

Four states in election mode: A tale of ‘anti-incumbency’

The ongoing elections in four Indian states provides a glimpse of how the phenomenon of ‘anti-incumbency’ unveils itself in the Indian political settings

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A few hours from now, voters in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu will queue up at polling stations to elect their new state government, with West Bengal voting in the first of the two phases, and Tamil Nadu in its single phase. The 2026 cycle involves assembly elections in five Indian states, including Assam, Puducherry, Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. With Assam, Puducherry and Kerala voting on April 9th, this year’s election cycle provides unique glimpses of how the phenomenon of ‘anti-incumbency’ or the aversion of voters to the existing governments/parties pan out in the Indian political settings. Through a holistic description of the political conditioning in these states, the authors – political scientists based at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy – take a deeper look at this phenomenon, which could manifest itself through the results that could be out on May 4th.

Home page image: *Voters queue up at a polling station in West Bengal during the 2021 assembly election; photo source - Wikimedia Commons*

Text page image: *Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an election road show in West Bengal*

Banner image: *A drone shot of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin addressing an election rally*

Five state assemblies go to the polls this April: Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry. The results of these elections will be announced on May 4th.

India has always performed remarkably more as an electoral democracy than as a participatory one. Turnout at voting booths has improved year after year; elections and by-elections take place at regular intervals.

The Election Commission of India (ECI or commonly referred to as the EC) has undertaken its duty as the caretaker and manager of polls. However, what has not happened regularly is the transfer of power from one party to another.

Over the last seven decades, there have been only [7 times](#) when governments were formed by a different party post-election at the centre. India ranks highest in the world in anti-incumbency sentiment, with [the incumbent party](#) replaced by other parties 50 per cent of the time.

Of the 4 poll-bound states, only Kerala has shown signs of anti-incumbency, since neither of the two prominent coalitions – the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI(M), and the Indian National Congress (INC)-led United Democratic Front (UDF) – has been re-elected since 1985.



The incumbents: From left to right – Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan, West Bengal CM Mamta Banerjee and Tamil Nadu CM M K Stalin

It was only in 2021 that this pattern was broken when the LDF government was re-elected for the first time, creating history.

Indian voters have been harsh towards incumbent leaders. However, this anti-incumbency sentiment [pans out differently](#) for parties and for individual elected representatives. This report provides a discussion of how anti-incumbency will make its impact in the ongoing assembly elections in four states – West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam.

West Bengal

Since 2011, West Bengal has been governed by the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC, often referred to as the TMC), headed by Mamta Banerjee. The TMC is expected to win

West Bengal again, this time, although the competition is tight with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) breathing down its neck.

Mamata Banerjee has been the TMC president for 28 years now, with the party working around the 'aura' of Banerjee, who has been the Chief Minister of West Bengal since May 2011. The working committee of the party is nominated and not elected. Within the party, the challenge is minimal.

When Mamata Banerjee released her [list of party candidates](#) for the upcoming assembly election on March 17, it shocked everyone as one-third of the legislature was dropped overnight, with 74 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) being removed from the list.



West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee addressing an election rally

Vivek Gupta, who represented Jorasanko and is one of the sitting MLAs who was not renominated, [remarked to a local media outlet](#): "We are loyal soldiers of the party. Whatever the party expects from us, we do." Gupta was thanking the leader or the party who had just ended his political career.

This was not a purge but a calculated organisational reset. Banerjee is supposed to have a sizable chunk of sitting MLAs ostensibly to protect her brand. It was a pre-emptive strike against anti-incumbency before voters could deliver it.

