

Response to Regionalism: Rise and Decline of AGP Party in Assam

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ABSTRACT: The politics of Assam is more or less under the dominance of the Congress party till 1980s. The voters of the state had given the party majority support since 1952. The party was able to show its dominance compared to other political parties. But in 1985 with the emergence of regional political party Asom Ganna Parisad (AGP), the political scenery has changed in the state. It has created a challenge to the Congress hegemony. The AGP not only creates a strong support base in the state but also create a greater consensus amid the Assamese people regarding the issue of immigration. However, the party cannot hold the people base, inability to resolve the immigration issue. The present study draws a comprehensive outline of the AGP party as a regional force in the state politics of Assam. This paper also made an attempt to study and highlight the rise and decline of AGP in the state politics and the current trend of its political base.

KEYWORDS: AGP, Regional, Political Party, Election, Assembly.

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has been a significant aspect of Indian political system. Regionalism means a sense of belongingness towards a particular region compare to the nation as a whole. The term regionalism has two connotations. In the negative sense, it implies excessive attachment to one's home region in preference to the country or the state. In a positive sense, it is a political quality related to people's passion for their territory, language, culture and other aspects to protect and maintain their independent identity. Our country India has a diversified population structure. With numerous cultures, languages and identities India is a mosaic of regions each with unique challenges and aspirations. The sense of unity or individuality of people from different regions is very natural. It is possible to achieve the developments of our country through regional developments. In fact the satisfaction of the people and regional development of different regions is the key to national development. However inequality, local issues and economic underdevelopment between different regions may lead to regionalism.

Regional political parties have emerged as key players particularly since the 1980s and have been playing a decisive role in fulfilling local aspirations, advocating for greater autonomy and pushing for development that reverberates with specific regions. Unlike national parties, regional parties mostly focus on specific states or regions, championing aspirations and local issues. Regional political parties serve as the voice of these distinct regions, ensuring that the national policy landscape accommodates the diverse needs of the entire nation. These parties contribute to a more representative and inclusive governance by championing regional interest. They enhance political representation by providing platforms for marginalized communities to participate in the democratic process. They also contribute for promoting decentralized governance and federalism by advocating for state-particular issues. Besides, in coalition politics, the regional parties play a pivotal, multi-faceted and influencing role. The regional political parties, rooted in the socio-cultural and linguistic diversity, hold significant wave in formation and stability of coalition government in India. Their strength lies in their ability to mobilize support based on regional identity and concern. Moreover, their participation in national politics ensures that the interests of states are safeguarded. The regional political parties are typically born out of specific regional issues and as a consequence their agendas are thinly tuned to address the challenges. It may be said that where single party cannot enjoy an absolute majority, the regional political parties become kingmakers influencing the forms of national policies by leveraging their support to coalition governments. In Indian politics, identity is a potent force. The regional parties embody the unique identity of the regions they represent. They have had a profound impact on Indian democracy by ensuring representation of regional aspirations and decentralization of power. These parties focus on the needs of specific regions, ensuring that local issues obtain adequate attention at both the state and national levels.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the present study are -

- i) To study the formation of the AGP party and its performance in the elections.
- ii) To analyse the response of Assamese people to regionalism

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iii) To study the reasons for the decline of AGP

Methodology:

The study is descriptive and analytical based on secondary sources. The data are collected from reports of the Election Commission of India, Assam election handbooks, election manifestos, relevant books, journals, magazines, government and non-governmental reports, website and news papers. Internet resources also have been accessed extensively.

