

# Rise of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in the State Politics of Assam

Dr. Mahan Borah

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, Assam  
Email mahanborah@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

The regional political parties are playing a very significant role in Indian political system particularly in the post congress era and in the age of coalition politics. So far the national level politics is concerned, the regional political parties play a “king making” role in Indian politics. Whereas in the politics at state level concerned the regional political parties emerge as an alternative of national political parties or emerge as the leading political party of polarity politics. Assam is also not lagging behind in this context. Although the state has produced some smaller political parties before 1985, yet the formation of Asom Gana Parishad in 1985 was a historical landmark development in the history of regional political parties of Assam. Thus, in this paper an elaborate discussion is made to understand the role and formation of regional political party namely, Asom Gana Parishad and also focuses the burning migration problem and growing identity politics among the people of Assam.

**Keywords:** Keywords: Assamese identity, ethnicity, regionalism, political party

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## Introduction:

The regional political parties are playing a very significant role in Indian political system particularly in the post congress era and in the age of coalition politics. So far the national level politics is concerned, the regional political parties play a “king making” role in Indian politics. Whereas in the politics at state level concerned the regional political parties emerge as an alternative of national political parties or emerge as the leading political party of polarity politics. Assam is also not lagging behind in this context. Although the state has produced some smaller political parties before 1985, yet the formation of Asom Gana Parishad in 1985 was a historical landmark development in the history of regional political parties of Assam. The Asom Gana Parishad not only emerged as an alternative of the

congress at state politics but also could be able to participate in national level politics.<sup>1</sup>

## Statement of the problem:

Asom Gana Parishad was formally formed in 1985 but it was not the product of one day or one year effort. The genesis of the party was developed during the period of Anti-Foreigner Movements which is very popularly also known as Assam Movement. In the post-reorganized Assam, a new dimension came into sharp focus and that is the steady ingress (opening) of the Muslims into the political power structures and now it is viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State. Relatively better economic opportunities

<sup>1</sup> N. Kowner, *Society and Politics in Assam*, Book land, Panbazar, Guwahati, 2006, p180

have encouraged mass migration from Bangladesh into India, particularly into the bordering state of Assam.

After India's partition in 1947, the Indian and Pakistani governments established a two-year "grace period" during which Hindus in Pakistan could settle in India and Muslims in India could immigrate to Pakistan. Pakistanis who migrated to India during the grace period automatically became Indian citizens. After July 26, 1949, however, immigration was possible only by completing certain legal procedures (visa applications, for example) and unrestricted cross-border migration should have ceased. This was not the result. Even after the existence of an international boundary, the imposition of a variety of legal restrictions and the presence of an Assamese government, [all failed to] stem the flow of Bengali Muslims into Assam.<sup>2</sup>

The native Assamese have mobilized in protest against the new migrants. They accused the central government of deliberately ignoring the cause of Assam. Assamese leaders charge that India's central government, largely dominated by the Congress Party, sought the migrant vote and therefore, ignored the Assamese demands.<sup>3</sup> As a result, in the late 1970's and in the mid 1980's, a large-scale movement was led by a student organization and some political parties namely All Assam Student Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad in Assam which is known as Assam Movement or the movement against the foreign nationals.

During the period of Assam Movement the leaders acquired certain experience, certain

knowledge and realised the necessity of formation of a regional political party which could be able to carryout the interest of the Assamese people, through formal institution, in post movement era. It is to be noted that the scholar like Girin Phukon trace the origin of Asom Gana Parishad beyond the period of Assam Movement and stated that "Although it may seem that the Asom Gana Parishad is the result of anti-foreigner movement, its origin may be traced back even earlier to this. There has been a long history of struggle of the Assamese people for their distinct socio-cultural and political identity which virtually started since the twenties of this century. In fact, the anti-foreigner movement is the latest phase of this struggle"<sup>4</sup> thus it can be said that a regionalist feeling was developed by the people during pre-independent period and the Assam movement was reflection of such regionalist feeling and the Asom Gana Parishad was formalization of such regional sentiments. Thus, a study on **Politics of Regional Political Parties: A Case study of Asom Gana Parishad in Assam** is not only bring to the focus about formation of regional political party namely, Asom Gana Parishad but also help us to understand the burning migration problem and growing identity politics among the people of Assam. Such a study may help to put solutions to continuing migration problem as well as impact of identity politics in Assam.