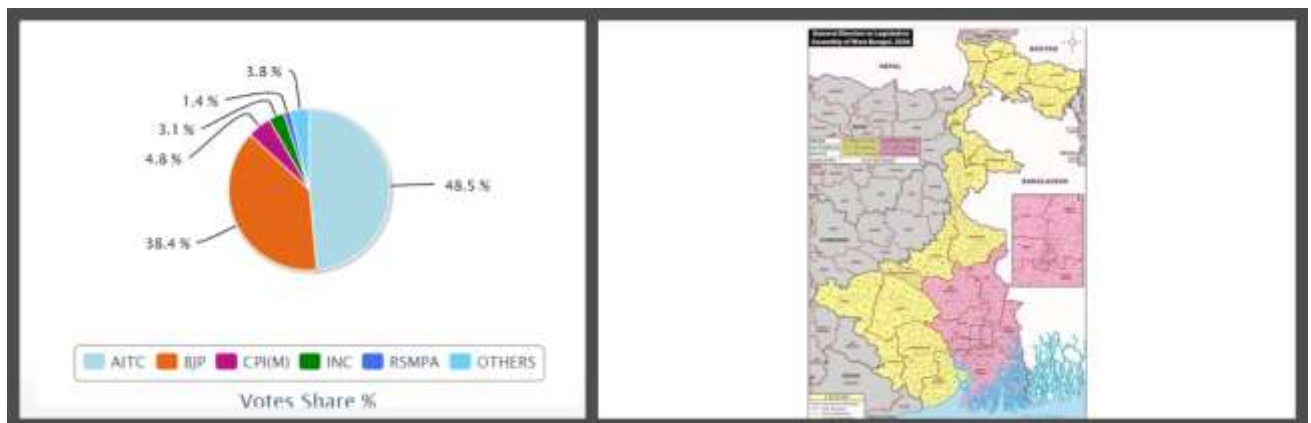
Accountability, even if selective, was delivered to the electorate through such clinical political action. Anti-corruption is one of the leading arguments used by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) against the TMC in the state.

The MLAs and Members of Parliament (MPs) of the TMC are alleged to be mired in many corruption scandals during the years the TMC was in power in the state. These include the Narada Tape Scandal, Cash-for-Query, Sandeshkhali, PDS, and SSC Teacher Scam, to name a few.

Notwithstanding the 'cleansing' exercise through mass jettisoning of sitting MLAs, there are instances like in the case of Jyotipriya Mallick, an accused in the PDS scam, who has been given a ticket for the upcoming Assembly elections.

Voters may know about the [Sandeshkhali](#) violence, where Sheikh Shahjahan faced serious allegations of land grabbing and sexual assault, but they were unable to foresee the BJP, or any other party/coalition, as a government in waiting.

Yet none of these scams and scandals would translate into electoral punishment. The failure of opposition parties in West Bengal to convert the corruption allegations into effective political campaigns could be a possible reason.



Vote share of parties in the 2021 West Bengal assembly election (left), and the assembly constituencies of the 2026 election (right)

The BJP's surge in Bengal, for instance, has been real, [from 10.3 per cent in 2016 to 38 per cent in 2021](#). Yet, it is still perceived as an external 'Delhi force' with no organic roots in Bengal. This is despite the last assembly election in 2021, [reflecting a narrow margin](#) between the 2 parties.

In 44 constituencies, the [deletion of voters](#) as part of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the Election Commission of India (ECI or EC) has been bigger than the winning margin in the 2021 polls. Out of these 44 seats, TMC won 24, and BJP won 20 in the 2021 assembly election. This year, so far, any different result looks unlikely.

With consistent immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh and a reported reduction in birth rates amongst Hindu families, the [Hindu population is supposed to have](#)

[considerably decreased](#). In contrast, reports suggest that the [Muslim population has increased](#) to 30 per cent (with some districts showing an increase of more than 60 per cent).

The decrease in the Hindu population in West Bengal from [78.45 per cent in 1951 to 70.54 per cent in 2011](#) is attributed to reduced birth rate. Most of the [educated youth have left the state](#) in search of greener pastures in other states and/or other countries.

Despite these being ripe conditions for 'anti-incumbency' sentiments, most of the MLAs have been [able to retain their seats](#) – 72 per cent in 2016 and 63 per cent in 2021. On the other hand, West Bengal, besides being [amongst the largest states](#) in India with over 294 assembly seats, has seen [election-related violence](#) as a recurring phenomenon. The 2021 assembly polls are considered to be the bloodiest, [with 278 instances of violence](#), as per the ACLED.

Violence in Bengal is not incidental; it is considered to be organisational. Political violence serves as a suppression mechanism, concentrated in opposition strongholds, [designed to depress](#) the turnout. This pattern is more commonly seen in the areas where the ruling TMC is assumed to be on a weak footing.

When [booth-level intimidation](#) is a [campaign strategy](#), electoral outcomes reflect not just preference but also fear. At the same time, the TMC has used populist methods effectively, especially the government-run [welfare policies](#) like Lakshir Bhandar, Khadya Sathi, Banglar Yuva Sathi, Kanyasree, etc.

These policies have supposedly been instrumental in keeping Banerjee's dominance intact for all these years. On April 23rd and 29th, people will have to choose between these welfare-named freebies for the short run or law and order for the long run.