Regional Politics in Assam: Rise of AGP and 1985 Assembly election

The 1985 election was a turning point in the state politics of Assam. In the year 1985, in Assam, a new regional political party Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) could capture the power which was facilitated by the regional wave and the electorates were guided by sentiments and emotions. However, towards the end of the 1970s, the political environment of the state started changing due to many socio-political factors. There was an unusual growth in electorates and the reason behind it was the rampant immigration of foreign national to the state. The Mongoldoi Lok Sabha seat had fallen vacant due to the death of the Janata M.P. Hiralal Patowari. As a consequence, the process of holding a by- election to the Lok Sabha started. The by- election of Mongoldoi Lok Sabha seat have brought the “foreign national” issue to the limelight in Assam. The apprehension of threatening the Assamese identity both politically and socio-culturally came in to the mind of Assamese people, when a large number of foreign nationals enlisted in the voter list was found in Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency in 1979. The Assamese sentiment appeared to be articulated more vigorously while the official attention about foreign national issue was carried by S. L. Shakdar, the then Chief Election Commissioner. In a conference held on 24th October, 1978, he stated that the large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in same states particularly in the North Eastern Region was alarming and required drastic action (Assam Tribune, 25th October, 1978). Golap Borbarua, the then Chief Minister of Assam, made a statement in the Assam Legislative Assembly that the influx of foreign nationals was assuming alarming proportion and expressed this government firm stand on the problem (Assam Tribune, 17th March, 1979). As a result in 1979, the All Assam Students Union started a movement against this immigration of foreigners. Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, Assam Karmachari Parishad, and many other civic organizations supported the movement. This movement was popularly known as “Assam Agitation”. The period from 1979 to 1985 was a period of socio-economic and political unrest in Assam. The AASU laid emphasis on the National Citizens Registrar (NRC) of 1951 and the Electoral rolls of 1952. The movement has got massive mass support almost from all corners of the society. To tackle this problem and for running the movement a coordinating body i.e. All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed on 27th August, 1979 under the aegis of AASU which consisted of the representation of Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Assam Jatiyatabadi yuba Satra parishad and Sodou Asom Karmachari Parishad. This newly formed United Front of regionalist forces spearheaded the movement which was led by the Asamiya middle class or classes with a specific political design and ideology of aggressive cultural nationalism (Jana and Sarmah ed., 2002 : 276 -277).

The foreign nationals issue became the burning problem in almost all the quarters of Assam. After a long period of 6 years (1979-85) of Assam agitation an accord was signed between AASU and the Central government headed by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in early morning of the 15th August 1985, which was known as the historic “Assam accord”. This was the turning point of the socio-political history of Assam. The Accord mandates for detection, deletion, and deportation for all foreigners national who came into Assam on and after 25 March 1971. In this accord, many clauses were incorporated to safeguard the social-cultural identity of indigenous people. This accord had impacts on the political history of Assam. Firstly, a regional political party, AGP was formed. Secondly, regarding the economic, social and political issues, awareness and understanding of the people increased largely. This foreign national movement articulated the regional aspiration among the people of Assam which culminated in the formation of the new regional political party AGP in 14th October, 1985. Thus the year of 1985 witnessed a significant development in the political field of Assam.

Consequently, the 1983 Assembly election was held which was boycotted by the leaders and supporters of Assam agitation. The leadership of the agitation was determined not to conduct the election at any cost until and unless solution could be settle permanently about the problem of foreign nationals but at the same time the election commissioner was determined to hold the election. Voters turn out was also significantly low which was 32.74 per cent. The agitators considered that the election was an illegal one without deleting the names of a foreigner from electoral rolls. After signing the Assam accord all the leaders associated with the agitation convened a convention, held in Golaghat for the formation of a new regional party and it came into existence on 14 October 1985. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, was elected as the President of the party where Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad were also merged with the AGP party. In 1985, people voted in favour of the party with a polling percentage of 79.2. For the first, time a regional political party came into power with the majority seat of 126 assembly constituency. Since 1985, the politics of Assam had been changing in a significant way in terms of electoral participation, socio-political issues, etc. In this election, nine political parties participated along with a large number of independent candidates supported by AGP. Another remarkable aspect of this election was the unprecedented voters turn out (79.2%) which was the reflection of the clear democratic will of the voters in favour of the newly formed regional party. On the other hand, the Congress party who dominated the election results with a big majority in the last five general elections in Assam was pushed to the second position. Further, the Janata Party, which could obtain the first ranking political party in 1978 election, was eliminated in 1985. The emergence of AGP

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as a regional party was a significant event not only for the politics of Assam but also for the whole of Northeast India. In this election, AGP got 63 seats with 34.54 percentage of vote share (Table-1).

Table -1: Voters turn out in 1985 Assembly (Party wise)

Party	Assembly Election, 1985		
	Contested seats	Won	Vote percentage (%)
AGP	107	63	34.54
INC	125	25	23.47
JNP	87	-	1.45
ICS	73	4	3.20
UMF	56	17	10.85
LKD	19	-	0.23
PTC	27	3	3.64
SUCI	6	-	-
CPI (M)	39	2	4.34
CPI	20	-	0.99
BJP	37	-	1.07
RCPI	13	-	-
UTNLF	13	1	-
IND	484	10	16.22

Source: Election Result, 1985, Government of Assam.

