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Spotlight on Assam

Revised May 2024



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Revised May 2024

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India – Spotlight on Assam

Contents

General background	2
Political background	3
The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)	3
The Assam Healing Act	4
Conclusion	5

General background



Assam is a state in the north-east of India with tremendous linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity. As per the World Christian Database (WCD, accessed March 2023), the state has a population of just over 36 million people; Hinduism is the largest religion with 21 million adherents (58% of the state population). Islam comes next with over 12 million adherents (34% of the population); Christianity has 2,520,000 adherents (7% of the population). In terms of caste and indigenous identity, Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) form a significant part of the population and play an important role in the state.

Dalits make up more than two million (7.15%) and Adivasis more than five million (12.44% of the total state population).¹

Assamese is a major language representing the Indo-Aryan group. The Northeast is also a very ethnically diverse region with more than 200 distinct ethnic groups. The majority ethnic groups in Assam are Assamese (48%) and Bodo² (30% of the population). Assam also shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh; the latter has become an area for refugee crisis and conflict. An historical xenophobia against the 'Bangladeshi' (an identity that has been

¹ Percentages of the SC (Dalit) and Adivasi (ST) population have been taken from the Census 2011 figures but the real numbers have been indexed and calibrated according to WCD 2023 numbers.

² Bodo is the majority ethnic group in Bodoland Territorial Region, an autonomous region and proposed state in Assam. It comprises of five districts on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river below the foothills of neighboring country Bhutan and neighbouring state of India, Arunachal Pradesh.

‘othered’ on the basis of territory, religion and language that often extends to people of West Bengal³ who migrate to Assam as well) has led to Assam being the birthplace of legislation such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) used in conjunction with National Registry of Citizens (NRC) to exclude Muslims from citizenship and legalize discrimination against them.⁴

Political background

Assam has a State Assembly of 126 seats. The last elections were conducted in 2021 with the incumbent nationalist Hindutva party BJP winning 75 seats. It was the first time in the history of the state that a non-Congress party won consecutive elections. Since 2001, the Congress party had governed the state under the leadership of Tarun Gogoi until the BJP won the elections in 2016 under the leadership of Sarbananda Sonowal, one of the most prominent BJP leaders in Assam and responsible for building up the party’s popularity in the state. The other top contender for the BJP was Himanta Biswas Sarma. Sarma was a former member of the Congress party but switched to the BJP in 2015. Sarma became a cabinet minister in Sonowal’s 2016 government.

In the 2019 general national elections, out of a total of 14 seats, the BJP won nine seats (upswing of seven votes) while the Congress party won three seats (no change from previous elections) and the Muslim party AIUDF won one seat (downswing of two seats). Despite a significant climate of anti-incumbency and allegations of corruption,⁵ Biswa Sarma has been keen to retain political dominance in Assam and he won over the BJP central leadership to become the Chief Minister of Assam in 2021. Sarma has practiced right-wing Hindutva politics not just in Assam but has also played a crucial role in political brokering for the BJP in other northeastern states. Sarma’s xenophobic speeches and his government policy regarding immigrants (all of them referred to as Bangladeshis illegally entering India) have induced widespread violence and evictions of migrant settlements in Assam.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

The central BJP-ruled government has introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which was passed in 2019 but only implemented in March 2024, ahead of the national general elections.⁶ The CAA permits non-Muslim communities or refugees from neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who entered India before 2014 to obtain Indian citizenship. Only Muslim refugees from neighboring countries have been excluded. This is a cynical move by the BJP to divide the Indian voters on the basis of religion, hoping that Hindu voters consolidate against religious minorities. This is of special importance in the states of West Bengal and Assam where many non-Muslim refugees from Bangladesh enter India. Because of adverse socio-political conditions in their home countries, these non-Muslim refugees often harbor an anti-Muslim sentiment and naturally favor the BJP in the Indian elections. These refugee communities voted for the BJP in 2019 on the promise that they will get Indian citizen-

³ The term ‘Bangladeshi’ is used against people from West Bengal since they too, like Bangladeshis, speak Bengali.

