

ASSAM ELECTION RESULTS What does it mean for Bangladesh?

THE results of the recently held Assembly Elections in Assam are of great significance to Bangladesh. Firstly, the BJP-led alliance has won with an agenda which is apparently directly detrimental to Bangladesh interests. Secondly, the same BJP is in power in Delhi and the centre's choice, Sarbananda Sonowal, who led BJP in the elections, is the Chief Minister - designate. In order to understand and appreciate the currents and cross-currents in Assam politics, it is perhaps necessary to delve into the past. In 1905, the British government created the province of East Bengal and Assam with Dhaka, as its capital. However in 1911, the partition was annulled, and Assam, with Sylhet district, become a separate Governor's province with Shillong as its capital. Assam was included in the demand for Pakistan, as Muslims were a single-religionist majority in the province. However, at the time of independence in 1947, a referendum was held only in Sylhet district to determine whether it should join Pakistan. Though the outcome of the vote was in favour of Pakistan, most part of Karimganj, a subdivision of Sylhet, was unjustly given to India by the Radcliffe Commission. Contrary to expectations or understanding, no adjoining Muslim-majority areas like Hailakandi or Goalpara was awarded to Pakistan. During the British colonial rule, large numbers of Bengali-speaking settlers had gone to Assam from districts like Mymensingh, Dhaka, Rangpur, Faridpur and Noakhali, initially at the instance of the British government to bring under cultivation large tracts of barren land.

They happened to be mostly Muslims. These settlers made Brahmaputra valley their home, fought against all odds, and made Assam an agriculturally productive land. History tells us that leaders like Maulana Bhashani and Abdul Matin Choudhury fought for their (settlers') rights during the Bordoilo government. At the time of independence in 1947, Assam was not included in Pakistan, and those settlers became automatically Indian citizens. Till 1946, a Muslim League government, with Sir M. Saadullah as the Chief Minister, was in power in Assam. At the 1946 elections, Congress, under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi, made an alliance with Jamaat-e-Ulema Hind and won majority seats in the Assembly elections. Bengali-speaking Jamaat Ministers like Muttaleb Majumder and Maulana Abdur Rashid held important cabinet posts. However, the Bordoilo government wanted to initiate a Bongal-Kheda Andolon (Drive away the Bengalees), but subsequently this initiative fizzled out. After partition, the Muslims of Assam became loyal, law-abiding Indian citizens, and generally, Congress supporters. There were also some staunch followers of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who were ardent Congressites even from before and played important roles in the national politics. One of them, (Late) Fakruddin Ali Ahmed was elected the president of the Republic of India. The Muslims, whether Assamese speaking or Bengali-speaking, never joined any insurgency or armed confrontation, though these have been rampant all over North-east India including Assam. Though there has been generally religious

harmony among the Assamese speaking people of Assam, there have been occasional riots and attacks on the Bengali speaking settlers. In places like Neela and Manash, hundreds of settlers lost their lives and homes, though they had completely identified themselves with the Assamese and had tried to integrate into the society. With a brief interlude, when the ultra Assamese Nationalist party AGP (Assam Gono Parishad) under Mohanto's leadership formed government, Assam has been under Congress rule. However, many among the minority communities felt that their interests have not been properly and adequately protected under the Congress rule, Badruddin Ajmal, a perfume-tycoon-turned politician, formed All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), a secular party adhering to democratic principles and protection of minority interests. The party has been, since the last three elections, participating in both Lokshava (Parliament) and Bidhan Shava (Assembly) elections and gained notable representatives. Ajmal was also elected to the Parliament. They mostly fought elections independently. This year, AIUDF was very keen on forging an alliance with the secular Congress party, and unlike PDF in Kashmir, avoided any possible coalition with the Hindu-nationalist BJP. Another factor has become significant in Assam's politics in the last two decades. This has been the emergence of Bodo political force. Bodos are an indigenous tribal people living in the plains. They constitute 16 percent of Assam's population of 2.7 million and the Muslims are a little less than one third. In

