencies where the election was held, Congress (I) won from 91.

While the indigenous Assamese communities steered clear of the election, the immigrant vote banks of Congress, particularly the Muslims and the Bengalis, participated in huge number and supported Congress overwhelmingly. Bengali dominated Barak valley voted normally in this election, and barring Dholai, where polling percentage was 46, in all other constituencies the percentage was above

50, with the Sonai constituency recording the highest 75.6 per cent of polling. The Congress won 12 of total 15 constituencies from the Barak valley. It should be noted that the Assam Movement was concentrated mainly in plains districts of the Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley did not have much influence of the boycott call by its leaders. The immigrant Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley, too, where ethnic Assamese communities largely boycotted the election, participated in the elections in droves and supported the Congress. The polling percentage in some of the Muslim dominated constituencies from the lower Assam of the Brahmaputra valley were: Salmara South – 73.49, Baghbor – 70.97, Dhubri – 64.60, Dhing – 54.45 and Rupahihat – 52.15.

Compared to the high participation of Muslims and the Bengalis in this election, the participation of the tea labourers was low. The polling percentage in some important tea labourers influenced constituencies were: Sonari – 11.22, Doom Dooma – 20.41 and Tinsukia – 24.8. This shows that unlike the Muslims and Bengalis, a section the tea community voters from the Brahmaputra valley boycotted the election in response to the Assam Movement leaders. This support of the community for the movement was interesting as it was also an immigrant community. It was because the community was not directly targeted by the movement. As has already been highlighted, while a portion of both Muslims and Bengalis living in Assam had recently immigrated (from neighbouring countries) after independence, the tea community was imported to the state before independence. Besides, the tea labourers live in upper Assam among the indigenous Assamese communities which also might have influenced them not to come to direct conflict with these communities by participating in this election. It can be said that the community, despite its low participation in this election, never deserted Congress entirely in the post-Assam Movement period until the 2016 assembly election. Even in the 1983 election, Congress won from all tea community influenced constituencies where the election was held.

The 1983 election was largely boycotted by the indigenous Assamese communities in support of the Assam Movement. But the Muslims, Bengalis and tea community hugely participated in this election and overwhelming



supported Congress which opposed the movement. This clearly reflected the immigrant vote banks of Congress in Assam.

### **The Breakdown**

The Assam Accord, signed between the Congress-led central government and the movement leaders on 15 August 1985, which ended the movement, fixed 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date for the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam. This cut-off date was repeatedly proposed by the Congress party and its consecutive central governments since the beginning of the movement. It should be noted that while the Assam Movement demanded 1951 as the cut-off year for the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam, the Muslim and Bengali organisations opposing the movement argued 1971 as cut-off year<sup>8</sup>. Although that demand was fulfilled in the Assam Accord, they were dissatisfied with Congress for two reasons. First, these communities made a lot of sacrifices and faced risks to their lives and future to support the Congress in the 1983 election, which was largely boycotted by the ethnic Assamese community. A total of 3,026 persons (both supporters and opponents of the election) lost their lives only in election-related violence from 1 January to 30 April 30 of 1983 (Nathh, 2015: 135). They felt betrayed by the Congress despite putting everything on the line for the party when just after two years following the election, the central government led by the party signed the Assam Accord. Second, the feeling of betrayal was aggravated by the Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, which provides for constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to the Assamese people for protecting their cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage. Both these communities started to consider this clause as an attempt to make them subordinate to the indigenous Assamese.

In this perspective, the Assam Accord became a turning point from where the breakdown of immigrant vote banks of Congress started. The feeling of being betrayal among the Muslims and the Bengalis was so strong that Congress was routed in the 1985 Assam assembly election, held just after the Accord was signed.

It was the beginning of the breakdown of the Muslim vote bank. The Bengali vote bank of Congress started to crumble in the next Assam assembly election held in 1991.

#### *Muslim Vote Bank*

After the Assam Accord was signed, the leaders of the Assam Movement formed a regional political party – AGP. Organisations led by immigrant Muslims and Hindu Bengalis, who opposed the movement, lost faith in Congress because of the signing of the accord. Against this backdrop, representatives of organisations like Citizens' Right Preservation Committee (CRPC), All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), Assam unit of Jamiat etc. formed the United Minority Front (UMF), a regional political party, as an answer to AGP, and to protect the minorities of Assam from the anticipated perils of the Assam Accord. The CRPC, led by Hindu Bengalis, was the main force behind the new party. The UMF was an alliance between the Hindu Bengalis and immigrant Muslims and was led by leaders from the Barak valley. While a Hindu Bengali leader, Kalipad Sen, became the President of the party, A.M.F. Golam Osmani, an immigrant Muslim, became the General Secretary. Both were from the Barak valley.