The SIR revisions of electoral rolls, [officially aimed at removing duplicate, deceased and ineligible voters](#), will indeed play a crucial role in the West Bengal elections. With [over 91 lakh voters reportedly deleted](#) through the SIR exercise, resulting in the Supreme Court's intervention, there can be an unexpected series of events that could unfold in the state, especially if this deletion is seen to have influenced the outcome in any manner.



Muslim women after voting in the 2021 West Bengal assembly election; photo source - Wikimedia Commons

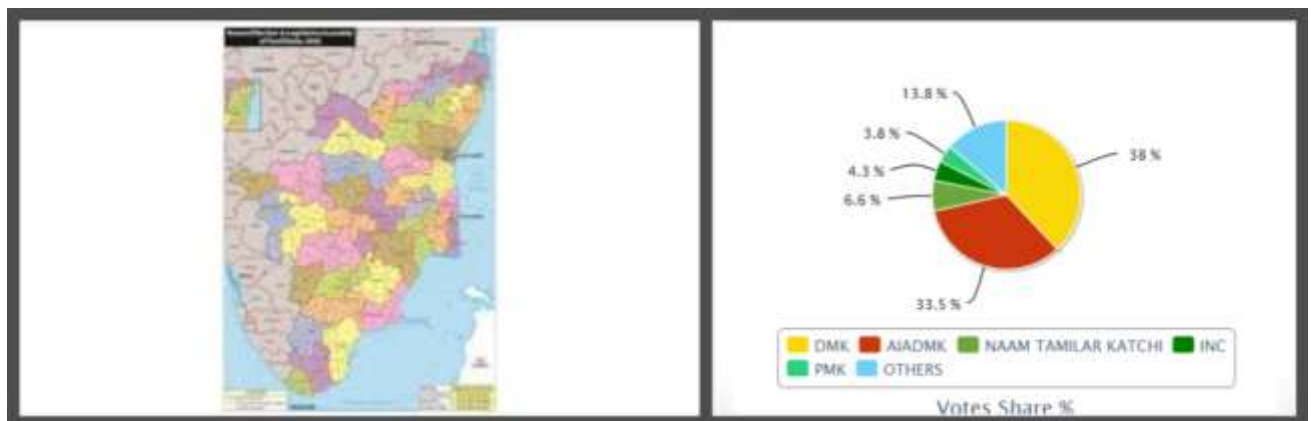
The mass deletion of voters through the [SIR is likely to affect the vote bases of both the TMC and the BJP](#). As per the 2021 results, a 1-2 per cent swing in around 44 assembly seats like Purba (5) and Pashchim (5) Bardhaman (5), Nadia (5), Pashchim Mednipore (4), North 24 Parganas (4) Dakshin Dinajpur (3), Murshidabad (3), Cooch Behar (3), Purba Medinipore (2) and Howrah (2) are expected to bring a 15-20 seats advantage to the BJP.

Any such swing, even if driven more by electoral-roll revisions than by shifts in voter preference, could be read as evidence of anti-incumbency in the state. Likewise, it would be historic for the TMC to lose such a relatively larger share of seats.

Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has its current Chief Minister, M.K. Stalin, from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in office since May 2021. The DMK has a 50-50 survival chance given its strong ideological base, unlike the personalistic politics of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and the TMC in West Bengal.

Tamil Nadu offers the only data point worth studying, as the leading Dravidian parties managed to politically survive and sustain despite the death of their patriarchs. Even after the demise of the DMK leader Karunanidhi, the party continue to flourish, operating smoothly and gaining power.



Map of Tamil Nadu assembly constituencies in the 2026 election (left), and the vote share of parties in the 2021 assembly election (right)

The AIADMK, on the other hand, did not pass the same test after the death of its omnipotent leader, Jayalithaa, who ruled for 3 decades. Having splintered into various factions, the AIADMK is currently seen to be on the verge of becoming defunct.

M.K. Stalin, who has waited on the sidelines when his father reigned over the DMK and Tamil politics, has managed to build his own distinct political alliances, as well as rivals. Despite being the son of Karunanidhi, it took Stalin a long time to build the position he is now in.

From entering active politics in the 1980s to gaining the power as the party president in 2018, Stalin had to wait a long time in the line of succession. That process was not passive;

instead, it was organisational. Three years after Karunanidhi's death, Stalin won 159 of 234 seats in the first elections he faced as head of the DMK.