1993, the all Bodo students' organisation started a movement for an autonomous Bodo region for protection of Bodo rights. This eventually became an armed struggle, and eventually a settlement was made both by the central and the provincial governments with the Bodo Liberation Tigers' Force (BLTF). A Bodoland Territorial Council was formed with Kokrajhar as its capital. However, this continued to remain politically a part of the state of Assam. In the last general election in 1911, Tarun Gogoi, the Congress leader forged an alliance with them and formed a government. This time BJP identified its interests with the BPF (Bodo People's Front - which is anti-immigrant) and with AULP (Ultra Assamese Nationalists) and the results has been a tremendous victory for them. This time, many of the central Congress leaders were willing to strike an alliance with Ajmal's secular AIUDF. However, Tarun Gogoi was adamant not to join hands with AIUDF, apprehending that in case of a victory, he will have to share power with a Bengali-speaking leader. Interestingly, Ajmal is now more Assamese than many others and has shown great interest for working hand in hand with Congress. Tarun Gogoi, it seems, now has to pay heavy price for his short-sighted strategy. If Congress could have struck a working alliance with AIUDF, the results might have been a little different. It seems now that if all the secular forces do not work together, Gwahati (the provincial capital) will always remain "Hanuj Door Ast" -- a little too far, for them. The following table will show how big has been BJP's gain-- The election pledges of the BJP (and its

coalition partners) have been vehemently anti-immigrant. They have pledged to seal the Bangladesh-India (Assam) border and send back all the Bengali speaking settlers whom they consider to be illegal. BJP leaders have even said-- "if a Hindu immigrant comes from Bangladesh, we will give him shelter and nationality. But if the immigrant is a Muslim, we will push him back." We do hope that now that they are in power, the BJP-led coalition, will overcome the election fever, and appreciate the ground realities. Bangladesh, of course, would like to live in peace with all her neighbours, but cannot take the burden of refugees, if they are expelled from their country. For the sake of connectivity, Bangladesh also cannot appreciate a sealed border. The people and the government of Bangladesh will have to be careful and alert in order to safeguard the nation's interests. We would, of course, offer our congratulations to Sarbananda Sanowal, the Chief Minister, designate of Assam and wish his government well in its arduous political journey ahead. The writer is former Chairman of the Privatisation Commission and a columnist.

Seats in Assembly Elections		
	2011	2016
BJP	5	60
BPF (Bodo)	12	12
AGP	10	14
Congress	78	26
AIUDF	18	13

Getting the best out of a youthful nation

SAKIB Khan's family has six members. The parents and two sons, aged between 20 and 55 years, earn a livelihood, while the two daughters aged below 15 attend school. As most of the members earn, they can save a good amount, as well as pay taxes. The same family, after fifteen years, will have ten members, as the two sons will marry and will probably have at least two children each, and the two daughters, who were school students fifteen years back, will be married off. Mr. Sakib's two daughters-in-law will also probably be employed, but Mr and Mrs Sakib will retire as they will have crossed 65. So, the total dependent members of the family will be sixty percent, where ratios of saving and taxes to the government will drastically decline. Bangladesh is thus passing through what is called a "demographic dividend". Sixty-six percent of our population is aged between 15 and 64 years, and belong to the workforce. By 2030, the population of this age group would rise to 70 percent, but then it will start declining, according to the UNDP's Asia Pacific Human Development Report launched in Dhaka on April 26. Nineteen percent of the country's population is between 15 and 24 years, which holds immense potential, but the number will decline after 2030 as is the case of the future scenario of Mr. Sakib's family. The number of people aged above 60 years in the country is now 11 million, which would be 22 million in 2030 and 44 million in 2050. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' latest report, only 6 lakh jobs were created in the last two years, whereas some 15-20 lakh new candidates prepare for the job market every year. So what happens to the young men and women who remain jobless? Some five lakh (mainly men) of them go abroad every year, mainly to the oil-rich Arab countries, or to Singapore and Malaysia. But how do they fare overseas? A common allegation regarding overseas labour migration is that they have to pay high amounts of money to finance their migration, and that a large portion of the migrants get low wages. To recoup the money that they had raised, either by selling properties or borrowing, they opt to work extra hours. Many of them leave their jobs for higher wages, but that makes their status 'undocumented'. They become more vulnerable to detention, abuse and deportation. The case of Malaysia can be cited where presently an estimated three lakh of the total six lakh Bangladeshis remain undocumented. Recent pictures circulating on social media show the young men hiding in the jungles to avoid being arrested.