### Conceptual definition of terms:

The present study entitled 'Politics of Regional Political Parties: A Case study of Asom Gana Parishad in Assam' is politically relevant and academically significant as it focuses not only about regional political parties but also gives an opportunity to understand the intricacies of Assam movement and formation of AGP in state politics of Assam. Thus, in an endeavour to understand the various aspects of the problem of politics of

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<sup>2</sup> Sanjib Baruah, "Ethnic' Conflict as State—Society Struggle: The Poetics and Politics of Assamese Micro-Nationalism, Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), Published by: Cambridge University Press, pp. 649-671

<sup>3</sup> Internet source: *Encyclopedia of India, Vol.2 (E-J)*, Thomson Corporations, United States of America, 2006, p39-44

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<sup>4</sup> N. Knowler, *Society and Politics in Assam*, Book land , Panbazar, Guwahati, 2006, p180

regional political parties with special reference to Asom Gana Parishad in Assam, the concepts relating to the study are explained.

**Political Party:** A political party can be defined as a party of the people, organised on the basis of an ideology, which is always keen to get power and remains continuously involved in the process of politics. Its final aim is to secure political power in the state and to use this power for making and implementing authoritative values for the entire society. It is an extra-constitutional political structure which plays an active part in politics. Political parties, though extra-constitutional in nature, always play a leading part in every political system and more particularly in every democratic political system. These are the key instruments which perform the function of interest aggregation and transform the demands into policy alternative. Political party plays a key role in the political functions of adaptation and integration. Political parties are the vital channels of political communications which transmit two ways information from the people to the government and vice-versa. In the present study, the term "political party" is defined as a group of people those who used all tactics of politics to share in and access to political power. Political party is defined as a decision making authority those who makes laws for the development of the state.

### Review of literature:

There are plenty of scholarly works on the conceptual background of politics of regional political parties in India in general and Assam in particular. One such work is B.C. Bhuyan's, "Political Development of the North-East"<sup>5</sup> which dealt with the growth and development of regional political parties and state politics in North-East India. The Indian National Congress as a national political party gained

ascendency in the north eastern region just after India's independence. But the regional interest groups had gradually developed themselves into regional political parties with the aims and objectives to achieve separate political and administrative units for the purpose of protection and preservation of their distinct identity. The formation of the communal-oriented groups like Eastern India Tribal Union, Jaintia Durbar, Karbi-A-Durbar, Khasi National Durbar and various Kuki National Organisations of Manipur like Hamar Association, Vaiphei National Organisation, the Sengkrak of Tripura are the examples of this trend. It also discusses that North East India as a region is divided into different sub regions with different demographic compositions, political diversity and complexion and development of sub national political identity usually based on ethnicity, culture and language. That is why the dichotomy between the hill and valley politics of Manipur brings political instability in that state, Meghalaya with its matrilineal system is still struggling in forging a common political identity, Mizoram has not yet finally settled the political identity of the Pawi, Lakher and Chakma.

Sanjib Boruah<sup>6</sup> in his work "Durable Disorder" explores a new perspective for the understanding of meaning of democracy with special reference to the Northeast India. The study argues that prolonged counter insurgency operation has eroded the democratic fabric of the region and institutionalized authoritarian practices. The result is a growing dissonance between the idea of ethnic homelands and the actually existing political economy of the region that makes ethnic violence and internal displacement quite predictable. Drawing the examples in this major study from a wide variety of multiethnic situations in India with special emphasis on Northeast, presents a distinctive approach and theory concerning with the understanding of politics in Northeast India.

