

Body language, not language, matters in Assam polls

Sonari (Assam) - As campaigning for the Assam elections gains momentum, the state has attracted a bevy of national leaders whose rallies are attended by huge crowds though they can't understand the speeches, delivered mostly in languages other than Assamese.

On many occasions, people do not have the faintest idea as to who the speaker is. But they never miss an opportunity to cheer or clap if the leaders raise a slogan or wave at them.

Elderly Makon Bora trekked two kilometres barefoot through a pebbled potholed road to attend an election rally. She mingled with a few hundred people at an open field here at Sonari, a small town in Sivasagar district some 400 km from the state's main city Guwahati.

The crowd lustily cheered and clapped as Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Sushma Swaraj waved at them from a makeshift podium. Makon clapped and cheered along with the others.

And in no time Swaraj took the microphone and was at her best, speaking in chaste Hindi and lashing out at Assam's ruling Congress party for allegedly encouraging Bangladeshi infiltrators.

Local politicians seated on the dais clapped. Within seconds, someone from among the crowd shouted 'BJP Zindabad' (Long Live BJP)! Immediately, a majority in the crowd, including Makon, repeated the slogan in unison.

Makon probably didn't understand a single word in the nearly 30-minute speech by Swaraj - she is an unlettered woman and understands nothing but Assamese.

'Maybe she spoke something good about our village. So I clapped along with the rest,' Makon replied with a smile when asked if she understood what Swaraj had spoken. She also admitted that she had no idea who the speaker was.

Assam goes to the polls to elect a 126-member legislature April 3 and April 10.

Like Makon, another elderly couple attended an election rally where Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee was speaking in Bengali.

'We understood a little bit of what he said. It is better if someone speaks in Assamese,' said Fulmoni Nath, a mother of two.

But it was worse when a few hardly known Telegu Desam Party (TDP) leaders addressed a meeting in English. The TDP is here to bolster the prospects of the main opposition Asom Gana Parishad (AGP).

Still the villagers cheered and were at the ground for the entire meeting, at times looking confused and staring at the speaker with a blank look.

'The body language of the speaker is more important than the language itself,' remarked an AGP leader. 'People do not get motivated or inspired by speeches. The show of strength and the tone and tenor of the leader at a rally are more important.'

Whether it is language or body language, elections are a fun time for people who are normally brought to the rallies with some bait.

'We were provided free lunch and Rs.50 for coming to the meeting,' a Congress supporter said at one meeting.

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