On the other hand, after Jayalalitha's death, the AIADMK split into multiple factions – the Sasikala faction, a faction led by O. Paneerselvam, and another led by Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

Not because they lost an election but because the party's leadership has been centralised for over 30 years, initially under its founder, M.G. Ramachandran, and later under Jayalalitha, whose death led to a leadership struggle and eventual splintering of the party.

On the other hand, [several corruption charges](#) have been raised against MK Stalin and his government by the opposition, which included the AIADMK alliance as well as an assortment of other political parties like the BJP, Naam Tamilar Katchi, Desiya Murapokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK), Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), and lately, V.K. Sasikala All India Puratchi Thalaivar Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AIPTMMK), which have alternated between electoral alliances. However, no credible investigations, prosecutions or convictions have happened so far.



AIADMK chief EPS with PMK leader Anbumoni Ramdoss (left), and actor and TVK chief Vijay Joseph (right) on a cycle during the election campaign in Kanyakumari district

The voters of Tamil Nadu have seen this script before. The Dravidian parties have traded corruption allegations across alternating governments for decades. What matters electorally is not the charge but the credibility of the challenger making it.

An alliance between a nationally commanding BJP and a fractured and weak AIADMK, led by EPS, does not yet command the kind of credibility that could challenge the current dominance of the DMK in Tamil Nadu.

Besides the ruling DMK and chief opposition AIADMK, amongst newer parties like the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), formed by popular actor-turned-politician Vijay in February 2024, is making some noise in Tamil Nadu's hugely crowded political scene.

Vijay's political establishment, however, is flimsy as he has no convincing political programme coming out of any movement or ideology. Pre-election polls estimate that

Vijay is likely to receive over 15 per cent of the vote, largely driven by his image, though not assumed to be by the merit of his political messaging.

Tamil Nadu is an interesting case when anti-incumbency is studied as an electoral phenomenon. While in 2011, only 38 per cent of incumbent MLAs were able to retain their seats, this number increased dramatically in 2021 to 60 per cent. However, in Tamil Nadu, there is [no clear advantage or disadvantage](#) for the incumbents.

Anti-incumbency in Tamil Nadu has not disappeared altogether. Rather, it is seen to have been neutralised by the absence of a viable alternative to the incumbents.

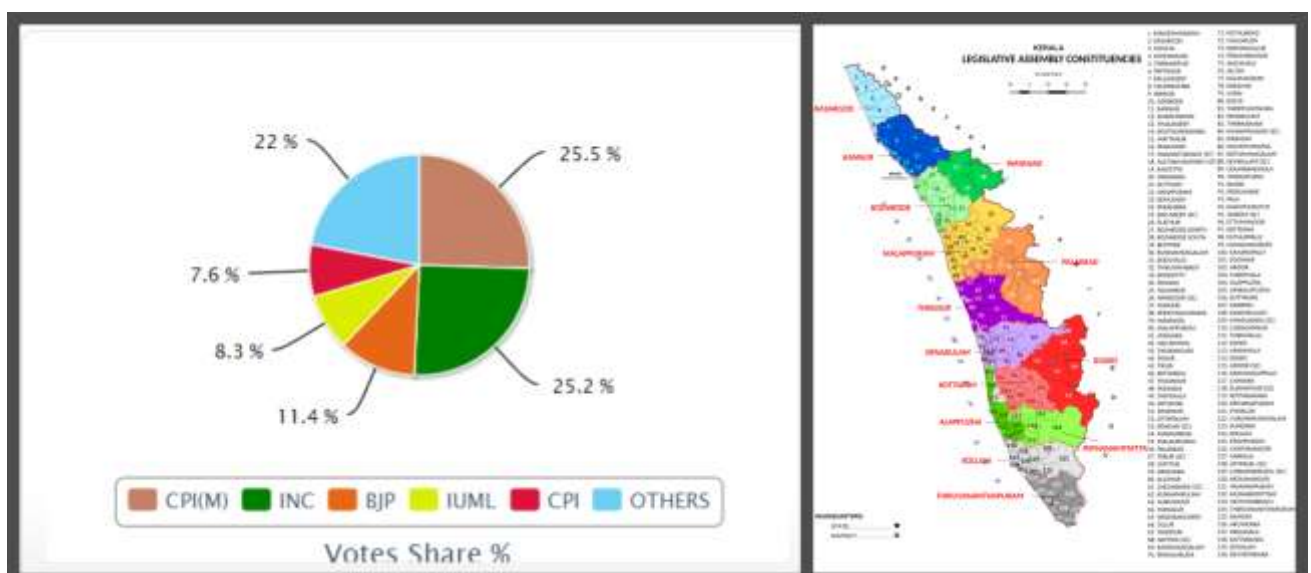
Kerala

Post-independence Kerala has witnessed the rise and fall of many political formations, revolving around Left and Centrist politics. This has shaped the politics of Kerala's initial decades until a larger political consolidation happened around two main political fronts – the Left Democratic Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the United Democratic Front, led by the Indian National Congress (INC).

