

## **America's gerrymandering comes to India.**

### **In Assam, it skews playing field before assembly poll begins**

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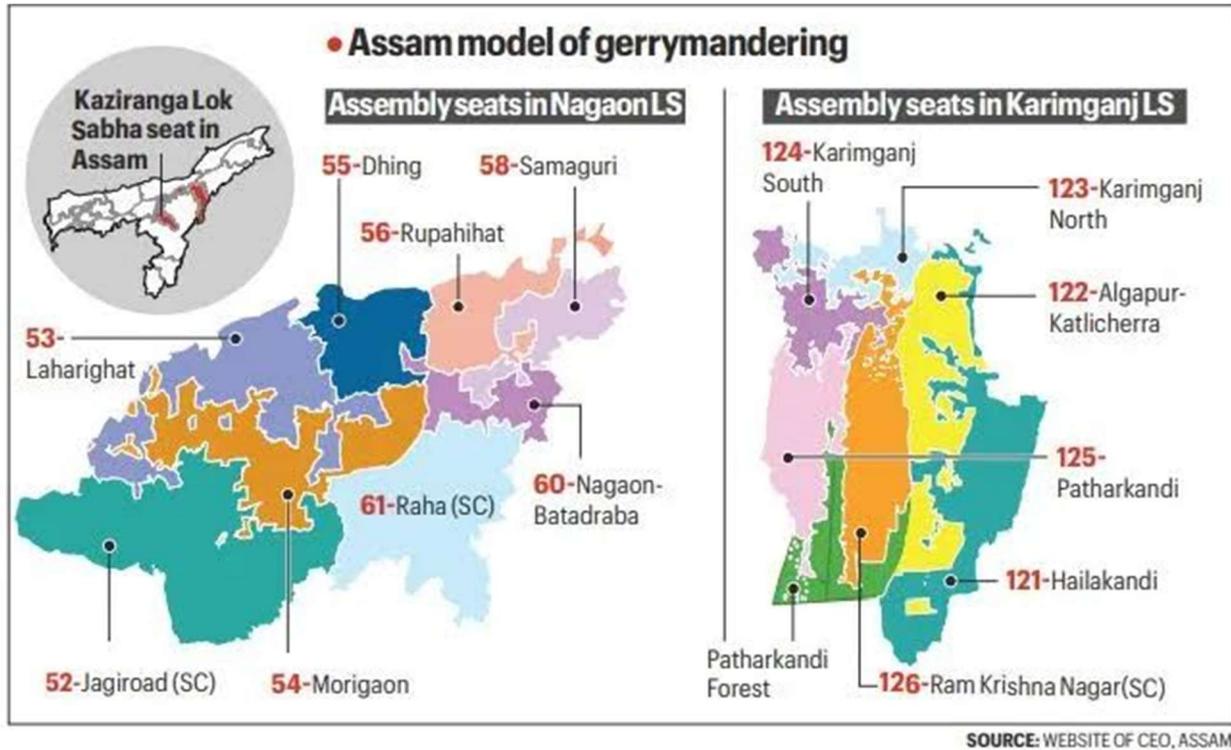


Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma

Let us call it “Himaling”. We do not know if he will continue to be Assam’s CM after the impending assembly elections. But Himanta Biswa Sarma has already earned a dubious distinction in the annals of Indian democracy. Just as Americans coined the word “gerrymandering” to remember Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry, who created a constituency resembling a salamander, India must honour the man who brought the science of gerrymandering to India. I propose “Himaling” to remember the mala-shaped constituency that was carved out to oust Himanta’s political rival.

We in India did not know much about gerrymandering. Those who did, knew it as an American disease that we were safe from. Unlike in the US, legislators in India do not have the power to draw electoral boundaries to their liking. The delimitation of constituency boundaries (“redistricting” in American lingo) is carried out here by a quasi-judicial body, the Delimitation Commission, headed by a judge, in association with the Election Commission. Tales of manipulation of a constituency boundary to suit one party or leader were not unheard of in the past, but for all its other flaws, the idea of a systematic and full-scale manipulation of the entire exercise to give the incumbent a permanent advantage was still alien to Indian democracy.

