

Muslim vote holds key in closing phase of polling

Community Has A Majority In Districts Having 41 of 61 Seats

TIMES INSIGHT GROUP

As the election to the Assam assembly enters the second and concluding phase, the hopes of national parties — BJP and Congress — could hinge on how the regional outfits perform. These 61 seats in lower Assam are where both the Bodo People's Front (BPF), now a BJP ally, and the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by would-be 'kingmaker' Badruddin Ajmal, have a strong presence.

Of the 12 seats the BPF won in 2011, nine were from this region, while 17 of 18 won by the AIUDF came from these 61 seats. This is also the part of the state with a high Muslim presence. As many as 41 of the 61 seats are in seven districts where the Muslims constitute over 50% of the population — Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Darrang, Marigaon and Nagaon. And that statistic holds the key to what the Congress and BJP would be hoping for.

If the Muslims vote tactically to defeat the BJP and its allies, the saffron party would have little chance of making much headway here. If, on the other hand, they are divided between the Congress and the AIUDF, the combined strength of the BJP, AGP and BPF could yield fairly rich dividends.

In the last assembly polls in 2011, each of these parties had contested separately. That saw the Congress winning 24 seats with one-third of the votes and the AIUDF picking up 17 seats with less than one-fifth of the votes. The AGP with only a slightly smaller vote share than Ajmal's party could win just five seats, while the BPF's concentrated strength gave it nine seats with under 10% of the votes. BJP was a marginal presence in seats and votes. Three years later, in the Lok Sabha polls, the situation was dramatically different.

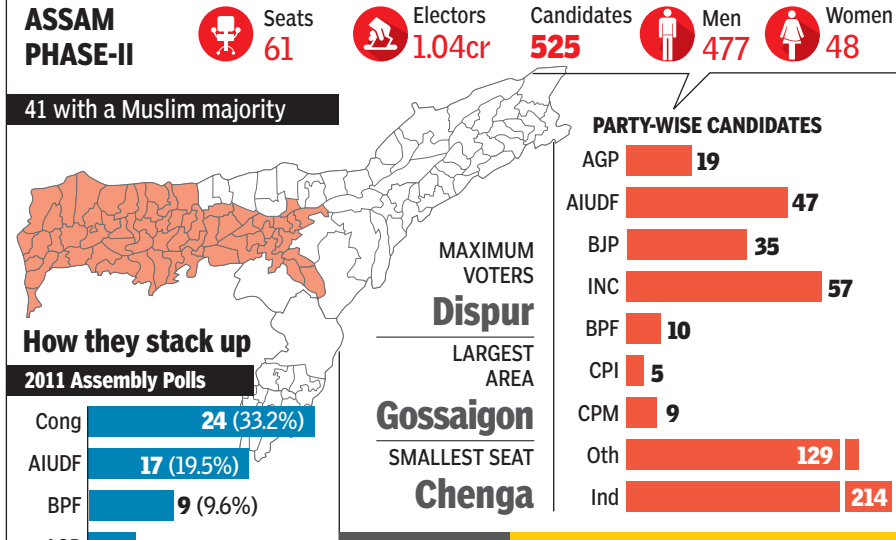
The region saw a genuinely triangular contest between a BJP riding the Modi wave, the Congress and AIUDF. The result was the BJP emerging the biggest party, leading in 25 seats and grabbing almost 30% of votes. The AGP and BPF were reduced to also-rans.

If 2016 again becomes a triangular contest, the BJP has reason to believe the outcome will be similar, particularly with the AGP and BPF also in its camp. But its big worry will be that it could well become a bipolar contest in most seats with either the Congress or AIUDF being picked by Muslims as the most likely to beat the BJP.