<sup>5</sup> B.C. Bhuyan, *Political Development of the North-East*, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1989

<sup>6</sup> Sanjib Boruah, *Durable Disorder*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005

S.K Chaube<sup>7</sup> in an article “Tribal Societies and the Problem of Nation Building” introduced the element of “class” as the objective basis of articulation of little communities. It reveals that the tribal elite is not clearly demarcated by the line dividing tradition and modernity. This is because of the fact that the traditional elite have a strong populist base and the class of professional politicians as functionaries of modern state has to reckon with them. The creation of district council and separate state is the result of the political aspiration of the tribal elite. It is to be noted that the growing secessionist movements in North-East India is an aspiration for “political freedom” of the tribal people and the post-independent state is responsible for it.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in an article “Assam: Portents of Violence and Hope for Peace”<sup>8</sup> discusses the current sixth schedule politics in Assam which indicates the further division of the state. The ethnic groups of Assam like Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Missing, Tiwa, Koch-Rajbangshis and so on increasingly assert an identity which is quite distinct from the caste Hindu Assamese identity. Therefore, there is an urgent need to seriously ponder over the identity question of the Assamese people. It is also suggested that the State requires a major change of thrust from the State security to people’s security, where people can take care of their basic socio-economic and cultural issues democratically. The state should try to resolve the identity issues of the sub-national groups by involving the various representatives of the civil society groups.

Chandana Goswami in her work ‘Nationalism in Assam’<sup>9</sup> discusses the growth and development of political consciousness in Assam during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of

the twentieth century. The study highlights the factors responsible for the emergence of political awakening and the role played by the intelligentsia for the growth and development of Assamese nationalism. It also discusses about the contributions of the various socio-political regional organisations like the Ryot Sabha, the Upper Assam Association, the Jorhat Sarbojonik Sabha and so on towards the growth of Assamese sub-nationalism or regional national in Assam.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the present study are:

1. To understand the origin and development of Asom Gana Parishad in Assam.
2. To examine the role of Asom Gana Parishad in electoral politics of Assam.

**Hypotheses:** The present study is conducted to test the hypotheses that:

1. Formation of Asom Gana Parishad is a result of anti-foreigner movement in Assam
2. The changing population demography is a cause of declining of Asom Gana Parishad in electoral politics of Assam.

**Sources of Data and Methodology:** The required information are obtained from books, memorandums, pamphlets, party proceedings and manifestoes and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis is employed to test the hypotheses proposed. Besides, persons having knowledge of the problem are also interviewed.

### **Origin, Development and Electoral Politics of Asom Gana Parishad**

The Assamese society is a plural society having diverse socio-economic groups. Significantly most of the social groups in Assam are developing their political consciousness which reflects the formation of regional political parties by different smaller ethnic groups. The ethnic mosaic of the state is supplanted by rich natural

<sup>7</sup> B. Pakhem, “*Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity*” Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1990

<sup>8</sup> Nani Gopal Mahanta, *Assam: Portents of Violence and Hope for Peace*, eds, Peace Studies, OKDESCD, Guwahati & Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007

<sup>9</sup> Chandana Goswami, *Nationalism in Assam*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2008

resources, river system and scenic beauty. Yet Assam is a poor state. The reason-some might attribute to the negligence of the Centre, some to the geographical condition and other to the crisis of leadership in political arena. Whatever it is, people of Assam have suffered a lot. This has resulted in people's movements against the state authority for better development, e.g., the refinery movement, language movement and movement for food and finally the Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985. The Assam Movement, most prominent one brought the state to standstill for six long years. The motto of the movement was to drive out the foreigners from Assam, i. e., the Bangladeshi immigrants. The All Assam Student Union (ASSU), Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, Assam Jatiyotabadi Yava Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Purbanchaliyo Loka Parishad(PLP), Assam Sahitya Sabha held the steering wheel of the movement, backed by many intellectual of Assam. In this regard Robert G. Gosselink stated that When the Assamese "movement against foreigners" was launched, it was labeled variously as secessionist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Bengali. The Assamese involved in the movement have long denied these characterizations. They insist that their struggle to "protect" Assam from non-Indians. It is not a religious, ethnic, or separatist movement. Rather, it is a *national* movement against the continued presence of foreigners in Assam and is designed to succeed where both the Indian government and the Indian Constitution have failed. Indeed, there are millions of illegal Nepalese and Bengali immigrants in Assam and the Indian government has failed in its duty to prevent this illegal migration. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Assamese have been agitating not only to expel foreigners, but also to protect the Assamese language and culture and preserve Assamese dominance in the state's political arena. It would be oversimplifying the issue to characterize the conflict in Assam solely as a matter of Indians versus non-Indians. A more honest approach recognizes that the growing non-

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Assamese groups in the state genuinely threaten the Assamese identity with extinction and that the purpose of the movement is to stop this threat.<sup>10</sup>