Another major development that took place was the rise of the United Minority Front of Assam (UMFA), a party of religious minority groups. UMFA won only 1 seat with 10.85 percent of votes share. Although Asom Jatiyatbadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchaliya Loka Parisad(two regional parties)were already there, yet they failed to work united for the cross-section of Assamese society due to their differences in policies. The main reasons behind the victory of AGP were that i) the party had made promises to detect and deport immigrants as per the terms of the Assam Accord. ii) The party assured to safeguard the linguistic and cultural identity of Assamese people, which was being increasingly challenged by the rampant immigration of foreigners. iii) It assured the people on greater autonomy to the state. The aspiration of Assamese people would be fulfilling if they were able to establish "Sonar Asom" (Golden Assam). However, towards the later parts of AGP rule in Assam the law and order situation of the state was devastating. Under these circumstances, the president's rule was imposed in the state from 27th November 1990 to June 1991.

1991 Assembly election: first set back of AGP party

In 1991 election a major development was the split of AGP into two fractions namely AGP and NAGP. A new party known as Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP) was formed under the leadership of Pulakesh Baruah (ex-Speaker of the 8th Assam Assembly)and Bhriku Kumar Phukan (ex-Home Minister of the AGP government in 1985) respectively. Both were contesting the election independently. Because of the division in AGP, the votes were also divided between AGP and NAGP and with the AGP party in disarray the Congress party seemed to be comeback trail in Assam politics. In 1991 election, INC secured 65 seats. The AGP party on the other hand, could capture only 18 seats out of 103 contesting seats with 18.07 percent of votes polled. BJP put up its candidates on 47 Assembly seats and won 10 seats with 6.42percent of votes share. The NAGP contested 85 Assembly seats and secured only 5 seats with 5.50 percent of votes polled. Their total vote share decreased by up to 24 percentages compared to the previous figure of 34 percentages. Thus 1991 election results showed a changing trend in case of voters. The same voters gave an overwhelming support to the regional party AGP in Assam in 1985 but the same party was virtually rejected by the same voters in this election. On the other hand, it would be important to note that in 1991 election BJP won in 10 constituencies with a vote share of 6.42 percentages. Mention to be made here that it is for the first time in the electoral history of Assam that a large number of candidates from Bharatiya Janata Party returned in an election. It is also interesting to notice that a sizable amount of religious minority votes shifted their supports to congress party which were with AGP and alliance in 1985 election. It is because of the fear that if BJP comes to power then it will repeal the IMDT Act which might cause trouble for them. INC fought this election for the issue of peace and development, improvements of communication, jobs for unemployed and resolution of the problem of demand for autonomy by Bodoland and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill District. The AGP went on the poll with the promises of greater economy and right of self-determination of the state, implementation of Assam Accord, resolution of ULFA problem, development of tea tribe's communities, etc. The NAGP fought this election with the assurance to implement Assam Accord for speedy economic growth, decentralization of power along with autonomy for the state. It is observed that sense of insecurity among

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different ethnic groups, the unprecedented rise of prices of essential commodities, unemployment problem, and payment of salaries of government employees were the major issues before the voters of the state in 1991 election.

1996 Assembly election: Assamese response to regionalism

The 1996 election in Assam had several developments in the political scenario. Both AGP and NAGP reunited together that again strengthened the regional political party. The Congress party found itself in a complex situation in 1996 by facing charges of unprecedented corruption. In this time, the situation was reversed. The regional party AGP regained the power and the Congress party suffered a major setback. There were two main causes of such debacle - firstly, reunification of AGP and its break way group NAGP and secondly, the alienation of the large section of the Assamese people. The party played a demonistic policy for which it faced the setback for the third time. The AGP succeeded in regaining a majority in state politics of Assam. But its performance appeared less impressive than its historic victory in 1985. Mention should be made here that the AGP contested only 99 seats in this election. The party bagged 59 seats while national parties Congress and BJP secured 34 and 4 seats respectively. Others got 25 seats. In 1993, the breakaway group of the AGP, the Natun Asom Gana Parishad merged back with the AGP. Additionally, the AGP formed a five-party alliance before the election, with the CPI, CPI (M), ASDC and UMFA. The new inclusive strategy of the AGP had three components: the AGP under Mahanta's leadership accepted the dissident faction, entered into a political coalition with the left, and underscored the need for a social coalition (Goswami, 2012). It is to be noted that in the 1996 election, all the political parties except BJP avoided the core issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