BATTLEGROUND ASSAM

'KINGMAKER' AJMAL IN THE FRAY



BADRUDDIN AJMAL | SALMARA SOUTH Dhubri MP set aside his son sitting MLA Abdul Rahim to contest from here. The businessman-neta-maulana has been saying he is all set to play 'kingmaker'

PRAFULLA MAHANTA | BARHAMPUR Can AGP find its feet after the tie-up with BJP? The party founder, two-time CM has represented Barhampur five straight terms now since 1991

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA | JALUKBARI Same constituency, different party. CM Tarun Gogoi's right hand man sitting MLA Sarma quit Cong last year to join BJP

RAKIBUL HUSSAIN SAMAGURI Gogoi's forest minister has represented Samaguri three times

DISTRICTS VOTING 13 | Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Bongaigaon, Baksa Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Nagaon, Kamrup (metro), Darrang, Morigaon

KEY ISSUES Infiltration from Bangladesh | Implementation of Assam Accord, 1985 | Employment | Development

Will TMC take a hit because Cong, Left on same side?

TIMES INSIGHT GROUP

The second part of the first phase of Assembly elections in Bengal could witness a keen contest between the Trinamool Congress and the Left-Congress combine if the last two polls are a guide to voting patterns.

Of the 31 seats in phase 1B, TMC won 18 in 2011 and its then ally Congress, won three leaving just 10 for the Left. In terms of vote share, the contest was much closer, the Left mopping up 44.5% compared to the TMC-Congress alliance's 48.6%.

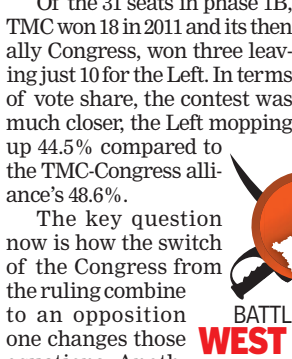
The key question now is how the switch of the Congress from the ruling combine to an opposition party changes those equations. Another question on which the outcome could hinge is how the BJP performs. In 2011, the BJP was a really marginal presence in this part of the state, which includes some parts of the Maoist-affected Jangmahal and of Burdwan, a district that's both an agricultural and industrial hub.

By the 2014 LS elections, the BJP had dramatically improved its position, winning almost 19% of the votes and leading in six assembly segments. All but

one of these leads were in the Asansol LS constituency, won by Babul Supriyo for the saffron party. Indications are that the BJP's star has faded significantly in Bengal since then, even if its vote share is unlikely to sink to the 2011 level of under 4%.

The imponderable then is who gains from a decline in the BJP's vote? In 2014, the TMC had 43.5% of the votes, the Congress and the Left put together polled 34.3%. That's a gap of just over 10%, which might seem like enough of a cushion. But if the BJP's vote share declines significantly in the absence of a Modi wave and most of that shifts to the opposition combine and if the TMC sees some reduction in its vote share, the cushion may disappear very fast.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee would be aware that even in 2011, nine of the 18 seats her party won were with margins of under 10,000 votes. Those would be vulnerable with a former ally now adding to the rival's tally. On the other hand, if she can hold on to the votes her party polled in the LS elections, she can make such arithmetic largely irrelevant.



SURJYA KANTA MISHRA (66) | Narayanganj | CPM | The Left Front's CM face, popularly called 'Daktarbabu', is a veteran of many contests
DILIP GHOSH (52) | Kharagpur Sadar | BJP | Bengal chief, ex-RSS pracharak takes on Cong senior Gyansingh Sohanpal
MANAS BHUNIA (64) | Sabang | Cong | Former state minister fights TMC's Nirmal Ghosh

Kanhaiya in Kerala Thiruvananthapuram: JNU students' union president Kanhaiya Kumar will address a youth convention, organised by CPI, in the city on Tuesday. Kanhaiya, on his first visit to the state, will reach the state capital after attending an IIT Chennai event. He'll travel in an open vehicle for stretch after which there's a youth convention. "The aim is to honour Kanhaiya Kumar," said G R Anil, CPI.

Gowri's party to contest five seats
Kochi: The Janathipathiya Sakshiksha Samithy (JSS) led by former Marxist veteran K R Gowri will field nominees in six Kerala seats. After senior LDF netas treated her shabbily denying her party any seat, Gowri decided to go it alone. She said she'll later announce candidates' names. Now senior party netas are saying JSS should stay with the LDF.

