

India: Assam's Easy Transition From Ethnonationalism To Hindutva

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The deadly eviction drive by Indian police forces in Assam on September 24, 2021 left 1300 families displaced, and led to the heinous public execution of an Indian citizen Moinul Haque, which was captured on video. In this prescient article from the May 2021 issue of the Caravan magazine, Praveen Donthi chronicles perhaps a genocide foretold.

It took a week after the results of the Assam assembly election last month for the Bharatiya Janata Party to name the state's chief minister. In a polity dominated by numerous tribal and ethnic groups, the party chose Himanta Biswa Sarma, a Brahmin, over the incumbent Sarbananda Sonowal, from a small ethnic Assamese community. Having returned to power at the head of a victorious alliance, the BJP called the result what it was: a resounding consolidation of pro-Hindutva forces in a state long known for its politics of jatiyotabad—ethnonationalism.

Assamese exceptionalism, based on a self-image of an inherently tolerant and secular people unaffected by the majoritarian impulses of the mainland, seems to have run its course. Once the BJP came to national power in 2014, it sensed an easy opportunity to consolidate Hindus behind it in a state where about a third of the electorate is Muslim and the politics of othering and majority anxiety have been playing out for over four decades. These same conditions allowed Sonowal, formerly with the regional Asom Gana Parishad, and Sarma, a long-time Congress leader—both with roots in the ethnonationalist All Assam Students' Union—to casually metamorphose into BJP politicians.

MS Prabhakara, a former Assam correspondent for The Hindu, wrote back in 2009 that, in essence, "these movements of ethno-nationalism are no different from Hindutva movements that too are animated by fear and hatred of the 'Other'"—of bahiragata, primarily understood as "outsiders" of Bengali origin, in the case of the former, and of Muslims in the case of the latter. "Hence, too, the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing that is as much an integral part of such ethno-nationalist assertion as of the Hindutva movements." The election results show that these two ideologies have finally coalesced, with the Bengali-origin Muslim, or Miya, as the chosen other. "Considering the longstanding othering of Muslims in Assam it is in some ways surprising that the state only turned saffron in recent years," Thomas Blom Hansen, a leading scholar of Hindutva and communal violence, told me over email last month. "I think it has a lot to do with the relatively thin networks of RSS activists in both Assam and Bengal, historically speaking. That is changing now, and fast."

Ahead of the polls, Sarma, as if out of a Hindutva manual, started making Islamophobic statements. In February, he declared that the BJP does not need votes from Bengali-origin Muslims in Assam to win the election. "They have started identifying themselves as Miya," he said. "These so-called Miya people are very very communal, very very fundamental and they are involved in various activities to distort Assamese culture, Assamese language. So I don't want to be MLA with their vote."

Sarma called Badruddin Ajmal, president of the All India United Democratic Front, "an enemy of us,"

and added that “this is the most dangerous phase of Assam’s politics. ... Not as a individual, but as a symbol of certain people, they are the enemy.” On another occasion, he claimed he had seen a video in which Ajmal had suggested “Muslim women to produce as many children as they want.” Sarma also asked whether Muslim girls are “child-bearing machines” and made promises to rejig the delimitation of constituencies—implicitly, in order to reduce Muslims’ electoral influence.

To account for the win, post-election analysis has largely pointed to such things as the BJP-led state government’s populist cash schemes in its previous term and its relatively successful management of the COVID-19 crisis, with Sarma as the health minister. Some have even proffered the feeble reason that the BJP manifesto avoided any mention of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which sparked massive protests in Assam after the Narendra Modi-led national government passed it in 2019—ignoring the fact that it is a done deal, already enshrined in law, that the BJP’s national president has promised “will be implemented in letter and spirit.” In short, most analysts have looked at everything but Hindu consolidation and deliberately ignored the Islamophobia that Sarma has helped normalise. The intellectual champions of Assamese exceptionalism have been complicit in the state’s turn to Hindutva, with their silences as much as their words.

Consider the easy change of heart of Kaushik Deka, deputy editor at India Today. During the anti-CAA protests, Deka wrote that Modi and Amit Shah, a major champion of the new law, “want us to be ‘good Hindus’, embrace Hindus from a different country, even if they speak Bangla.” The CAA promised citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim minorities in neighbouring states, and many in Assam feared an influx of Bengali Hindus from Bangladesh. “What they fail to understand,” Deka continued, “is that, for me, and for every Assamese, being Assamese in Assam is above everything else. We can’t be Hindus or Muslims, if we can’t remain Assamese.” Deka was very deliberate about where he assigned blame. “I’m not angry with Modi and Shah ... they always told us what they wanted to do. It was not a hidden plan. But I cannot forgive Sarbananda Sonowal. I cannot forgive Himanta Biswa Sarma. They promised me in the summer of 2016 that they would protect my maati (land), bheti (home) and jaati (my Assamese existence). Today, they betrayed me.”

