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Regional Politics in Assam: Rise and Decline of AGP

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ABSTRACT

The Politics of Assam is more or less always under the dominance of the Congress party till the 1980s. After the Assam Movement, the strong emergence AGP (Asom Ganna Parisad) creates a challenge to the Congress hegemony. The AGP not only creates a strong support base in the state but also create a greater consensus among the people regarding the issue of immigration. However, the party cannot hold the people base, inability to resolve the immigration issue. This article draws a comprehensive outline of the AGP as a regional force in Assam in the late 1980s and gives an analysis of the rise and decline of AGP in the 2000s. This article also analyzes the current trend of AGPs' political base in Assam.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of this article, an analysis of the first general election to Assam assembly has been given. The trend and style of electoral politics in Assam since the first general election in 1952, to the election in the 1970s, was more or less a reflection of all Indian politics. However, towards the end of the 1970s, the political environment started changing due to many socio-political factors. There was a growth in electorates of the state and it was believed that the growth was not normal. There was an unusual growth in the number of voters. The reason behind was the rampant immigration of foreign national to the state. In 1979, the All Assam Students Union started a mass agitation against this immigration of foreigners. Assam Gana Sangram Parisad, Assam

Karmachari Parisad, and many other civic organizations supported the agitation. This was the turning point of the socio-political history of Assam with the culmination of agitation by signing “*Assam Accord*” in 1985, between the Government of India and ASSU along with the associated organization. The Assam Accord mandates for *detection*, *deletion*, and *deportation* for all foreigners national who came into Assam on and after 25 March 1971. After the six yearlong agitations, an election was held for state assembly in 1983, which was boycotted by many organizations. The agitators considered that election was an illegal one without deleting the names of a foreigner from electoral rolls.

The polling percentage in this election was lowest in the election history of Assam, which was 32.74 per cent. Soon after the election, president rule was imposed in Assam and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi invited the leaders of the agitation for a peace talk. After signing the Assam accord all the leaders associated with the agitation convened, a convention, which was held in Golaghat for the formation of a new regional party, came into existence on 14 October 1985. Consequently, a new party emerged in the politics of Assam in the name of AGP. People voted in favour of the party with a polling percentage of 79.2 percentages. For the first, time a regional political party came to 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. It is seen that there has been a gradual rise in political participation in terms of casting of votes since 1956. However, there was a big fall in the percentage in the year 1983 mainly because of the resistance imposed by the agitators.

2. Regional Politics and Rise of AGP in Assam

The 1985 election was a turning point in the politics of Assam. From 1979 to 1985 was a period of socio-economic and political unrest in Assam. A movement was started by AASU against immigration of foreigners from the neighbouring countries popularly known as “Assam Agitation”. The agitation was primarily based on non-violent methods but in due course of the agitation, many violent incidents took place leading to considerable loss of life and property. The entire agitation has culminated in an Accord signed between the leaders of the movement and the representatives of the Central Government. The accord known as Assam Accord was signed to dismiss the erstwhile Government of Assam and to make an announcement of the election immediately. In this accord, many clauses were incorporated to safeguard the social-cultural identity of indigenous people. One of the major clauses of this accord was made for detection, deletion, and deportation of foreign national who had immigrated to the state on or before 25th March 1971.

This accord had multiple impacts on the political history of Assam. *Firstly*, a regional party was formed by the leaders of the movement in the style and came to be known as Asom Gana Parisad (AGP). *Secondly*, awareness and understanding of the people about social, economic and political issues increased largely. Thirdly, another important development that took place in this period was the emergence of extremist groups mainly the United

Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The ULFA has been demanding an independent and sovereign Assam to resolve the socio-political and economic problems of the region. Under these circumstances, the election for state legislative assembly was held in December 1985. 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 which was 79 percentages. This was the reflection of the clear democratic will of the people in favour of the newly formed regional party. The national parties particularly INC who dominated the election result with a big majority in the last five General elections in the state was pushed to the second position in the 1985 assembly election. The Janata Party, which could obtain the first ranking political party in the 1978 election, was eliminated in 1985. On the other hand, AGP the newly formed regional party just before the election whose candidates contested as independents occupied the first position in the election result. The emergence of AGP as a regional party in 1985 was a significant event not only for the politics of the state of Assam but also for the whole of Northeast India. In the 1985 election, AGP won 63 seats with a 34.54 percentage of vote share. Another major development that took place in this election was the rise of the United Minority Front of Assam (UMFA), which was a party of religious minority groups. UMFA won only 1 seat with a vote share of 10.85 percentages remaining in the third position with a footing, particularly of religious minority Muslim dominated areas.

The growth of AGP and UMFA was significant as regional political forces. During the foreigner movement, the leaders and supporters felt the need for a regional party capable of handling the sentiments and meeting the aspiration of the Assamese middle class in the state. Although two regional parties Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchaliya Loka Parisad were already there yet they failed to work united for the cross-section of Assamese society due to their differences in policies. It is very important to see why the majority of the people of Assam voted for AGP or the UMFA. **Firstly**, the majority voted AGP as it had made promises to detect and deport immigrants as per the terms of the Assam Accord. **Secondly**, the party assured to safeguard the linguistic and cultural identity of Assamese people, which was being increasingly challenged by the rampant immigration of foreigners. **Thirdly**, it assured people on greater autonomy to the state by removing Stepmother tramping by the centre.