The immigrant Muslims living in the Brahmaputra valley, for the first time, deserted Congress in the 1985 Assam assembly election and rallied behind the newly formed UMF. Congress candidate could win from the Muslim dominated constituencies from the valley except for Dhubri constituency. A total of 17 UMF candidates won from the valley of which 15 won from Muslim dominated constituencies. However, the Muslims in the Barak valley did not align with UMF in this election. Not a single UMF candidate won from a total of 15 constituencies of the Barak valley. Congress performed well in the Barak valley and won 10 seats, unlike its poor show in the other valley. Even the Muslim dominated constituencies like Karimganj South, Hailakandi, Sonai and Katigora voted for Congress. It was interesting that while, in this election, immigrant Muslims from the Brahmaputra valley punished Congress for signing the Assam Accord, the

Muslim from the Barak valley aligned with the party and did not support UMF. It happened for two reasons; first, the Barak valley was not much influenced by the Assam Movement, and second, the UMF was formed and led mainly by Hindu Bengali leaders from the valley which was not accepted by a large section of the Muslims in the valley.

The success of UMF in the Brahmaputra valley in 1985 exhibited the strength of Muslim votes in Assam. Realising this, the Jamiat wished to play a bigger role in the future politics of Assam by determining the electoral behaviour of immigrant Muslims from both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. After independence, Jamiat was made relevant in politics of Assam by the Congress party. Until the Assam Movement, it worked as an agent of Congress to whip up Muslim votes for the party. This significantly helped to continue the Congress - Muslim alliance that was formed after independence until the 1983 Assam assembly elections. The Assam Movement provided Jamiat with the opportunity to play a more activist role in the politics of Assam. Hindutva organisations tried to take the opportunity of the mass mobilisation of the movement. National leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani and Jaswant Singh of the newly formed BJP supported the movement and actively campaigned for it. Against this, Jamiat came forward to oppose the movement on the premise that it was influenced and controlled by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It strongly expressed the concerns of Muslims vis-à-vis the movement and actively opposed it. This helped the Jamiat to make itself more relevant among the immigrant Muslims in Assam who had become the main target of the movement.

With renewed relevance among the Muslims, since the 1991 assembly elections, Jamiat started to lend its heft publicly to different political parties in elections held in Assam. In the 1991 assembly election, it lent support to Congress. In 1996 and 2001 elections, it supported AGP-led coalition and Congress, respectively (Omar, 2005: 12). In 1991, 1996 and 2001 Assam assembly elections, the party or formation that won the election and came to power in the state was

supported by Jamiat. This made the Jamiat 'kingmaker' in the politics of Assam. However, it was interesting that it did not show much interest in UMF after 1985 Assam assembly elections. It might be because CRPC, a Hindu Bengali organisation, led the process of the formation of UMF. On the other hand, the first-ever Bengali Hindu and immigrant Muslim political alliance through UMF proved a failure in the 1985 Assam assembly election itself as not a single candidate from the party could win from the Hindu Bengali dominated Barak valley.

Assembly elections held in 1991, 1996 and 2001 created the impression among the Assam Jamiat leaders that they determine the politics of Assam. They became confident that they could even form a government in Assam if the Muslim community, accounting for one-third of the total population of the state, could be united under a political party. The repeal of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983 [IM(DT)]<sup>9</sup> gave Jamiat leadership the opportunity to become the 'king' from 'kingmaker' in the politics of Assam. The Assam Jamiat then formed the AUIF in 2005 under the pretext of the alleged betrayal by the Congress in repealing the IM(DT) Act and in an objective to safeguard the interests of the minorities in post IM(DT) situation. The party showed significant success in the 2006 Assam assembly elections which inspired its leadership to extend its activities to other parts of the country, and the party was relaunched as All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in 2009.

Since the formation of AUIF, the Assam unit of Jamiat has solidly stood behind it. In the 2006, 2011 and 2016 Assam assembly elections, the AIUDF gained 9.03, 12.57 and 13.05 per cent of the total votes polled. It bagged 10, 18 and 13 seats respectively in these elections. Because of the existence and success of AUIF in these consecutive elections, the Muslim vote in Assam remained divided between the Congress and AIUDF. In the 2016 Assam assembly election, Congress could not win three constituencies from the Barak valley (Patharkandi, Sonai and Katigora) and eight constituencies from the Brahmaputra valley (Golakganj, Bilasipara East, Barpeta, Mangaldoi, Raha, Batadroba, Nowgong and Lumding) because of the presence of AIUDF.