Nellie still waits for a closure

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Nellie (Morigaon): Borburi village in central Assam's Morigaon district looks different. Almost every corner displays political festoons and posters.

Abdul Halim, 38, has just finished his prayers when he meets a cluster of political workers campaigning for Monday's voting. "Halim bhai don't forget to vote on Monday even if it rains," a worker says. "I will. If life can continue despite what happened 33 years ago, what can hold us back from voting," he adds.

Halim's response gives the impression people here and in adjoining villages have come to terms with one of the worst pogroms in post-Independent India. Memories of the Nellie massacre, as the pogrom is popularly known, are still fresh. A deep sense of injustice is entrenched in survivors' minds, but they've taught themselves to look ahead. "You can't forget what happened in Nellie. Survivors have been denied justice. But people want to look ahead. The massacre will remain a blot in our history," social activist Mazdur Rahman says.

On February 18, 1983, at Nellie and nearby villages some 3,000 Bengali-speaking Muslims were massacred in a single day by a mob. This was during the height of the anti-foreigner movement led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU). That day, the killing began around 9am and continued till evening. The government launched a probe, but the report submitted to the then CM Hiteswar Saikia was never made public.

Parties ring in polls on voters' cell phones

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Chennai: Tamil Nadu is among the country's top three states in mobile penetration and, given the speed and interactivity offered by the medium, political parties have lined up elaborate telecom campaigns ahead of the May 16 assembly polls.

In 2014, for LS polls, AIADMK launched a state-wide WhatsApp and SMS campaign texting lakhs of voice and text messages every day, using an in-house computer programme. Last December, after floods ravaged the city, the

party released a 2-minute audio clip of CM Jayalalitha assuring the public she'd do everything possible to improve conditions. The state also started a call centre to record and respond to grievances.

In January, AIADMK launched 'WhatsApp Bench' — a series of humorous audio clips featuring two voices mocking rivals and offering the party's perspectives on issues.

An AIADMK insider said: "In 2014, when we launched our mobile-based campaign, only the AIADMK had such a

software. We could send out messages to 15 lakh people in a flash. The CM's message to people of Chennai went out to 75 lakh mobiles in an hour."

Now the DMK too is set to roll out a mobile-based campaign. "We'll use WhatsApp, SMSs, outbound dialing and e-mail blasts," said a source in DMK's tech team. "To build our database, we launched a missed call campaign some time ago. We received 70 lakh missed calls from across the state. Ever since, we've been profiling names, constituencies and

now have an understanding of our support base."

A Bhopal company provides customised bulk SMS service solutions to parties through resellers. Its founder, Sandeep Rajputh, says: "We've developed an application that runs on a Windows platform. We can send out up to 3 crore messages a day and we follow TRAI norms."

According to Navkendar Singh, a senior official at another such firm, low mobile tariffs in India "has led to the development of an ecosystem for creation of mobile-based content relevant for specific segments and geographies."

Didi's celeb pick hopes to dribble past Left's ace

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Siliguri: It's half past nine at night. Bhaichung Bhatia has hitched a ride on an e-rickshaw. A green kurta and a pair of jeans with a Trinamool stole around his neck, he is an unfamiliar sight. In the collective memory of football lovers, Bhaichung's visage is embossed with the famous East Bengal and Mohun Bagan jerseys. Those days are gone. But the fans remember.

Youngsters rush to touch the former India captain, shake his hand. An impromptu cavalcade of bicycles and motorbikes takes shape alongside the rolling cart. A youngster records the journey down the winding lanes on his smartphone. In these parts, Bhaichung is as much a star as any cricketer or Bollywood actor.

He reaches Goalapatti, an underclass colony for a poll meeting below a fluorescent street light. People sit on plastic chairs lined up be-

tween a Shani mandir and an open drain. Slogans of "Welcome Bhaichung Bhatia" and "Vande Mataram" are raised as the 39-year-old footballer-turned-neta starts speaking. Young girls giggle, so do their mothers.

