

RELEVANCE OF REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTY ASOM GANA PARISHAD

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ABSTRACT

The Politics of Assam is more or less always under the dominance of the Congress party till the last part of 20th century. After the Assam Movement, the emergence of Asom Ganna Parisad (AGP) creates a challenge to the hegemony of Congress Party. The AGP not only creates a strong support base in the state but also create a greater consensus among the people regarding the foreigner issue. However, the party could not resolve the foreigner and hold the people base issue. This research paper draws 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 paper also analyzes the current trend of AGPs' political base in Assam.

Key words : Relevance, Regional Party, Support base, Assam accord, extremist group

1. Introduction

At the beginning, 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 an unusual growth in electorates of the state and it was believed that the growth was not normal. 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 since Independence . 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 year long 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 constituencies. Since 1985, the politics of Assam had been changing in a significant way in terms of electoral participation, socio-political issues, etc.

Asom Gana Parishad (translation: Assam People's Council, abbr. AGP) is a political party in the state of Assam, India. The AGP was formed following the historic Assam Accord of 1985[5] and formally launched at the Golaghat Convention held from 13 to 14 October 1985 in Golaghat,[6] which also allowed Prafulla Kumar Mahanta who was the youngest chief minister of the state to be elected. The AGP has formed government twice once in 1985 in which Prafulla Kumar Mahanta who was the youngest chief Minister of the state and again in 1996. But the popularity of AGP surged in the late 1980s but declined in the 2000s.[1]

The party split in 2005, with former Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta forming the Asom Gana Parishad (Progressive), but regrouped on 14 October 2008 in Golaghat.[2]

The party won 14 seats out of 126 in the 2016 Legislative Assembly Elections; a historic win for the party. It shares power with the Bodoland People's Front and Bharatiya Janata Party.

Currently it is a part of North-East Regional Political Front consisting of political parties of the northeast that has supported the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). As of 2021, the party is formed an alliance with BJP in coming assembly elections as well.[3]

2. Background : In 1979, AASU started a non-violent campaign to highlight illegal immigration into the state, but later descended into violence. The AASU, joined by the AGSP demanded detection and disenfranchisement of all illegal migrants in the state, and deportation of all immigrants entering the country from 1951 on under the laws of the land. One of the most serious outcomes of the ethnic violence that ensued came to be known as the Nellie massacre when anti-immigrant groups attacked and killed at least 2,000 Muslim, Bengali immigrants.[4] The agitation lasted from 1979 to 1985, and caused tension and hostility during the assembly Election in 1983.

AASU then constituted the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) which consisted of representatives of various organizations including the Asom Sahitya Sabha, two regional political parties – Asom Jatiyabadi Dal and Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad, the Sadau Asom Karmachari Parishad, Asom Jatiyabadi Yuva-Chatra Parishad, Asom Yuvak Samaj, All Assam Central and semi-Central Employees' on the issues.

Several rounds of discussions with successive governments in New Delhi. The accord was signed between the government, represented by prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, and representatives of the AASU in 1985.

The State Assembly was then dissolved and the Congress government headed by Hiteswar Saikia, who came to power in February 1983, was dismissed.

The Golaghat National Convention, held in Golaghat on 13–14 October 1985 determined that a regional political party similar to Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) should be formed and the Asom Gana Parishad was launched in Golaghat on 14 October 1985.

The central executive committee of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) had been dissolved at a convention in North Lakhimpur in September, and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the

president of the AASU, was elected the president of the presidium of the new political party. Asom Jatiyabadi Dal and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad also merged with AGP. Members from other organizations joined the party.

The AGP contested the State Assembly elections held in December 1985 and swept the polls of the 126 seats and capturing seven of the 14 Lok Sabha (Parliament) seats.

Party leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta served as the Chief Minister of Assam for two terms, first from 1985 to 1990 and again from 1996 to 2001. Asom Gana Parishad was a part of the National Front government from December 1989 to November 1990.