As the results came in, Deka joined Sarma on-air at India Today TV. As Sarma pretended to look at his phone, Deka, who is known to be close to the politician, endorsed his claim for the post of chief minister. After the BJP announced its choice of Sarma over Sonowal, Deka wrote in a flattering profile that the “unprecedented move” demonstrated “the importance of Sarma not only in the politics of Assam and the Northeast, but also in the larger game plan of the BJP and its ‘ideological fountainhead’ the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.” Deka listed factors that worked in Sarma’s favour: his family’s long association with the RSS, his unwavering commitment to its ideology and his vocal support of the CAA, an RSS brainchild.

Such selective blindness goes back to the 2016 Assam election, when the BJP took power in the state for the first time, in alliance with the Asom Gana Parishad and Bodoland People’s Front. The Assamese academic Udayon Misra characterised that result as a victory for identity politics, not Hindutva. He wrote that the ethnonationalist AGP, although on the wane, gave the BJP-led alliance a secular flavour, and a popular appeal on the grounds of mati, bheti and jati. The BJP campaign had likened the election to the Battle of Saraighat, a decisive Ahom defeat of Mughal forces, and Misra read this as having revived the anti-foreigner spirit of the watershed Assam Movement, which ran from 1979 to 1985. He somehow missed the point that it could be and was projected as a victory over Muslim incursion.

Misra brought up the “highly syncretic and plural nature of Assamese society” and its history of “identity politics centred on immigration, land and language” as bulwarks against the RSS’s ambitions in the state. He added that the RSS’s attempts “to saffronise Assam politics are bound to be resisted by the BJP’s partners in government, the AGP and the BPF,” as well as by Assamese

nationalist groups such as the All Assam Students' Union as long as they "stick to their secular credentials." Misra also wrote that Ajmal's AIUDF had attempted to polarise the electorate to garner Muslim votes, but concluded that this attempt had failed, since significant numbers of Muslims had voted for the Congress as well.

Another leading Assamese intellectual, Sanjib Baruah, argued along the same lines. If "ideology played a role in this election it was neither Hindutva nor the Bharat Mata ki jai brand of nationalism," he wrote. "The victory script was ideologically moored firmly in the history of Assam."

For Baruah, "The most iconic image of the recent election was a poster with a picture of Sonowal next to Ajmal's with the question: Whom will you vote for? The khilonjia"—the putative original inhabitants of Assam, in this case signified by Sonowal—"no longer had to be defined. The contrast between the phenotypic features of the two men said it all." The deliberate stress on phenotype ignored the other meaning of the image: Ajmal appeared in his typical garb, bearded and skull-capped, signifying Muslim identity.

Baruah noted that Muslims of East Bengali descent, once reliable Congress voters, had grown disillusioned with the old party, and had turned in large numbers to Ajmal's AIUDF instead since around 2005. He admitted this much: "The emergence of this community as an independent political force—instead of a vote bank—frightened the khilonjia population. This has shaped their choices in all subsequent elections including this one."

Both Misra and Baruah refused to acknowledge that Assamese Hindus could be voting on communal lines, or that the Assamese jati was now largely imagined as Hindu. Both accused the Congress of banking on Muslim votes and the AIUDF of deploying polarising communal politics, but neither wanted to see the communalism inherent in the Hindu consolidation behind the BJP.

This was clear, however, in the post-election analysis from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. "If there is one factor that overshadows all others in explaining the BJP's victory in Assam, it is that of religion," the analysis stated. "In a state where electoral outcomes were until recently largely understood in terms of multiple ethnicities, religious identity seems to have emerged as the main determinant of voting choices in this election."

The researchers wrote that "at the heart of the BJP alliance's success lies the aspect of Hindu consolidation. As high as 63% of voters who identified themselves as Hindu (on being asked their religion), ended up voting for the BJP and its election partners." This trend began in 2014, with the national election that brought Modi into power. "At that time, 58% of the Hindu electorate had voted BJP—and if one were to add up the Hindu votes that the AGP got, this figure would be 65%. In fact, in 2014, Assam was second only to Gujarat in terms of Hindu preference for the BJP."

There was no evidence of Muslim communal consolidation. "This remarkable Hindu coalescing around the BJP was, however, not matched by a counter-consolidation of Muslims behind any one party," the analysis read. "In a state where Muslims constitute 34% of the population (the highest outside J&K), Muslim voters did not vote en bloc."

This time, too, growing Hindu communal cohesion fully explains the election result, and to place other factors above this in importance is simply to obfuscate the issue. Yet Assamese Hindus—especially those of the elite castes—do not want to acknowledge this, since it does not tally with the Assamese exceptionalism they have set so much store by. Assamese sentiment against outsiders is predominantly their creation, a projection of their own interests as the interests of the Assamese jati in order to preserve their own power. Ever since Assam was incorporated into the British Raj, one of its key purposes was to freeze out Bengali Hindus who threatened to monopolise

administrative jobs. Especially with the Assam Movement, which started out opposing *bahiragata*—outsiders including Marwaris, tea-garden labourers and others—the sentiment morphed to become anti-*bideshi*, or anti-foreigner. In the wake of the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh, and the influx of refugees because of it, this meant a very particular target—Bengali-origin migrants, predominantly Muslims but many Hindus too.