This is largely a Biharhi mohalla. Bhaichung speaks in Hindi. Earlier, in another locality, he had spoken in Bengali starting with "nomoskar" and "salaam alekum". The audience had clapped. He had said: "CPM says I'm an outsider. But I have a home and petrol pump here," before adding, "Please buy some petrol there." They applauded again.

Bhaichung isn't a great speaker. But he comes across as sincere, a virtue for any politician seeking votes. He shows no sign that his day started 14 hours ago as he sings high praise of Mamata Banerjee, urging people to compare TMC's rule of 5 years with the Left's 34. Bhaichung joined TMC in 2014 to contest the Darjeeling LS seat. He had



Bhaichung in Siliguri

lost to BJP's SS Ahluwalia. Siliguri is north Bengal's commercial hub close to the border with Nepal, China and Bangladesh. Bengalis, Biharis, Gorkhas, Marwaris and Punjabis make the melting pot to communities here. About 5% voters are Muslims. Bhaichung faces a formidable opponent in CPM's north

Bengal commander Asoke Bhattacharya.

TMC dropped sitting MLA Rudra Nath Bhattacharya who had defeated the CPM veteran by 5,050 votes in 2011. For the CPM, Asoke Bhattacharya is its comeback man and he's leading from the front. Siliguri votes on April 17 and ranks high on symbolism for it is here that Asoke Bhattacharya, now the Siliguri mayor,

turned the tide for his party. The 67-year-old's rainbow coalition against TMC — a historic first where for the first time CPM sailed with Congress in the state — worked wonders in the Siliguri Municipal Corporation (SMC) and district council elections. CPM won 23 of 47 wards in SMC polls, Congress 4. BJP 2, TMC got 17. Inseparable from his trademark Santiniketan sling bag, Bhattacharya was minister for 20 years in successive LF governments. Of Bhatia he only says, "He's an accomplished footballer."

By all accounts the election is evenly poised between TMC and CPM. Finishing his speech at Goalapatti, Bhatia says he will spend the night there. "If I win, I'll come and stay here again," he says. Then he sends out an open invitation. "Tomorrow at 7 am, I'll play football in the nearby ground. Join me." A cheer goes up in the crowd. Some of them start talking shorts and boots. Who says, you can't mix football with politics?

CM straightforward, kind, says ex-striker

The former India captain tells Avijit Ghosh about football, politics and how they are linked...

straight-forward, kind-hearted, works for the poor.

Which is tougher: playing football or being in politics?

Both are tough. You don't achieve anything easily in either. I worked hard for football, played the game with sincerity and dedication. These are the principles that gave me success. That is what I want to bring into politics. There is a difference too. The difference is that in football, you carve out your own destiny. In politics, the result lies in people's hands.

Why Trinamool?

I have always been interested in politics even during my football career. It was just a matter of time. I accepted when I got an offer. Trinamool respects all religions. Mamata Banerjee is very

CPM has a strong candidate for Siliguri seat. What are your chances?

It is a tough fight. No election is easy. The LS election taught me a lot. An assembly election is different. For one, it is spread over a smaller area. I'm highlighting TMC's achievements.

I'd like to create better sports infrastructure... more international sporting events here. Siliguri has the potential to be a sports hub. But it can also be an education hub, do better in tourism, be stronger commercially.

What happens to your football activities: the academy, coaching, commentary?

I'll have to find a balance. It won't be completely left out.

Expert doctors to stay back in Kerala to offer treatment to patients

From P 1

The additional district magistrate had refused permission for the fireworks; apparently, the permission is sought every year; it is refused every year; and the rule is violated every year.

The temple authorities organised a competition of fireworks display between two rival pyro-technicians, a four-hour display accompanied by 'live commentary' on the proceedings and reportedly involving prize money and betting. Police remain wary of intervening, fearing religious sentiments and unsure if the politicians will back them if they act against this 50-year-old practice.