2001 Assembly election: The decline of AGP

The 2001 Assam assembly election was chiefly a two-party contest between the national party Congress and the regional party AGP. In this election, the AGP was defeated again. Congress won the popular vote and a majority of seats. The party able to capture 71 seats (39.75%) while AGP got 20 seats (20.02%). One of the striking features of this election was that for the first time, Asom Gana Parishad and BJP had an alliance for which AGP had to lose three of each earlier allies, the CPI, CPM and United Peoples Party (UPP). This election took a significant turn with the decision of alliance between regional party AGP and national party BJP. However this alliance has managed to come to an understanding with the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) and the Haliram Terang faction of the ASDC. Thus the new alliance included AGP, BJP, ABSU and ASDC (United). There was confusion in the minds of Assamese people about AGP and BJP alliance. One was the leading regional party and the other was BJP a national party advocating Hindutva. By doing this, the AGP had to lose its basis among the Non- Hindu minority community. On the other hand Congress party with all its preparation was ready to fight against AGP-BJP alliance bringing the UMF and other smaller ethnic-based parties to its fold. Besides, during the last AGP's rule in 1996, the people of Assam had a horrible fire of corruption, uprising of violent activities were the major causes of the party's back in this election. There were some factors which were responsible for the defeat of the AGP in 2001 election. After the formation of the AGP led government in 1996 under the leadership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, ethnic movement started. In the Bodo dominated areas, frequent ethnic rioting occurred between the Adibashis and the Bodos. Besides these, from the very beginning, AGP government was also facing acute financial crisis because the government had to bear the expenditure of the entire paramilitary forces which were deployed by the Central government to fight the counter-insurgency operation. Therefore it was suggested that the Central government should bear at least half of the salary. In this regard, the state government called on Prime Minister, Atal Behari Bajpayee in the first week of May, 1998. But the Central government did not relieve the financial burden of the state government. Under such circumstances, a number of problems i.e. 'not getting salary', 'stopping some welfare schemes' had arisen which termed AGP government as an anti-employee government. In view of this the AGP government had to face vigorous criticism from the opposition for failing to reinstate peace, unity and stability in the state.

2006 Assembly election: Assamese response to regionalism

In 2006 assembly election, the results have sprung many a surprise. It was observed that no single political party secured the absolute majority. The AGP, as regional party has stagnated electorally. The party suffered a defeat in the election. The Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government has stormed back to power, forming a coalition government with the support of the Bodo People's Progressive Front (Hagrama). The Congress party made a post electoral alliance with BPF and after getting the support of 11 BPF MLAs, the party under the leadership of Tarun Gogoi formed the government. The newly formed AUDF in July, 2006 appeared in Assam Legislative election 2006 for the first time. The main battle cry of the AUDF party was unification and forming an anti Congress and anti BJP forum. They were very much concerned about the rights and developments of the minority people and finding out solution on the issue of foreigners. The Congress has emerged as the single largest party with 53 seats (31.1% votes) while its pre-poll ally, the BPPF (Hagrama) has managed to wrest 11 seats. The AGP won 24 seats (20.4% votes) while the Prafulla Mahanta-led AGP (Progressive) managed to secure only single seat. The BJP and the newly-formed Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) secured 10 seats apiece in this election.

2011 Assembly election: Decline of AGP

In the state politics of Assam, 2011 assembly election marked the beginning of a new phase. In this election, the incumbent Congress party government headed by Tarun Gogoi, managed to win a third term with a thumping majority. The party secured an absolute majority by winning 78 seats out of 126 seats with 39.38 percent of votes polled. On the other hand due to organizational

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weaknesses and internal factionalism, the AGP party was able to manage only 10 seats with 16.38 percent of votes. The party performed disappointingly in this election. It was observed that the ethnic Assamese voters played a pivotal role and they are considered as the key factor for the spectacular rise of the Congress party.

2016 Assembly election: Re-emergence of AGP and Alliance and form government with BJP

The 14th Legislative Assembly election (2016) in Assam was significant in the sense that it saw the thrashing of the Congress government which ruled for three consecutive terms since 2001 in Assam. Bhartiya Janata party has witnessed a significant rise in popularity and influence in the state politics of Assam. It is worth mentioning that the diminishing dominance of the Congress party and political stagnation of regional party AGP had led to the favorable condition of BJP'S rise. The BJP came to power with AGP as a mere junior partner. In this election, the AGP party tried to consolidate the voters on the issue of development and good governance in Assam against the misgovernance of Congress-led government for three consecutive terms. This election was characterized by different factors like anti-incumbency against the three terms Congress government's rule in Assam widespread corruption which made people desperate for a change. The election in 2016 brought a change of power as the Congress lost its majority to the BJP led by Sarbananda Sonowal. Two major trends mark this political shift in Assam - i) the dominance of the Congress party was challenged and ii) the BJP was gaining across the regions in the state. BJP got 60 seats with 29.5% votes polled while the Congress which was expected to put up strong fight ended up with 26 seats. AGP got 14 seats with a vote share of 8%. BPF and AIUDF secured 12 and 13 seats respectively. In 2016 election, the AGP party formed an electoral alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP's pre-poll alliance with AGP and BPF consolidated anti-Congress votes in its favour. The Bodoland People's Front was part of the National Democratic Alliance along with the BJP.