Strangely, though the Assam Movement is the most studied phase of the state's entire history, there has been no clear explanation for this crucial shift—likely because it belies the exceptionalists' claims of Assamese syncretism and tolerance. The journalist Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, for example, in her book *Assam: The Accord, The Discord*, would rather depend for an explanation on some unnamed leaders of the agitation who told her that "the Intelligence Bureau (IB) played a role in shifting the gaze ... which would then not violate the Constitution." Another wholly plausible but less considered theory is that it was the result of RSS influence on the movement's young leadership. Pisharoty herself, in another context, accepts that the Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP, took the AASU under its wing. The RSS presence in Assam dates back at least to 1946, when it opened its first shakha in the territory, and it has never missed an opportunity to colour the immigration issue with the notion that Hindu arrivals are refugees in need of protection, while Muslim arrivals are menacing infiltrators.

Assamese elite-caste Hindu scholars have another symptomatic blind spot when it comes to the Nellie massacre, an atrocity at the height of the Assam Movement that saw thousands of Bengali-origin Muslims killed. The political scientist Paul Brass points out in *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* that soon after every communal riot there is an attempt to "capture its meaning" and establish "a hegemonic consensus, which in turn will influence, even determine power relations in society thereafter." Both Pisharoty's book and Baruah's recent *In the Name of the Nation* argue the same things: that the Nellie massacre should not be understood through the usual lens of Hindu-Muslim violence; that there were other attacks in the same period targeting Adivasis and Bengali Hindus, but Nellie gets disproportionate attention; that the motive behind it was ethnic, not communal. They hold that its most important cause was the central government's divisive decision to hold a state election in which migrants from Bangladesh would be able to vote, but they apportion no blame at all to the leaders and participants of the Assam Movement.

Both writers selectively cite the scholar Makiko Kimura's study of the massacre to back their position. They ignore where Kimura says, in *The Nellie Massacre of 1983*,

Without the atmosphere and legitimacy provided to attack the Muslims, we would never be able to explain police negligence towards the violence ... The AASU leaders not only failed to stop the violence when it broke out, but they also let some of their leaders lend a hand in the attack mainly against the Muslims.

Most non-Assamese scholars who have studied the subject see clearly what these scholars refuse to. "The Muslims of Nellie were targeted as 'Bengalis' and Muslims and the pogrom showed the potentially lethal effects of this kind of campaign," Hansen told me. "Violence calmed down (but flared up again in 2012) but the notion that the 'foreigner' was an illegal (Bengali) Muslim migrant was firmly established among many Hindus (and others) across Assam."

For Assam's Hindu elite, the shift in focus from the secular category of foreigners to the communal one of Bengali-origin Muslims makes political sense. The National Register of Citizens, the CAA's twin plank in the BJP project to make vast numbers of Muslims official outsiders in India, was supposed to rid Assam of five million illegal immigrants—understood to mean Muslims from Bangladesh. Instead, the NRC's last update, published in 2019, excluded roughly two million people,

a quarter or more of them Hindus. The BJP sees this as an error to be corrected, and Sarma, in his first press conference as the chief minister, promised a re-verification of the NRC. Assamese intellectuals who earlier wrote in support of the NRC, ostensibly with ethnonationalist rather than communal motives, have remained largely silent. Some Assamese Hindus, meanwhile, are now talking of it as a legal Battle of Saraighat.

Bengali-origin Muslims have been caught in a trap, allowed neither to assimilate nor to assert their identity. Within the Miya community, the debate now is whether to assert their rightful and equal place in the state, or to passively submit in the hope of avoiding attention and trouble. For all the noise about Ajmal, and although his party won 16 of the 20 seats it contested, he is not really the leader the Miyas need or deserve. "We are a leaderless and headless community," the lawyer Aman Wadud told me. "Ajmal miserably failed to counter the narrative against him and the community."

The NRC has been at the forefront of their dilemmas. "We had no choice but to support the NRC," Abdul Kalam Azad, a Miya social activist and scholar, told me. "If we had not done it, not 19 lakh, they would have declared 50 lakh people illegal." Wadud said that, earlier, "they used to call us anti-NRC," but "when the NRC did not list 50 lakh people, they became anti-NRC." He continued, "How can I make you happy? Should I go to a detention centre? Should I get deported? The game plan is very clear. They want to drop more people out of the NRC. The only one who can save us is the Supreme Court."

"The strength and resilience of this community has been finished to a large extent," Azad explained. "They probably want us to come out and protest against this demand for re-verification so that they can beat us and jail us. As a community worker, it pains me to say that people should not come out on the streets to protest." Many Miyas had earlier come out to support the protests against the CAA, but that did not do much to cement their Assamese credentials either. At the time, Azad said, "I told some of them this is not our war, this is an Assamese nationalist war. When they get a chance, they will not spare you. That is what happened in the election."

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