A demographic dividend -- how do we make the most of it? SHAFIQUK ISLAM KAJOL / DRIK NEWS

Despite the risks, young people migrate abroad in flocks. The stories of Bangladeshi migrants dying in the Bay of Bengal or the Mediterranean have become commonplace. When mass graves of migrants were discovered in Thai and Malaysian borders in May last year, there was a pertinent question as to why Bangladeshis take such risky sea journeys when they are not fleeing war or persecution, as is the case with Rohingya migrants. Why are these youths - migrating legally and illegally - so desperate? Obviously, the dearth of job opportunities at home and higher income abroad are the major push factors. The Asia Pacific Human Development report says 77 percent people earn below \$3.1 a day, and 44 percent

earn below \$1.9, while adding that 85 percent people are in vulnerable employment. Thus a large portion of the workforce at home are engaged in jobs that are ill-paid and menial, while the same is true for those working abroad as they do back-breaking jobs that the Arabs or the Malaysians avoid. The cities of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Kuala Lumpur might not have been built had it not been for the sweat and blood of the migrant workers from Bangladesh. Farmers, despite continuous low prices of their produce, are toiling to feed this nation; garment workers, despite 12 hours of work at minimum wage, are keeping the sector competitive; migrant workers, despite their

struggle, are sending remittances to keep the balance of payments strong. Thus most of our young people, whether at home or abroad, are earning much less than what they had aspired to, or do not have any job at all. The simple reason for this underutilisation is a lack of investment - both domestic and foreign - to create jobs. There is a mismatch between the skills acquired by the youth and the skills demanded by the market. This can be easily concluded when thousands of foreigners - Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans - are found working in technical and mid-level managerial positions in Bangladesh's RMG and telecom industries, and when most Bangladeshi migrants are found at the lower tier of the job market in the Middle East, Singapore or Malaysia. Such a scenario is actually pushing down the huge potential that this nation has. Authorities must act promptly to help young people best utilise their talents by creating jobs, providing more opportunities for developing skills and helping them become entrepreneurs. This will take the national economy to a new height by contributing to the GDP and tax revenue, giving the government the opportunity to prepare for a time when there will be more dependents as the population growth rate declines. The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

BABY BLUES

BY RICK KIRKMAN & JERRY SCOTT

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Criticize harshly
- "All in the Family" spinoff
- Castor's mother
- "Gold finger" singer
- Infamous czar
- Sigh, say
- Hall of Famer Joe
- Hall of Famer Roberto
- Pill type
- Orange tuber
- UFO pilot
- Lived
- Fish eggs
- Makes addresses
- Hall of Famer Leo
- Hall of Famer Jackie
- Slow passage
- "Othello" villain
- Repetitive chant
- Musician Lofgren
- Church replies
- Merriment

DOWN

- Glided
- Jacob's son
- First person
- Shackle
- Wise saying
- "...who lived in -"
- Much of N. Amer.
- Singer Shannon
- Retina setting
- Sire
- Secluded spot
- Russian refusal
- Account
- Ambu lance workers, for short
- King or queen
- Noted baseball family
- Docking site
- Eins und zwei
- Caveat
- "Yippee!"
- Heart, for one
- Change
- Enter the regatta
- Lusty look
- Rocket part
- Copying
- Poorly lit
- Had lunch

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P	R	I	G		B	E	A	T
S	E	N	O	R	P	I	N	T
H	A	S	T	E	A	N	T	O
A	D	A	W	I	N	G	I	N
W	I	N	C	I	N	G	R	E
N	E	A	R	S	B	E	D	
					R	E	U	S
P	L	Y			L	I	N	D
A	R	I			W	I	N	D
W	I	N	K	I	N	G	L	O
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R	E	N	T	S		R	A	T
E	D	G	E			N	E	S

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