No longer. The latest delimitation of assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies for Assam, completed in 2023, has inaugurated the age of gerrymandering. This has grave implications for the forthcoming delimitation, due anytime after 2026. Much of the discussion around delimitation has focused, rightly so, on the reapportionment of Lok Sabha seats among states and the threat to federal balance. But little attention has been paid to this other aspect of delimitation, the routine redrawing of constituency boundaries that can be weaponised to favour the incumbent ruling party. Assam could well become a model for manipulation through delimitation in the rest of the country.



We can understand “Himaling” by looking at the mala- or collar-shaped constituency (Kaziranga-10) in Map-1, which depicts all Lok Sabha constituencies of Assam. This new constituency, carved out in the latest delimitation, replaces an earlier constituency Kaliabor. Sarma’s political rival, Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi, had won Kaliabor successively in 2014 and 2019. The latest delimitation erased Kaliabor, to be replaced by Kaziranga. More importantly, a weird, garland-like shape was given to the new constituency in order to remove all Muslim-dominated areas and stack it with BJP and AGP strongholds. As if someone had gone with a fine-tooth comb to carve out a seat that Gogoi could not possibly win. He was forced to shift.

If the idea of micro-targeted line-drawing of boundaries to suit political ends sounds like a conspiracy theory, take a look at the other two maps of assembly constituencies, which could be used in textbooks of Political Science to explain gerrymandering. Just focus on oddly shaped Karimnagar South and Hailakandi in Map-2 or Laharighat, Samaguri or Nagaon in Map-3. These shapes cannot possibly reflect a natural or administrative boundary. Note the islands of Laharighat inside the adjoining seat of Morigaon, something unheard of in Indian elections. You cannot make sense of these maps until you understand the religious demography of these areas — the boundaries of Laharighat and Karimnagar South simply pack all the Muslim areas, so as to make the adjacent constituency Hindu dominated. If the US has racial gerrymandering, the Indian version is religious or communal gerrymandering.

The Assam model uses all the standard mechanisms in the toolkit of electoral manipulation. Map-2 and Map-3 illustrate dual techniques of “cracking” and “packing”. Wherever possible, Muslim votes have been dispersed across multiple seats so as to dilute their impact. Given the sheer numbers of Muslim voters, this “cracking” strategy does not always work. In that case, “packing” all the Muslim pockets into one seat is the alternative. Muslims would have had a majority anyway; now they have a supermajority, which increases the margin of victory but does not change the number of seats. This reduces the effective weight of their vote. Kaziranga is a classic case of “stacking”: Stitch together localities of your influence in a way that a losing seat becomes a winnable seat.

The Assam model has added new mechanisms to the science of gerrymandering. Students of Political Science are yet to study this phenomenon in the depth it deserves. There is “padding” by increasing the number of seats in districts and regions where the ruling party feels safer. The opposite is “trimming”: The number of seats in Muslim-dominated districts has been reduced. This was achieved by using Census 2001 instead of Census 2011 as the basis of population and by a sudden reversal in the boundaries of districts just before the delimitation began. Finally, there was a well-known trick of “reserving” — several seats that had elected Muslim MLAs in the past were reserved for SC and ST.

The cumulative impact of this partisan delimitation was a reduction in the number of Muslim-majority seats, from 29 to 22. In political terms, it meant the vote-seat curve shifted in favour of the BJP: The ruling party now gets more seats for the same proportion of votes, while the proportion of “wasted votes” has gone up for the Opposition. Take the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 in Lower Assam, the region most affected by communal gerrymandering. The NDA (40.4 per cent) enjoyed a wafer-thin lead over INDIA (38.8 per cent) in terms of votes. But it translated into a lead in 35 segments for the NDA compared to just 13 for INDIA. That is the whole point of gerrymandering.

In case you wonder what Sarma has to do with all this — ostensibly an independent delimitation carried out by the Election Commission of India following due process of law — a series of public pronouncements by Sarma before, during and after the delimitation left nothing to the imagination. He began by setting a target of “reserving” 110 out of 126 seats in the assembly for “indigenous people”. When the draft was released, he endorsed it by saying “Assam should not be taken over by unfamiliar persons, and for that we worked religiously to protect jati [community], mati [land], and bhethi [foundation], so as to retain the political power in the hands of our people.”

After its completion, he “applauded” the 2023 delimitation exercise as “the state’s greatest achievement” and a “significant step towards safeguarding the interests of the indigenous population”, which would now control 106 out of 126 seats. Hence my proposal: It is HIMALING.

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