AGP's Member of Parliament Dinesh Goswami was the Union Minister of Law and Justice in the V. P. Singh Ministry. The party also took part in the United Front governments headed by H. D. Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral. Party leaders Birendra Prasad Baishya and Muhi Ram Saikia took office as Union Minister of Steel and Mines and the Union Minister of State for Human Resources Development respectively in the United Front governments.

3. Internal splits and mergers :

The AGP in March 1991 underwent a split when party general secretary and former Assam Home Minister Bhriku Kumar Phukan, former Union Law Minister and MP Dinesh Goswami, former state Education Minister Brindaban Goswami, Assam Legislative Assembly speaker Pulakesh Barua and others formed the Natun Asom Gana Parishad (natun means new in Assamese). This fraction came back to the party fold in 1992.

In 2000, former Assam PWD minister and senior party leader Atul Bora (Senior) moved away along with Pulakesh Barua and formed Trinamool Gana Parishad.

After the second AGP Government's reign under Prafulla Kumar Mahanta came to an end and Congress regained power, numerous allegations were raised against him related to the corruption during his tenure, government's involvement in secret killings, and Mahanta's overall inactive leadership. These led to his demotion from being President of the party and later he was

expelled from the party on 3 July 2005 after being accused of anti-party activities. Latter on P.K. Mahanta formed Asom Gana Parishad (Progressive), a regional political party.

In 2008, a process started to reconcile the differences among all the breakaway fractions and to bring back everybody under the mother party umbrella to strengthen the regional party movement in Assam. Finally, on 14 October 2008, all breakaway groups reconciled in one umbrella at the historic town Golaghat. Prafulla Mahanta merged his AGP(P) with AGP. Atul Bora and Pulakesh Barua merged their TGP with the AGP and former legislator of Patacharkuchi, Pabindra Deka too merged the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) with it.

In 2011, firebrand youth leader Sarbananda Sonowal resigned from all executive posts within AGP and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party, due to dissatisfaction with and amongst the senior leadership of the party who were trying to forge an alliance with a party that was against the scrapping of the controversial IMDT Act. "The AGP was born out of the illegal foreigners' issue after the six-year-long Assam agitation; 855 people laid down their lives in the agitation. However, the party has failed to honour the sacrifice of the martyrs by deviating from its principles.

On 8 February 2011, Sonowal joined Bharatiya Janata Party in the presence of the then BJP National President Nitin Gadkari and senior leaders like Varun Gandhi, Vijay Goel, Bijoya Chakravarty and state BJP president Ranjit Dutta. He was immediately appointed a member of the BJP National Executive and then later on State Spokesperson of the state BJP unit,

Again on 3 July 2013, senior party leader Atul Bora once again left the party and joined BJP.

In November 2016, Atul Bora was elected for President of Asom Gana Parishad second time amending party's constitution 'one man one post' as he is also minister of Agriculture, Horticulture and Food Processing, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary in Sarbananda Sonowal Ministry.[5]

In January 2019, they broke an alliance with Bharatiya Janata Party on the issue of Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019 but in March 2019 the party returned to North-East Democratic Alliance for the Lok Sabha election. As per the agreement, AGP contested on 3 seats, Bodoland People's Front at one and Bharatiya Janata Party on ten seats.[6]. In 2024 NDA formed government at centre with AGP as alliance partner and AGP own on Loksabha from Barpeta constituency.

4. 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 Asom (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 Indian National Congress (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 Step-mother 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 Natun Asom Gana Parishad (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, Indian National Congress (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. Indian National Congress (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 AGP 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.

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.

5. The decline of AGP (2001)

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.

6. Re-emergence of AGP: Alliance and formation of 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. In 2021, Assam assembly Election and 2024 Lok Sabha Election AGP and BJP formed an alliance and formed government as state and centre. The issue of decline of AGP has been a major issue. The Hijack the issue of AGP by BJP is concerned for the regional political party AGP because the parties base of voters are same folk that weekend the AGP's support base and becoming decline of their future prospect. AGP is now only ruling partner of BJP lead NDA alliance government that without alliance their good election result is doubtful and becoming as not formidable force.

7. Conclusion

AGP's 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. Though AGP has failed to fulfill its promises and aspiration of the people of Assam, its relevance is still roaring in the mind of the people of Assam.

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