The emergence of these two fronts in the 1980s has since shaped the bipolar nature of electoral outcomes and government formations in the state for the last few decades.

In 2011 and 2016, nearly 75–77 per cent of sitting MLAs were able to retain their seats. This number increased to 83 per cent in 2021. Stability here is not stagnation. It reflects a political culture built on genuine programmatic competition between two ideologically grounded blocs.

The year 1969 played a crucial role in strengthening the presence and increasing people's trust in the Communist parties. A set of land reforms was introduced in the state legislature to restructure the agrarian system and eliminate the generations-old 'Janmi-Kudiyar' (a feudal landlord-peasant binary practised in the state during the pre-independence period) system.



Vote share of parties in the 2021 Kerala assembly election (left), and the assembly constituencies in the 2026 election (right)

In Kerala, governance and the trust that the CPI(M) – which split from the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1964 – have brought in among the people ensured its survival. The party has played a significant role in the growth of Kerala in many spheres, bringing in land reforms, health improvements and social welfare. Kerala's human development indicators, among the best in India, are the compounded dividend of that founding intervention.

When CPI(M) asks for votes, it is asking voters to ratify a record, not a promise, though this political messaging has considerably changed in the last few years, with the narratives around 'development' and socio-economic progress being increasingly influenced and shaped by neo-liberal constructs.

Around 15 lakh tenant farmers received land rights due to the land reforms initiated by the EMS Namboodiripad-led government of the undivided Communist Party. It was one of the most consequential redistributive interventions in post-independence India, and created a material base of loyalty to the Left that has survived the political transformations for many decades.

However, in the upcoming polls, the BJP has emerged as a major force to reckon with in Kerala's politics. Rajeev Chandrashekar, who heads the party's Kerala unit, had blamed both the UDF and LDF governments for not [delivering on the promises they made](#). However, the BJP's challenge in Kerala is itself personality-driven and centrally commanded – the very model that cannot outlast its leader.

The LDF is not just asking Kerala to re-elect a government. It is asking voters to ratify an institution that is a fundamentally different and has a more durable electoral proposition. Yet, there is a strong [outcry this time in favour of the UDF](#) led by Congress as well.



Pinarayi Vijayan greets a child during his election campaign

Assam

The current BJP government in Assam, led by CM Hemant Biswa Sarma, has ruled the state for two consecutive terms. The Congress lost Assam to the BJP in 2016, and 42 per cent of the sitting MLAs also lost in that election.

Ten years later, under the BJP government, in 2021, [73 per cent of incumbents won](#). Vote Vibe, a public opinion platform, indicates [a high chance of the incumbent BJP](#) retaining power this year as well.

The swing in retention rates of 2021 is not just an electoral statistic. It reflects a wholesale realignment of Assam's political landscape around a potent organising plank: infiltration, identity, and promise of a demographically restored Assamese homeland.

The BJP has pivoted on the spectre of infiltration as its electoral messaging. Chief Minister Sarma, backed by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah, has been vocal about infiltrators. In the last five years, around [1.5 lakh bighas](#) have been [reported to have been freed](#) from infiltrators, especially those from the neighbouring Bangladesh, who supposedly illegally occupied areas in forest and remote regions of the state.

In a state where the indigenous Assamese communities have watched rapid demographic changes with deep anxiety for decades, the act of reclamation carries symbolic weight far beyond its administrative scale.



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma (left) and Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi (right), in respective election campaigns

Pradyut Bordoloi, a Congress MP since 2019, recently resigned from the party and formally joined the BJP, only to be instantly given a ticket to fight from the prestigious Dispur assembly seat. The sitting BJP MLA, Atul Bora, a veteran politician who joined the BJP in 2013, has alleged betrayal from his own party.

