

The Decline of Regional Politics and the Rise of the BJP in Assam

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Abstract : *In the post-independence history of Assam regional parties played a very important role in shaping the political narrative of the state's politics. Assam, a beautiful and diverse state in northeastern India, has witnessed a significant political transformation over the past few decades. The region was habitat of many ethnic group with uniqueness. Assam faces many political problems among illegal immigration from Bangladesh was major issue. The peoples believes that with the regional party they can solved the emerging issues for that there was Historically the politics of Assam dominated by regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Bodo Peoples' Front (BPF), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and the national political party Indian National Congress (INC) but the political picture of Assam has shifted dramatically with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This article tries to analysis into the major factors which was contributing to the decline of regional politics and the rising importance of the BJP in Assam, discussing new electoral trends, leadership dynamics, and socio-political developments etc.*

Key-words: *Regional Politics, Assam Politics, leadership, recent trends, AGP, BJP.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The politics of Assam historically and traditionally characterized by its local parties with strong sense of unique ethnic & cultural identity. Assam's political landscape has undergone tremendous changes over the past few years, marked by a gradual decline of once-dominant regional forces like strong AGP and the concurrent, steady strong rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) not only in Assam but in this North-East region of India. This shift has been not in a very short period of time but it was driven by a complex interplay of factors including the evolution of regional aspirations and losing faith upon local parties, leadership dynamics of BJP, strategic political manoeuvring, using of social media and the BJP's ability to tap into local anxieties, national narratives and Hindutva. Assam, a northeastern state of India, has long been a crucible of political change, social upheaval, and cultural transformation. Formerly Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had no significant influence in the northeastern region, has emerged as a dominant force not only in Assam but also states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which once upon a time represented the voices of the regional aspirations, Assamese regionalism, the aspirations of the Assam Movement and ethnic identity but now-a-days it has almost losing its influence over the people of Assam. while on the other hand the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has rapidly risen to dominance in Assam politics. BJP explores historical contexts of Assam, electoral dynamics, socio-economic factors, strong booth level activeness and the strategic moves have included new political chapter in Assam politics and reshaped Assam's political map.

2. THE ERA OF MAJOR REGIONAL PARTIES:

Historically and traditionally, regionalism played a very significant role in Assam's politics. In Assam there was many concerns like illegal immigration, protection of indigenous culture & tradition, language, and land rights. Due to the issues the demography of Assam changes rapidly for that there was concern about to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples. Before formation of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) there was few regional parties formed in Assam but it was AGP who changed the politics of Assam with its establishment. The AGP, formed on 14th October 1985, as a

result of the famous Assam Movement (1979–1985), which sought to address major issues related to illegal immigration from Bangladesh and to protect the rights of indigenous Assamese people. Assam Movement was an anti-foreigner agitation led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU). AGP was led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Bhriku Kumar Phukan etc. The AGP won and formed the Govt. in 1985 & 1996 state elections and symbolized Assamese sub-nationalism, cultural identity. The All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), formerly known as Assam United Democratic Front was founded on 3rd October 2005 under the leadership of some Muslims' leaders like Badruddin Ajmal, primarily represented to protect the interests of the state's Muslim population. Other important regional party, such as the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), was founded on 5th December 2005 under the leadership of Hagrama Mohilary and Emmanuel Mosahary. BPF is active particularly in Bodoland areas where they run the Bodo Autonomous Council and was a part during the Congress Govt. under the Chief Ministership of late Tarun Gogoi. Another important regional party of Assam from BTAD is United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) was founded on 5th August 2015 under the leadership of Urkhao Gwra Brahma and Pramod Boro and the party also run the Bodo territorial Govt. as well as a partner of National Democratic Alliance Govt. in Assam. Some of the new regional political parties of Assam are Rajjor Dal, Assam Jatiya Parishad but they are yet to make a significant impact in the politics of Assam.

These are some names of regional parties which are present in Assam and addressing regional concerns, issues, promoting Assamese identity, and managing the complex ethnic identity, uniqueness, tradition and cultural mosaic of the state. However, here we basically analysis the factors which have led to decline of AGP in recent years.

3. THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL PARTY: AGP

Post Independence period up to 1985 was dominated by Indian National Congress (INC) but post-1985, the political scene was primarily divided among regional parties like AGP and The Indian National Congress (INC). The famous historical Assam Agitation from 1979 to 1985 against illegal immigrants from Bangladesh resulted in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 which directly led to the formation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Which was the regional party born out of the movement. The party swept to power and formed the Govt. in the same year, symbolizing the zenith of regional aspirations. The AGP formed the government twice, first in 1985 winning 67 out of 126 Assembly seats and again in 1996 got 59 seats with alliance 69 forming the Govt. under the Chief-Ministership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. The party also captured a majority of Assam's Lok Sabha seats during that time marking a decisive shift from Congress dominance to regional party dominance. But the initial success of AGP doesn't last long, it faced internal factionalism, allegations of corruption, and challenges in addressing main issues like illegal immigration, sealing of border, economic development of Assam and ethnic conflicts. The less experienced of the leaders and lust of power also responsible for losing its popularity among the masses.

CAUSES OF FALL:

Asom Gana Parishad wanted to placed itself as the custodian of Assamese society and identity, promising to implement all the clause of Assam Accord and safeguard the rights of the indigenous population of Assam. The AGPs' rise reflected the broader trend of regionalism in Indian politics, where local parties emerged to champion state-specific issues neglected by national parties but the party failed to become act as a custodian of Assamese people.