2021 Assembly election: Alliance with BJP

The election saw the incumbent BJP -led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) retaining power with 75 seats, which marked the first time a non-INC alliance winning consecutive terms in the state. This election has registered the second-highest participation rate (82%) in the state's history. Since the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, participation in elections has always been high in the state. It made political history in Assam, the BJP government headed by Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, managed to win a 2nd term with a whipping majority. The party has managed to retain Assam convincingly. The *Mahajot* led by INC won 50 seats, increasing its tally from 26 in 2016. In 2021, Bodoland People's Front contested alongside the Congress. In alliance with the regional ethnic parties AGP and BPF, BJP obtained a total of 86 seats. Congress faced a trouncing with only 29 seats out of 122 contested seats. The BJP managed a comfortable win by bagging 60 out of 89 contested seats while the AIUDF, AGP bagged 16 and 9 seats respectively and others got 5 seats. The AGP has performed quite unsatisfactorily winning 9 seats out of the 29 they had contested in. The CPI (M) and the UPPL ended up with 1 and 6 seats respectively. The AIUDF's performance has also been on similar lines. Its seat share in the 2016 and 2021 elections has been 10.3% and 11.1%. It is noteworthy that in 2016 Assembly election, the AGP party formed an electoral alliance with Bharatiya Janata Party and won 14 seats. But in 2021, the number was reduced to 9 (Table - 2).

Performance of AGP in electoral politics of Assam

Year of Elections	Seats Own	Total Seats	Result / Position
1985	72	125	Winner and formed the Govt
1991	19	125	Lost; Opposition Party
1996	59	125	Winner and formed the Govt
2001	20	125	Lost, Opposition Party
2006	24	126	Lost; Opposition Party
2011	10	126	Lost; Opposition Party
2016	14	126	Formed Coalition Govt with BJP
2021	09	126	Formed Coalition Govt with BJP

Source: Election reports, Government of Assam

Causes for the decline of AGP in Assam politics:

One of the remarkable features of the Indian Party System is the presence of a large number of regional parties. The AGP, which was emerged with lots of hope and aspirations of the Assamese people, have failed live up to the expectations of the people of the state. The results of assembly elections clearly indicate the declining support and acceptability of the party. However it has failed to retain its political support. The reasons behind it are as follows-

- i) Lake of Ideology: It has been observed that after coming into power in 1985 the AGP party lost track on its main issue and became lost in diverse administrative and political problems.
- ii) Split and factionalism within the party: Another major cause of weakness is growing factionalism within the party. It is noticed that AGP lacks organizational discipline and hierarchy. A main rift in the party between the party president Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and party general secretary Bhirgu Kumar Phukan which led to the foundation of a new

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political party- Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP) under the leadership of Bhriku Kumar Phukan, Dinesh Goswami, Pulakesh Baruah in 1991 and fought the elections of 1991 as a separate party. This fraction again came back to the party in 1992. In 2000, AGP leader Atul Borah moved away and formed Trinamool Gana Parishad. Again major split came in 2005, when Prafulla Kr. Mahanta formed a new political party known as AGP (Progressive). Factionalism within the party badly affected on the performances of AGP in the 2006 assembly elections. However, in 2008 a process started to reconcile the differences among all the breakaway fractions. Finally all groups reconcile in one umbrella. At present, the party stands united, although its popularity and performance is steadily declining.

- iii) Effects of Insurgency and Terrorism: Another significant factor that affects the performance of AGP is the prevailing insurgency and terrorism in Assam. The United Liberation Front of Assam has been demanding an independent and sovereign Assam to resolve the socio-political and economic problems of the region. The ULFA directly or indirectly tried to influence the political situation of the state at the time of elections. Even in some occasions ULFA openly challenged AGP and started to target AGP leaders and workers. Moreover it is due to this ULFA factor that AGP was not able to complete its first term and the president rule was imposed in 1989 in Assam.

CONCLUSION

The trend of regional politics in Assam started changing in a significant way with the emergence of AGP. However, in the state politics of Assam the AGP's political base was gradually shrinking within the state. It was observed that the failure of the immigration issue and not taking action against the people who involved in secret killing during Assam Agitation creates a negative impression amongst the people. There is a need for a strong party agenda, to resolve the party conflict and uphold the intra-party democracy.

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