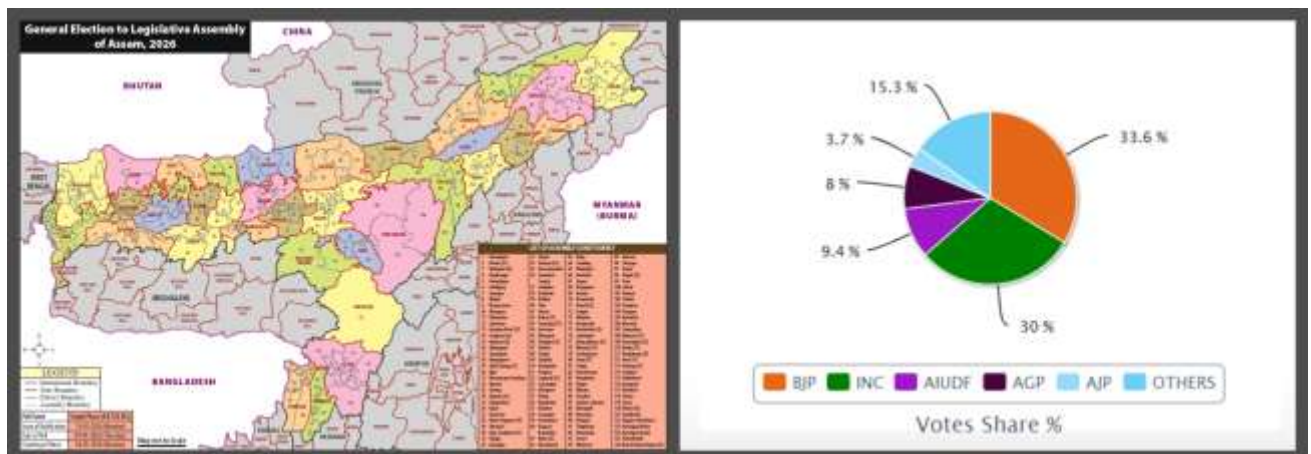
The BJP in Assam, for its part, is not building a movement, rather assembling a coalition of convenience. The cracks, however, are already visible!

The delimitation exercise reduced the Muslim-majority constituencies from 29 to 22, effectively eliminating around seven constituencies where Muslims have had a decisive say. It is an electoral map redrawn in the incumbent's favour, surgically eliminating constituencies where Muslim voters could have delivered decisive verdicts against the BJP.

This, interestingly, has happened in a state with a 34 per cent Muslim population, the highest among mainland Indian states. Evidently a profound democratic or demographic intervention, it has received far less scrutiny than it deserves.

The BJP-led government has transferred INR 3,600 crores to the bank accounts of 40 lakh women beneficiaries of the Orunodoi Scheme, with each beneficiary receiving around INR 9,000.

The opposition parties allege that the State government has ended up with a loan amounting to over INR 2 lakh crores in its effort to fund various cash payout schemes. The women who received INR 9,000 each are expected to vote with such arguments, likely to make a negligible impact.



Assembly constituencies of Assam in the 2026 election (left), and vote share of parties in the 2021 assembly election (right)

The BJP in Assam is pivoting a political strategy wherein the projected concerns over infiltration stoke anxiety, delimitation rigs the map, and Orunodoi buys the silence. This strategy seems to be working.

However, calculations, unlike convictions, could have an expiry date. Assam has not yet been asked whether it believes in the BJP. It has only been asked whether it fears the alternative. That is a very different, and far more fragile, kind of narrative.

Anti-incumbency as a phenomenon

Four states, four political ecosystems, four different incumbent strategies – the conclusion is strikingly uniform. Anti-incumbency rests on one precondition: a credible alternative.

In Bengal, it is perceived as external. In Tamil Nadu, it is organisationally hollow. In Kerala, it does not speak the local language. In Assam, it has not recovered from a decade of collapse.

The incumbents here are not winning because they governed well. They are winning because their opponents ran themselves into irrelevance. When the opposition hollows out, voters do not gain power. They lose it.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during an election campaign in Tamil Nadu, with AIADMK chief EPS by his side

The ballot box remains, but choice does not.

India calls itself the world's largest democracy. These four states are a quiet, uncomfortable reminder that size and health are not the same thing.

(Views expressed in this report are the authors' own.)

The authors, led by Professor Swetasree Ghosh Roy, are part of the [Jindal Policy Research Lab](#) at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, Sonapat, Haryana.