The by election of the Mongaldoi parliamentary constituency in Assam in 1978 focused fresh public attention on Assam's problem of illegal immigration.<sup>11</sup> The leaders of All Assam Student Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad argued that the unusual rise in the electoral roll prepared for the by-election of Mongaldoi parliamentary constituency was caused by the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. They demanded the detection of the names of foreigners on the electoral rolls, the deletion of those names and the deportation of foreigners from Assam.<sup>12</sup> To find out the solution of the problem of illegal immigration several round of talks were held between the government of India and the leaders of the movement in December 1982 and early January 1983 but no solution could be found out. After the failure of the talk between the government of India and the leaders of the movement in December 1982 and early January 1983, the government of India decided to conduct State Legislatively Assembly election in February 1983 in Assam. But the leadership of the movement was against it and they were determined to stop the election at any cost which created an extremely explosive situation in Assam.<sup>13</sup> The leaders of the movement called it Assam's last struggle for survival and campaign in every district of Assam. On the other hand, the descendents of Muslim immigrants, who regarded the movement anti-Muslim, saw the election as a good opportunity to elect an

<sup>10</sup> Robert G. Gosselink, **Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India**, Published by Boston College of Third world Law journal, Volume 14, Issue 1, 1994 p 1-35

<sup>11</sup> Sanjib Baruah, "**India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality**", Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2001, p121

<sup>12</sup> Makiko Kimura, "**Agency of Rioters: A Study of Decision-Making in the Nellie Massacre, Assam, 1983**", eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009, p193

<sup>13</sup> Manirul Hussain, "**The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity**", Manak Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p 141

immigrant-friendly government.<sup>14</sup> The incessant influx from across the border and the lack of political will to check it made the people revolutionary. All the ethnic communities supported the movement by heart. As fallout of the movement the Assam Accord was signed in 1985 and a new regional political party, namely; Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed under the stewardship of Prafulla Mahanta as the President and Bhriku kumar Phukan as the General Secretary. AGP won the Assembly election in 1985 and formed the government in Assam. Prafulla Kr. Mahanta became the Chief Minister. People had great expectation but the new government failed to deliver up to that. In the mean time the extremist wing of the Assamese nationalists youth formed an underground separatist organization namely United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). This group rose to the occasion and started to enjoy popular support. The AGP government also failed to keep the small ethnic groups under the same umbrella of Assamese Nation. The Bodo people started agitating for separate state. Other ethnic groups also directed their grievances toward the negligence of the State government. Movement for 'autonomous state' was started in the Karbi Angong and North Cachher Hills by Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). All these led to the downfall of AGP in 1991 election. But the main reason behind was the failure was intra-party conflict on personal basis, lack of organizational strength and trust deficiency upon the leadership. Because of factionalism in AGP, the NAGP was formed in 1991. In 1996 though the party again came to power, Atul Bora faction split away from the party and formed Trinamul Gana Parishad. The government again failed meekly. The allegations of secret killing, inability to pay salary to the government employees and rampant corruption defeated AGP in 2001. During this

time an attempt was there within the party to isolate the former Chief Minister Prafull Mahanta. Mahanta on his own frayed a new political party; Asom Gana Parishad-Progressive (AGP-P) and contested election. Since then, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the main opposition political party in the state Assam and the icon of regionalism in Assam has keep on defeated on three consecutive times in 2001, 2004 and 2011. In 2011 Assembly election, AGP could get only 10 seats. Many political observers have opined it as a death nail to the coffin of the regional political party and politics.

**Major Findings:** The discussion in the preceding chapters leads to the following inferences supporting the proposed hypotheses. We present below the major findings of this study.

Asom Gana Parishad was formally formed in 1985 but it was not the product of one day or one year effort. The genesis of the party was developed during the period of Anti-Foreigner Movements which is very popularly also known as Assam Movement. During the period of Assam Movement the leaders acquired certain experience, certain knowledge and realised the necessity of formation of a regional political party which could be able to carryout the interest of the Assamese people, through formal institution, in post movement era. Thus it can be said that a regionalist feeling was developed by the people during pre-independent period and the Assam movement was reflection of such regionalist feeling and the Asom Gana Parishad was formalization of such regional sentiments.

