

Regional Politics in Assam: The Journey of AGP

Dr. Navajyoti Borah
Associate Professor
Pandu College, Guwahati

Abstract - The trends of Electoral Politics of Assam had been similar with the rest of the country after the post independence period. Regional political groups were there in the state but could not contain the national political parties like INC. But a sense of insecurity had gradually grown in the minds of the people who claim to be indigenous, regarding their cultural, linguistic and political identities due to rampant immigration of people from neighboring countries mainly from Bangladesh. It led to a mass agitation under the leadership of All Assam Students Union (AASU) which came to an end with the signing of Assam Accord between Central Government and leaders of the different organizations that took part in the agitation. The accord created a new socio political situation which started changing with the emergence of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party in 1985. In this article an effort is being to observe the circumstances that led to the emergence of AGP and its rise and fall as a political force of the state.

keywords - Regionalism, Assam Accord, AGP, Election, ASSU

1. Introduction

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. In this election, participation of the people was limited to around 50 percentages and Indian National Congress (INC) was the only dominant National party. However, towards the end of 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. The reason behind was the rampant immigration of foreign nationals 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 others civic organization supported the agitation.

During 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 foreigner from electoral roles. 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. This was the turning point of 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 associated organization. The Assam Accord mandates for detection, deletion and deportation for all foreigners national who came in to Assam on or after 25 March 1971.

After signing the Assam accord all the leaders associated with the agitation convened, a convention, which was held in Golaghat for formation of a new regional party. Consequently, a new party emerged in the politics of Assam in the name of AGP 14th October 1985.

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 majority seat of 126- assembly constituency. Since 1985, the politics of Assam had been changing in a significant way in terms of election participation and socio political issues. It is seen that there has been a gradual rise in the political participation in terms of casting of votes since 1956 in spite of there was a big fall in the percentage in the year 1983 mainly because of the resistance imposed by the agitators. In that year, polling could not be conducted in 17 constituencies. Since 1985, polling percentage maintained a steady trend and remained at the level of 70 percentages which is a good sign for democracy. The trend can be observed as regard the number of candidates in each successive election, yet it can be said that people overwhelmingly participated in the general elections. Number of candidates was few in 1983 election due to boycott called and in 1992, it was all time high may be due to the reason that people were under President's rule for about two and half years with hectic anti insurgency operations by Indian Army. The situation was calm and people were eagerly waiting to return to the democratic process. It is observed that in general women's participation kept on rising although no definite trend could be observed. However, a growing trend could be visualized with an exception in the years 1983 and 1996.

Electoral politics in Assam has a great bearing in the policies of Congress. In fact, in the upper Assam people followed the leaders of the freedom movement who were mainly from Congress party. With an occasional break in 1985 and 1996, it was the Indian National Congress, which ruled the State politics. The INC was in power for three consecutive terms from 2001 to 2014, in spite of several allegations of mis-governance, corruption etc.

The Assam 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 Parishad (AGP) after this accord. Secondly, awareness and understanding of the people about social, economic and political issues increased largely. Another important development that took place in this period was the emergence of extremist groups mainly United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The ULFA has been demanding for an independent and sovereign Assam to resolve socio-political and economic problems of the region. Under these circumstances, 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. 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 majority in the last five General elections in the state was pushed to the second position in 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 contested with 105 seats and won 63 seats with a 34.54 percentage of vote share. Another major development that took place in this election was rise of United Minority Front of Assam (UMFA), which was a party of religious minority group. UMFA contested in 56 seats and 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 Assam Accord divided the people of Assam in two groups- the majority which supported the accord under the leadership of AGP were on one side and the other side consisted of minority especially Muslims under the banner of UMF (United minority Front of Assam). This had made the politics of Assam polarized in two lines, which was not so clear in the earlier phase.

During the Anti foreigners movement, the leaders and supporters felt the need of a regional party capable of handling the sentiments and meeting the aspiration of 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 cross section of Assamese society due to their differences in policies. Later these two groups merged with AGPA at the National Political Convention (NPC) held at Golaghat on 12 to 14 October in 1985 to work for a free progressive society based on secular democratic socialism under a true federal structure to ensure economic security and cultural identity of cross sections of Assamese people in the state.

2. 1991 Assembly Election

Towards the later parts of first AGP rule in Assam the law and order situation of the state was devastating leading to the imposition of president's rule in the state from 27th November 1990 to June 1991. After this election was held where 14 National and 245 regional parties took part. There were 1393 candidates for 126-Assembly constituencies in the state. The major development in this election 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 in earlier election, became more reactive against both AGP and NAGP in 1991 election. Competition started among AGP and other regional parties with same groups of supporters as a result, voter who backed AGP in the earlier election were divided. INC took the advantage and captured most of the assembly seats. In this election, INC secured 66 seats among the 126 constituency in Assam. AGP and NAGP could retain only 19 and 5 seats respectively in this election. Their total vote share decreased 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 contested in 47 seats and 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 support 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 than it will repeal IMDT Act which, might cause trouble for this 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 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 for more autonomy etc. but these issues could not influence the voters at large. It is observed that sense of insecurity among different ethnic groups, 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. Implementation of Assam Accord as promised by AGP and NAGP could not influence people as they had backed AGP on these issues in 1985 election. Another important factor of AGP's setback in 1991 election could be attributed to the emergence of United Liberation Front of Assam.