*Bengali Vote Bank*

In the 1985 Assam assembly election, the Barak valley Bengalis largely supported the Congress. They did not rally behind the UMF even though the party was formed and led mainly by the Hindu Bengalis from the valley. The Assam Movement might not have influenced the Barak valley much, but the Bengalis from here were opposed to it. They were aware of the clauses (including Clause 6) of the Assam Accord after it was signed. They were not at all happy with Congress because of its role in signing the accord. Despite all these, the Bengalis from the Barak largely voted for Congress in this election. It was because, although CRPC leaders took the lead of the formation of UMF, the main constituents of the party were Muslim organisations like the Jamiat. This discouraged the Bengalis of the valley from supporting UMF in the 1985 election. They, without an alternative, supported Congress despite strong dissatisfaction towards it. This dissatisfaction reflected in the valley in the next Assam assembly election held in 1991. It has already been mentioned that UMF was not supported by Muslims from the Barak valley in the 1985 election because of the leading role of CRPC in setting up the party. Against this, the Hindu Bengalis did not support it as Muslim religious organisation Jamiat, and few Muslim student organisations were constituents of it.

The BJP started to gain grounds nationally with the *Rath Yatra* of its national President L.K. Advani in support of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in late 1990. In the Assam assembly elections held in 1991, the Barak valley Bengalis overwhelmingly supported the BJP. In this election, BJP won 10 seats in Assam and nine of them were from Barak. This was the first election when BJP won a seat in Assam elections. It can be said that it started the electoral journey in Assam from the Barak valley in 1991. After the party was formed, it did not participate in the 1983 Assam assembly elections in support of the boycott call of the Assam Movement leaders. Although it participated in the 1985 Assam election, it failed to show any success.

The Bengali vote bank of Congress in Assam disintegrated in the 1991 assembly election. However, this cannot be subscribed only as a fall out of the growing popularity of BJP as a result of *Rath Yatra*. It was also a fall out of the

Assam Accord. In this election, the Bengalis from the valley sided with BJP to punish Congress for the accord and to compete with the Jamiat's increasing influence among the Muslims in Assam. As has been mentioned, in the 1991 Assam assembly election, Assam Jamiat openly lent its electoral support to Congress after it dissociated itself from UMF just after the 1985 assembly election.

Congress recovered to some extent and blunted the influence of BJP among the Bengalis from the Barak valley in the next (1996) Assam assembly election, and since then the Bengalis from the valley remained divided between Congress and BJP in subsequent 2001 and 2006 assembly elections. In the 2011 Assam assembly election, however, Barak valley Bengalis supported Congress overwhelmingly. In this election, Congress won 13 seats from the valley and BJP, which won at least four seats from the valley in subsequent Assembly elections since 1991, drew a blank. This wholehearted support of Bengalis to Congress in the 2011 assembly election again was a reaction to Muslim politics. The Congress Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, during the period after the AUIUDF was formed, successfully emerged as the warrior against the Muslim communalism of AUIUDF with his public criticisms and rhetoric against AUIUDF President Badruddin Ajmal. To contain the growth of Muslim communalism under AUIUDF, Congress was widely supported by non-Muslims from both the valleys of Assam in this election (Nath, 2019: 39). As a result, it won 78 seats in this election in entire Assam, against 53 in the previous election, and formed the third consecutive government under Tarun Gogoi. To help Congress to contain AUIUDF, in this election, the Barak valley Hindus did not rally behind BJP which did not have much influence in the other valley.

After this election, the AUIUDF emerged as the main opposition party in the Assam Legislative Assembly, winning 18 seats. This frightened both the indigenous Assamese communities from the Brahmaputra valley and the Hindu Bengalis from the Barak valley of being politically subordinated by immigrant Muslims. This should be noted that AUIUDF is led and supported mainly by the

immigrant Muslims of the state. Against this backdrop, BJP started to gain ground fast in the entire state after it formed government at the centre under Narendra Modi in 2014. The consequence was that the 2016 assembly election was communally polarised between AIUDF and BJP. In this election, while BJP won eight constituencies in the Barak, AIUDF showed its best-ever performance there, by winning four seats. Congress won only three seats from the valley, the worst ever since independence.