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<sup>14</sup> Sanjib Baruah, "India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality", Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2001, p131

namely United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). This group rose to the occasion and started to enjoy popular support. Indeed, the emergence of the ULFA can be causally related to a failure of the AGP leaders to pull together and respond to regional aspirations. Moreover, taking advantage of the AGP being in power, the ULFA got an opportunity to act on a parallel course of attaining independence for Assam with the connivance of the state government. In the process, the ULFA entered into a rather complex relationship with the state authority. The AGP leaders' ambivalence regarding ULFA, which they could neither suppress nor make a deal with, left them no escape route when the centre finally cracked down. The deteriorating law and order situation in the state finally led to an imposition of President's Rule prematurely in November 1990, and ULFA was declared an unlawful organization under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967.

The AGP government also failed to keep the small ethnic groups under the same umbrella of Assamese Nation. The Bodo people started agitating for separate state. Other ethnic groups also directed their grievances toward the negligence of the State government. Movement for 'autonomous state' was started in the Karbi Angong and North Cachar Hills by Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). All these led to the downfall of AGP in 1991 election. But the main reason behind was the failure was intra-party conflict on personal basis, lack of organizational strength and trust deficiency upon the leadership. Because of factionalism in AGP, the NAGP was formed in 1991. In 1996 though the party again came to power, Atul Bora faction split away from the party and formed Trinamul Gana Parishad. The government again failed meekly. The allegations of secret killing, inability to pay salary to the government employees and rampant corruption defeated AGP in 2001. During this time an attempt was there within the party to

isolate the former Chief Minister Prafull Mahanta. Mahanta on his own frayed a new political party; Asom Gana Parishad-Progressive (AGP-P) and contested election. The split in the AGP led to a major break-up in its traditional vote bank, which undoubtedly benefited both the Congress and the BJP. Since then, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the main opposition political party in the state Assam and the icon of regionalism in Assam has keep on defeated on three consecutive times in 2001, 2004 and 2011.

The 2011 Assembly elections marked the beginning of a new phase in state politics. The Congress party secured an absolute majority, winning 78 seats and 39.38 per cent of votes. The main opposition party, the AGP, suffering from organizational weaknesses and internal factionalism, managed to retain only 10 seats with 16.38 per cent of votes. The BJP managed to secure only five seats garnering 11.46 per cent of votes. The AIUDF won 18 seats and 12.58 per cent of votes. The BPPF and Trinamool Congress also managed to increase their tallies, the latter garnering one seat.

Instead of playing into the hands of sectional interests, the emphasis on peace talks with the insurgent groups and development of the state paid rich dividends to the Congress after 2011. Assam has been reeling from violence and insecurity for nearly a quarter of a century. The initiation of a peace dialogue with the ULFA proved to be the Congress' trump card. The possibility of a political solution to the vexed problem of militancy in the state by engaging the dominant militant groups across the negotiation table and initiating the much-awaited peace process without any preconditions on the issue of sovereignty after a long period of 30 years worked well for the Congress party. Besides, the success of the AIUDF and BPPF seems to have encouraged the formation of smaller ethnic parties, causing even greater political and ethnic

fragmentation. The fate of the main opposition party, AGP, appears bleak in such a situation.

### Conclusion:

Politics of regional political parties in Assam thus clearly reflects two fundamental tendencies – a fragmentation in the party political space and an explosion of ethnicities in the arena of politics. A realignment of relationships among various kinds of pre-existing social cleavages has also emerged. The simultaneous operation of these alignments has made contemporary Assam a virtual laboratory of the politics of ethnicities. The entry of new social groups and parties has the potential of giving greater meaning to competitive democracy in the state, even though this competition has rarely led to better choices and new policies, programmes or institutional devices. Underneath the apparent political supremacy of the Congress party, the state can still witness an unrest caused by more serious issues like, among others, corruption, immigration of foreign nationals, rising prices, and grievances of ethnic minorities. Overall, the future of both the Congress and regional forces like Asom Gana Parishad will depend less on short-term political exigencies like electoral alliances and more on how well they respond to and meet the dormant political desires of the hitherto unrepresented social forces under a larger federal political umbrella that can effectively strike a balance between the ruling segments and the minorities.

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