3. Election 1996

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. In this election, there were 8 national parties 2 regional parties 5 state parties from the other state 3 registered but unrecognized parties and a number of independent candidates who contested. 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. Another important development that was observed in 1996 election was that many independent candidates contested in the election in the name of some community and organization.

Election was held for 122 constituencies excluding for constituencies where elections were counter mended. The polling percentage of 1996 election was 78.92 percentages, which was almost similar to the voting percentage of 1985 election. In this election Congress (I) contested in all 122 seats but won only 34 seats with a vote share of 30.56 percentage, AGP who contested in 96 constituencies secured 59 seats with a vote share 29.70 percentage and remained in the first position. BJP contested in 117 seats and won with only 4 seats with a vote share of 10.41 percentages. There were 657 independent candidates out of which only

11 could return with a vote share of 17.41 percentages. CPI fought with 11 seats and secured three seats with vote share of 1.96 percentages. CPI (M) contested in 10 seats and secured 2 out of them with a vote share of 1.94 percentages. UMF contested in 19 seats and won 2 seats with a vote share of 1.12 percentages. ASDC contested in five seats and won all of them with a vote share of 1.98 percentages. Janata Dal, which fought in 33 assembly constituencies, could not open their account at all.²⁸⁵ The APGs 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 almost same share of votes AGP secured almost double number of seats compared to the ruling Congress party, which was in vogue for quite some time.

In 1996 election, all the political parties except BJP avoided the core issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. The AGP itself maintained considerable distance from this for the majority vote bank without whose help being in power for 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.

There was no mention of any word about IMDT Act in the election manifesto of this regional party in 1996 election. 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 IMDT Act of 1983, the BJP's stand on the issue was very critical in this election. The party was of the opinion that Hindu Migrants from Bangladesh were refugees and only the Muslim migrants were the 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. It is to be observed that the 1996 election was not based on any particular issue but was motivated by a particular wave. It is worth mentioning here that left parties of the state were almost reflected by the people in all assembly constituencies in 1996 election.

4. Decline of AGP (2001):

Some special features characterized the 2001 assembly election in Assam. 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). 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 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. Apart from Congress, AGP and BJP with left parties there were 27 parties who put up candidates in this election. There were 5 national, 12 state parties and 10 registered parties (Unrecognized) in the election.²⁸⁹ Out of 126 constituencies of Assam Assembly, 102 were general 8 and 16 constituencies were reserved for SC and ST respectively. Total number of contesting candidates in this election was 916 out of which 393 were independents. Out of 14439167 electorates 10836651 voted in this election and polling percentage was 75.05 percentages.

INC contested in the entire constituencies and won 71 seats with a vote share of 39.75 percentage followed by AGP which secured 20 seats out of 77 constituencies it contested with a vote share of 20.02 percentage. BJP, which contested in 46 seats won only eight seats with a vote share of 9.35 percentages, remained in the third position. NCP won three seats out of 62 contestants with a vote share of 2.51 percentages. ASDC (U), which contested in five seats, won two with a vote share 1.11 percentages. Two other national parties Samata Party (SAP) and Samajbadi Party (SP) won one seats each out of 19 and 23 candidates respectively. 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. 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 party's back in this election. Out of 393 candidates, only 19 independent candidates won this election.

5. Reemergence of AGP: Alliance and formation of government with BJP:

It has been observed that during the 1980s governance has become a primordial issue of polity of the state across the nation. There has been a shift from 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 mal governance of Congress led government for three consecutive term. 2016 assembly election in Assam was characterised 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 well-thought and high voltage campaign. The formation of BJP government at the centre under the leadership of Narendra Modi, could also influence the perception of the voters to large extent. People looked at BJP as the only a viable alternative to Congress.

The 2016 assembly election held with a total number of 1990755 electorates, which is an increase of around 18 lakhs from the 2011 election. Out of them 16891142 electorates voted in the election, which increased the poll percentage electoral history of Assam to 84.26 percentages. In this election, five national parties, 3 state parties, 29 state parties from other states put up 690 candidates along with 496 independents candidate. BJP, which contested in 89 seats secured 60 with a vote share of 29.51 percentages and became the largest party, which was followed by Congress, which contested in 122 constituencies, won only 26 seats with a vote share of 30.96 percentages. AGP contested in 30 seats secured 14 with a vote share of 8.14 percentages, AIUDF contested in 74 seats won 13 with a vote share of 13.05 percentages, BPF, which contested in 13 Constituencies, secured 12 seats with a vote share of 3.94 percentages.

6. Conclusion:

The trend of regional politics in Assam started changing in a significant way with the emergence of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). The party came to power in 1985 as the first regional party to form the government. People of the state specially the middle Assamese population backed the party with the expectation that future of indigenous communities would be protected in terms of their linguistic, cultural identities and rights over resources. During the first term of its rule from 1985 the AGP government failed in financial and law and order management fronts very badly. The government and party could not give proper attention to the implementation of Assam Accord for which the party was constituted and later the government was formed. The party was again mandated to power in 1996 but it failed miserably to govern many basic issues. The congress took full advantage of the situation made alliances with other local political forces became able to remain in power through three consecutive terms. AGP could not accelerate its mobilization in grassroots during this period. On the other hand two major political forces BJP and AIUDF representing different ideological interest started strengthening their bases at grassroots levels left AGP merely to be a bargaining partner.

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