#### *Tea Community Vote Bank*

The tea community in Assam did not take a clear stand vis-a-vis the Assam Movement which was reflected from their very low to average participation in different constituencies in the 1983 assembly elections. They, again, remain divided between Congress and the newly formed AGP in the 1985 election. In this election, although constituencies like Rangapara, Behali and Dhekiajuli from the north bank of river Brahmaputra stood behind Congress, AGP candidates won from constituencies like Sarupathar, Khumtai, Mariani, Sonari, Moran, Lahowal etc. from the south bank of Brahmaputra. All these constituencies have a high concentration of the tea community. In the 1991 assembly election, the community again rallied behind Congress in large numbers. And till 2011 assembly elections, they remained a consistent support base of the Congress. The influence of AGP over the community, during this period, remained confined to few constituencies like Dhekiajuli, Sarupathar, Naharkotia and Khumtai. The tea community deserted Congress completely only in the 2016 Assam assembly election. The party did not win a single constituency influenced by them from the north bank of Brahmaputra. Again, only four constituencies with a heavy concentration of the community from the south bank of Brahmaputra—Sarupathar, Nazira, Doom Dooma and Mariani—were won by the party. In this election, the tea community of entire Assam solidly rallied behind BJP and deserted the Congress. With the breakdown of tea community vote bank, Congress lost its last immigrant vote bank in Assam.

BJP started to gain ground among the tea community since the beginning of the present century. It started to influence the electoral politics of the Brahmaputra

valley significantly since the 2001 assembly elections. In this election, it won from total four constituencies from the Brahmaputra valley of which two were dominated by tea labours: Behali from the north bank and Duliajan from the south bank of the Brahmaputra. The other two constituencies it won from the valley (Golakganj and Lumding) were with a high concentration of Bengali population. In this situation, it can be said that in the Brahmaputra valley, BJP started to influence the tea labourers before the indigenous communities. Interestingly, with the rise of BJP over the tea community, the influence of ACMS over it started to decline. The structure and membership of ACMS have remained intact, but its influence over the community in elections began to wane. From the origin, it always followed a policy of not to hamper the interests of the planters as it was a trade union under Congress which ruled Assam most of the time after independence. In this situation, the rising aspirations of the community as a result of the spread of education among a significant section of them has emerged as a challenge before the organisation. Pawan Singh Ghatowar, a five-time Congress Member of Parliament from Dibrugarh who also became a central minister, emerged as the tallest leader of ACMS during the 1980s and 1990s. Even he faced a defeat from Dibrugarh parliamentary constituency in 2004 election which he had retained since the 1991 parliamentary election.

Assam has a large Muslim population. The BJP realised the electoral importance of the tea community in its mission to spread organisation in the state. To contain the influence of the Congress-backed ACMS over the tea community, the Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha was formed in the late 1970s under the patronage of then Jana Sangh. However, it could not sustain for long. After BJP formed government at the centre in the late 1990s, different organisations of RSS started to work among the community. However, the BJP broke the Congress vote bank through a calculated electoral strategy in the 2014 parliamentary election. One important point to be noted here is that the Assam Tea Garden Tribes Students Organisation (ATGTSO), formed in 1970, became Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) in 1984 and became very active regarding the interests of



the tea community in the post-Assam Movement period. While most of the leaders from ATGTSO and then ATTSA migrated to Congress after leaving the student organisation, few leaders from AATSA joined BJP after it formed government at the centre in the late 1990s. Two young prominent ex-ATTSA leaders who joined BJP at this juncture were Rameswar Teli and Kamakhya Prasad Tasa. BJP won over the entire tea community through these two leaders in a well-formulated strategy in the 2014 parliamentary election.

Assam also witnessed a strong electoral wave in favour of BJP in the 2014 parliamentary election after Narendra Modi was designated as the prime ministerial candidate from the party. In this election, BJP strategically fielded tea community candidates from Dibrugarh and Jorhat constituencies. While Rameswar Teli was fielded from Dibrugarh, Kamakhya Prasad Tasa was made the candidate from Jorhat. These two constituencies from upper Assam of Brahmaputra valley fall under the region where the tea community is mainly concentrated. While Dibrugarh is absolutely determined by the community, Jorhat is strongly influenced by it. The Jorhat is mainly determined by the Ahoms. The Congress strategy for these two constituencies remained like earlier – Dibrugarh for tea community candidate and Jorhat for Ahom candidate. But BJP took a risk by fielding tea community candidates from both the constituencies in an attempt to steal the tea community vote bank from Congress. Under Narendra Modi wave, both Teli and Tasa won and this worked as the winning strategy to break down the Congress dominance over the community in the next Assam assembly election. The victory of the Teli and Tasa created new opportunities for the BJP to penetrate the community. After this, the migration of leaders from ATTSA and entire tea community to Congress completely stopped, and BJP emerged as the new platform of these leaders. In the 2014 parliamentary election, BJP promised to give the Schedule Tribes status to the Adivasis, a major section from tea community. The scheduling of the Adivasis as a tribe had repeatedly been promised by Congress in previous elections, but the party never been fulfilled it. Meanwhile, since the 2014 parliamentary election, Narendra Modi started to earn popularity among the tea community also like other

ethnic communities of the state. All these contributed to the shifting of the tea community votes to BJP and the breakdown of the Congress vote bank among them in the 2016 assembly election for the first time in post-independence history.