Although the Assam Accord, which was signed after a long-time agitation, divided the people of Assam into two groups- the majority which supported the accord under the leadership of AGP was on one side and the other side consisted of minority especially Muslims. This had made the politics of Assam polarized in two lines, which was not so clear in the earlier phase. These two groups identified as pro and anti-Assam were held in 1985, the mainstream Assamese people gave their verdict in favour of AGP in hope that it would implement Assam Accord. In the true sense of the term, the aspiration of the people would be fulfilling if they were able to establish the aspiration of the people and would be able to establish a "*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. In 1991 election a major development was the split of the regional party AGP into two fractions namely AGP and NAGP. Both were contesting the election independently. The hard-core supporters of the movement and the leaders of ASSU who worked with dedication for the interest of the party in 1985 and contested in that election were not there in 1991.

The small local parties, who joined hands with AGP, became more reactive against both AGP and NAGP in the 1991 election. In 1991 election, INC secured 66 seats. AGP and NAGP could retain only 19 and 5 seats respectively. Their total vote share decreased by up to 24 percentages compared to the previous figure of 34 percentages. 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. It is for the first time in the electoral history of Assam that a large number of BJP candidates returned in an election. It is also interesting to see that a sizable amount of religious minority votes shifted their supporters to congresses which were with AGP and alliance in 1985 elections.

It is because of the apprehension among that minority that if BJP comes to power then it will repeal the IMDT Act which might cause trouble for these people. 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. Even though most of the parties 'focus was on major issues like implementation of Assam Accord demands more autonomy etc. but these issues could not influence the voters at large. It is observed that sense of insecurity among 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.

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. On the other hand, Congress had to face a difficult situation with uprisings, corruption, indiscriminate use of state machinery particularly police and armed forces to suppress different anti-state activities in the state. AGP had a social alliance with other non-congress political forces in the election. It was seen that most of the major issues of regional importance could not find their place in the manifesto of AGP in this election.

In this election Congress (I) won only 34 seats with a vote share of 30.56 percentages, AGP secured 59 seats with a vote share 29.70 percentages and remained in the first position. The APG victory with 59 seats was unexpected

for the party itself as it could maintain a strong portion in lower Assam, by winning 29 seats. The party could also maintain command in Upper Assam and North bank of Brahmaputra except Cachar, Dibrugarh and Karimganj districts where Congress could lead over AGP. AGP and its allies' CPI, CPM, ASDC, were seen to be successful in all the districts of Assam. It is interesting to note that with the almost same share of votes AGP secured almost double the number of seats compared to the ruling Congress party, which was in vogue for quite some time.

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. The AGP itself maintained a considerable distance from this for the majority vote bank without whose help being in power for the long term was quite impossible. The party did not mention the issue of Bangladeshi migrants even in their election manifesto and cited all kinds of general promises to initiate the necessary action to implement the Assam Accord. Congress, on the other hand, assured that it would take care of all Indian citizens so that they are not victimizing in the determination and deportation of illegal migrants under the IMDT Act of 1983. The BJP's stand on the issue was very critical in this election. The party believed that Hindu Migrants from Bangladesh were refugees and only the Muslim migrants were foreigners. According to the party, Hindu Bangladeshi migrated to Assam due to atrocities on them by the Muslim religious fundamentalist in Bangladesh. Therefore, it was India's duty to provide settlements to these refugees.

The decline of AGP (2001):

Some special features characterized the 2001 assembly election in Assam. For the first time, Asom Gana Parisad and BJP had an alliance for which AGP had to lose three of each earlier allies, the CPI, CPM and United Peoples Party (UPP). CPI, CPM and Samajbadi Party together had to fight against the Congress. The AGP and BJP alliance could, however, manage to have a poll understanding with ABSU and the Holiram Terang fraction of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). There was confusion in the public minds about AGP and BJP alliance. One was the leading regional party and the other was BJP a national party advocating Hindutva. By doing this, this AGP had to lose its basis among the Non- Hindu minority community. Congress on the other hand with all its preparation was ready to fight against AGP and BJP alliance bringing the UMF and other smaller ethnic-based parties to its fold. Congress for the first time felt the need for electoral adjustment with minor groups as AGP and BJP alliance presented a tough equation before the party. It is seen that very significantly the left parties who were once a viable force in Assam were swept out during this election. Congress' victory in the election was to some extent expected. Because during the last AGP, rule started 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.

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

It has been observed that during the 1980s governance has become a primordial issue of the polity of the state. There has been a shift from a multi-dimensional

understanding of democracy to a one-directional understanding of good governance. It was one of the major focuses of the BJP before the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The party tried to consolidate the voters on the issue of development and good governance in the 2016 assembly election in Assam against the misgovernance of Congress-led government for three consecutive terms. 2016 assembly election in Assam was characterized by different factors like anti-incumbency against the three terms rule Congress government widespread corruption that made people desperate for a change. BJP could catch hold of the situation and fought the election with a well-thought and high voltage campaign. The formation of the BJP government at the centre under the leadership of Narendra Modi could also influence the perception of the voters to some extent. People looked at BJP as the only visible a viable alternative to Congress. This assembly election changes the nature of the political dynamics of the state and made political history.

3. Conclusion

However, the AGPs Political base in Assam was gradually shrinking within the state. The failure of the immigration issue and not taking action against the people involved in secret killing during Assam Agitation creates a strong negative impression among the people. The rise of the Saffron political base in Assam also becomes a challenge to the party. There is a need to resolve the party conflict and uphold the intra-party democracy.

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