⁴ <https://scroll.in/article/976739>

⁵ <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/if-anyone-can-show-proof-assam-cm-on-rs-10-crore-subsidy-controversy-wife-to-file-suit-against-congress-mphimanta-11694701010703.html>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/11/india-implements-anti-muslim-2019-citizenship-law-weeks-before-election>

ship and the BJP is hoping to retain their vote in the general elections of 2024.

It should be noted that the CAA - in conjunction with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) - was implemented in the state of Assam in 2019 on a preliminary basis. During the trial, many Hindu and other non-Muslim refugees from Bangladesh who entered before 2014 could not show any documents to prove that they had indeed entered India before 2014. As a result, they were rejected from the NRC and the entire exercise resulted in hundreds of thousands of Hindus feeling disproportionately targeted by the authorities. As a result, the Assam government and Himanta Biswa Sarma (the BJP chief minister) have been very cautious about the any full implementation of the CAA in Assam.⁷

The Assam Healing Act

Given the minimal benefits from the CAA, Sarma is likely to try and polarize the Assamese electorate on the basis of religious division. The 2024 Healing Practices Act is an indication that the state will use legislation to harass and intimidate Christians from rural Assam, especially unorganized independent or non-denominational groups. Similarly, it is also quite likely that Sarma will directly or indirectly try and target Muslims in the weeks ahead of the 2024 elections.

As reported in the Hindustan Times on 26 February 2024, the BJP-ruled Assam government led by Hemanta Biswa Sarma passed a bill called the Assam Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Act 2024.⁸ The stated objective of this new Act is to prevent traditional healing with ulterior motives. According to an Indian Express report dated 22 February 2024, in mid-February just days before tabling the bill, Chief Minister Sarma had stated that the aims of the Bill is to curb evangelism by Christians, claiming that healing is used to ‘convert tribal people’.⁹ Healing practice is defined as a ‘traditional holistic approach to heal body, mind and spirit of human beings with traditional medicine and art including any system, treatment, diagnosis or practise for ascertainment, cure, relief, correction of any human diseases, ailment, deformity, injury or enhancement of a condition or appearance’. Evil practices are defined as “commission of any act of healing practices and magical healing, by any person, with a sinister motive to exploit common people’.

The penalty for offenders ranges from one to three years imprisonment along with a fine of Rs. 50,000 (approximately 600 USD). Repeat offenders may be imprisoned for up to five years with a fine of Rs. 100,000 (approximately 1,200 USD). The Act authorises police officers to enter and inspect places where they believe an offence has been committed or is “likely to be committed”. The Indian Express report cited above also reports that the Assam Christian Forum stated that the Chief Minister’s assertions about Christians engaged in magical healing was misguided and needless. They pointed out that ‘prayer is a universal practice across religions used to invoke divine healing’.

⁷ <https://scroll.in/article/1065208/betrayal-by-bjp-why-caa-rules-might-not-help-hindu-bengalis-left-out-of-assam-nrc>

⁸ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/assam-assembly-passes-legislation-banning-magical-healing-opp-raises-doubts-101708933007693.html>

⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bill-to-eliminate-magical-healing-tabled-in-assam-assembly-9174132/>

Conclusion

The Assam Chief Minister Hemanta Biswa Sarma has been projecting himself as a radical and strong Hindu leader not just for Assam but for the entire northeastern region with its significant Christian population. With the general elections due to be held in April 2024, the BJP is looking to polarize Assamese society along religious lines hoping to consolidate Hindu voters against Christians (and Muslims). The overly broad definitions of ‘evil practices’ and ‘healing practices’ in the Assam Healing Act will open the way for police officers to intimidate and harass Christians and their places of worship since police are authorized to enter and inspect places where healing is ‘likely to be committed’. Further, sweeping powers now held by the police under this Act will in turn create self-censorship and fear amongst the Christian communities in Assam.