### **Conclusion**

The immigrant Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and the tea community are three large communities living in Assam which started to migrate to the state after it was taken over by the British. Congress formed electoral alliances with these recently immigrated communities after independence which helped it significantly to rule Assam for most of the time since independence. However, the Assam Accord changed the situation and the post-Assam Movement period has shown a gradual decline of immigrant vote banks of Congress in the state. In the last Assam assembly election held in 2016, Congress contested, for the first time in the post-independence history, without an immigrant vote bank. The Muslims were the first to desert the party just after the Assam Movement. In the post-Assam Movement period, the community's electoral behaviour was significantly determined by Jamiat. However, it can also not be said that the community has become a communal bloc under Jamiat. It is because the AIUDF, patronised by Jamiat, could not get more than 13 per cent votes in the last three assembly elections although Muslims are more than one-third of the total population of Assam. The Bengalis were the next to desert Congress as a vote bank. It can be said that leaving of Congress by the Hindu Bengalis is the consequence of increasing communal politics among the Muslims in the state. Besides, the decline of the ACMS and smart ethnic politics of BJP have broken down the tea community vote bank of Congress in 2016 Assam election.

### Notes

1. In census enumeration, there is no provision of recording the Hindu Bengali population separately. Their population strength cannot be ascertained even from language data as a large section of Muslims living in Barak valley and lower Assam of Brahmaputra valley identify Bengali as mother tongue. The present figure is from [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) (accessed on 5 June 2020).
2. Ahoms are an ethnic community living mainly in upper Assam districts. They, a Tai clan originally from Southeast Asia, immigrated to the Brahmaputra valley and ruled Assam during 1228–1826.
3. In the Brahmaputra valley, the immigrant Muslims are concentrated mainly in the lower Assam districts. This region consists of more than 78 per cent of the total Muslim population of the state and almost 94 per cent of total Muslims living in the Brahmaputra valley as per the 2011 census. It should be noted, however, that all Muslims in lower Assam are not immigrants; they are an overwhelming majority over the indigenous Muslims.
4. It was clear from the discussions on the bill in the parliament that the provisions of the bill would be applicable to only those immigrants staying in Assam whose staying is detrimental to the interests of India. The bill would not be applicable to those whose staying is not detrimental to the interests of India, or who have migrated to Assam because of instability in Pakistan or other nations (Parliamentary Debate, Vol. I, Part III). The central government, through this act, wanted to expel only the Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan.
5. Since the 1978 assembly election, the hill region has only five of total 126 assembly constituencies in Assam.
6. Among the constituencies won by INC, Katlichera was Bengali dominated; Karimganj South, Katigora, Dhubri, Baghbor, Chenga, Lahorighat and Rupahihat were Muslim dominated; and, Dhekiajuli, Rangapara, Behali, Bokakhat, Sarupathar, Mariani, Nazira, Lahowal and Doom Dooma were tea community influential.

7. Of total eight elected MLAs from INC(I), Muslim: Abdus Sobhan (Jania), A.N.Akram Hussain (Chaygaon), Syeda Anwara Taimur (Dalgaon); Bengali: Nepal Chandra Das (Algapur), Sisir Ranjan Das (Dholai); and, tea community: Satya Tanti (Sonari), Joy Chandra Nagbangshi (Moran), Rameswar Dhanowar (Digboi).
8. AAMSU, formed as a student organisation of both religious and linguistic minorities of Assam in 1980 to counter the Assam Movement; CRPC, a Hindu Bengali organisation; and Jamiat, a religious organisation of Muslims, were the main opposing forces of Assam Movement. All these organisations argued that 1971 be made the cut-off year.
9. The Act was legislated by the Indian parliament and imposed on Assam in 1983. After 22 years of existence in the state, the Supreme Court of India declared it as illegal in its judgment on the Writ Petition (Civil) 131 of 2000 (*Sarbananda Sonowal vs. Union of India & Anr*), on 12 July 2005, and the Act was repealed.

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