In the last three years alone, 451 people have died in Kerala in accidents related to fireworks. Though there are stringent provisions on paper, in practice these are observed in

their breach. "We will investigate how the orders were flouted and who was responsible for the decision to go ahead with the fireworks display," said chief minister Oommen Chandy after visiting the site. Religious leaders like Mata Amrithananda Mayi called for heavily regulating the use of fireworks in temple festivals.

The state and Union governments acted swiftly to enable optimum rescue effort. Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew down to Kollam and visited the temple premises. He also visited survivors of the accident at district hospital in Kollam and at the Govt Medical College in Thiruvananthapuram.

"It was a shocking and horrific accident. In the explosion, heads got severed from bodies. We will ensure all support. We stand with the people of Kerala and will extend all possible help," Modi said. A team of expert

doctors accompanied the PM and are staying back here to offer advanced treatment to patients with serious burn injuries. Modi also directed Union health minister JP Nadda who reached Kollam to stay back and coordinate rescue operations.

Chandy home minister Ramesh Chennithala and other senior ministers cut short their election campaign and rushed to Kollam. An impromptu cabinet meeting chaired by the CM decided to order a judicial probe into the incident. Retired high court judge Justice N Krishnan Nair will be the inquiry commissioner and he has been asked to file a report within six months.

Relatives of those who died will receive Rs 10 lakh as assistance from the state government. Those who are seriously injured will receive Rs 2 lakh each and those with minor injuries will receive Rs 50,000 each.

Pune to hire professional CEO for Smart City project

New Delhi: Pune will be the first city among the first batch of 20 Smart Cities to hire a professional as the chief executive officer (CEO) to execute the ambitious project. In almost all other cities, bureaucrats have been posted as CEOs.

Sources in the urban development ministry said the city administration has informed them about the decision and will select the candidate by inviting applications from professionals. "This approach is good and prove more productive. As such there have also been examples of central government bringing in professionals at secretary level," said an official.

The Smart City guidelines of UD ministry provisions appointment of CEOs, who will drive the concept and execution rather than leaving these tasks to municipal bodies alone. The CEOs will head special purpose vehicles (SPV) for each city like that for Metro rail projects where managing directors are sole in-charge.

'Rentals rising in central parts of Chennai to Karapakkam on OMR'

From P 1

In RMZ IT Park deals are now getting inked at nearly Rs 56 a square foot as against Rs 49 earlier.

Part of the reason, which the developers and real estate consultants attribute is the shift that city witnessed from commercial to residential. "For a good three years now, developers chased residential buyers and flooded the market with apartments giving the commercial and IT space a miss. That is coming to haunt the industry now," an industry official said.

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"Outlook looks good from a demand standpoint, but bad from supply side," Ramaswamy said.

past quarter: During January-March 2016, deals were completed for nearly 8 lakh square feet as against one million square feet a year ago. "January-March 2015 was an aberration as a lot of pending deals were completed then. That said, the future appears strong from demand pipeline," Knight Frank's Krishnan said.

For a city which is limping away from disastrous floods last December, the expansion programme of several top notch companies is welcome. "Rentals are rising in central parts of the city and up to Karapakkam on the OMR. By end year, all existing supplies will dry up which will force developers to pour more concrete into projects," she said.



Shopper Gogoi loves drumsticks
Guwahati: Asam CM Tarun Gogoi on Sunday shopped at a local market here, buying vegetables and herbs. With 'Rongali Bihu' round the corner, Gogoi was at the weekly Beltola market where hawkers sell vegetables and other products from across the state and Meghalaya. As he bought squash, gourd, drumstick, brinjals, Gogoi asked vendors about their profit margins.

Bengal heatmap in poll-bound districts
Kolkata: The western districts, including Burdwan and Bankura that vote Monday are reeling under a heatmap. "Heatwave conditions are likely to continue for at least 3-4 days," the local Met office said. Asansol recorded 41.9°C, Burdwan 41.5 and Bankura the highest at 44.2°C.

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