LEADERSHIP ISSUES AND INTERNAL CONFLICT:

One of the important causes of AGPs' fall in Assam politics was internal dissensions and multiple splits. Factionalism weakened its organizational strength and public trust and image of the party and leaders among the people. AGP suffered from frequent splits like in 1991 when one of the founders as well as party general secretary Bhriku Kumar Phukan and other strong member of the party formed Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP), second split in 2000 and third split when former two-time AGP chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta out from party and formed Asom Gana Parishad (Progressive), though factions later reunited but the damage already done and divided the regional vote. lack of charismatic leadership after the early years of AGP was also one of the major issues for the party. AGP also faced a leadership crisis over the years, with a failure to groom a new generation of leaders who could capture the public imagination as the initial leaders of the Assam Agitation did. Younger voters and urban populations thought that AGP as outdated or ineffective party. AGP faced leadership struggles, factional disputes, and an inability to present itself as a united front in Assam politics.

WEAKENING OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY POLITICS:

The AGP's roots lie in the Assam Movement (1979–1985), a mass agitation against illegal immigration from Bangladesh in Assam which ended in the signing of the "Assam Accord" in 1985. "Assam Accord was not just only a

paper of agreement but the emotion and sentiment of Assamese people, which sought to address the concerns of the indigenous Assamese population regarding demographic changes and political rights. But AGP's inability to resolve the core issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh a foundational promise of the party totally disappointed its main support base. The people of Assam totally disappointed with the party because it was failed to address the clause which was in the Accord. As a National party BJP began to hijack the issue of illegal immigration and the rights of indigenous people's rights from AGP and diminishing the thoughts that regional parties are as sole defenders of indigenous rights. The AGP also failed to effectively tackle insurgency and ethnic violence, particularly in Bodo-dominated areas, further eroding public trust. The shift away from AGPs original agenda in pursuit of electoral gains alienated many Assamese nationalists and core supporter of the party.

LOSS OF IDEOLOGICAL FOCUS:

After coming to power, AGP drifted from its original ideological moorings, diluting its regionalist agenda in pursuit of short-term political gains and alliances, notably with the BJP. This shift alienated its traditional supporters, vote-bank and weakened its distinct identity as regional party who talks about Assamese identity and indigenous people's rights.

INABILITY TO GOVERN EFFECTIVELY:

AGP formed government in Assam two times one in 1985 to 1989 and second time from 1996 to 2001, but it struggled with issues such as economic development, insurgency, and law and order. Accusations of corruption and inefficiency led to erosion of public support. AGP faced allegations of misgovernance and Corruption during its rule which also leading to decline its public support and trust among the masses. Scandals, administrative inexperience and governance failures eroded its public trust.

CORRUPTION AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES:

One of the major issues of losing its popularity in Assam due to the allegation and involvement in corruption. The AGP government faced widespread allegations of corruption in its two term rules which severely damaged its credibility among voters and among the local masses. The inexperienced leaders run administration struggled with financial crises, inability to pay salaries to its employees and had to cut welfare schemes, leading to perceptions of being anti-employee and ineffective in governance led to fall its trust. Corruption during the AGP's rule had a direct and significant negative impact on its popularity. The party had come to power on a strong anti-corruption platform, promising to cleanse the state's political culture. AGP ministers were seen in misusing of power and engaging in the same corrupt practices they had promised to eliminate from Assam. These led to widespread public disappointment and anger steady erosion of AGPs core and primary support base.

AGP'S STRATEGIC COMPROMISE WITH NATIONAL PARTIES:

AGP was formed purely on the basis of regional issues and sentiments. But AGP lost its identity as one of the strongest regional parties of Assam due to its alliances with national parties (BJP), which diluted its regional character and voter base. Faced with declining electoral fortunes and base in Assam, AGP chose to ally with BJP, hoping to retain some relevance and influence in governance but this alliance, however, has led to criticism that AGP has compromised on its core principles, especially as BJP's policies sometimes conflict with Assamese nationalist sentiments.

FAILURE TO ADDRESS COMPLEX ISSUES:

AGPs inability to effectively address all the major and emerging issues like economic development, social development, rights of the indigenous people, problems of insurgency, issues of unemployment, ethnic conflicts, and illegal immigration etc. led to voter's trust over the party.

EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE REGIONAL PARTIES:

Emergence of other regional forces and with the presence of strong national parties in Assam led the fall of AGPs presence in Assam politics. As AGP faltered, national parties like the Congress and BJP, as well as other regional forces gain its base. It capitalized on its weaknesses, consolidating their own bases and leaving AGP as a marginal player. Parties like the BJP, Congress on national front and UPPL, BPPF, AIUDF, Rajor Dal, Asom Jatiya Parishad and others gained ground, further fragmenting regional support.

IMPACT OF INSURGENCY AND TERRORISM:

The rise of insurgent groups like ULFA and the government's controversial handling of counter-insurgency operations, including the dark part of Assam history known as secret killings episode also further tarnished AGP's image and led to a loss of public support and confidence.

ELECTORAL SETBACKS:

The AGPs dominance in Assam politics as regional party diminishing from 2001 Assembly elections. 2001 elections marked the beginning of AGP's decline, as the party lost power to Congress amid allegations of misgovernance, mis using of power and corruption. After it in all Subsequent elections from local bodies to General elections the party saw a steady decrease in vote share and seat tally. Now-a-days the party increasingly reliant on alliances to remain politically relevant in Assam politics.

The AGP Government has failed to live up to people's expectations and it failed to deliver on its promises. Loss of credibility and trust was a key factor in the party's declining popularity and electoral setbacks in subsequent years. These factors combined to produce a steady decline in AGP's electoral fortunes and political relevance in regional politics.

4. THE RISE OF THE BJP IN ASSAM POLITICS:

BJP which had a marginal to non-presence in Assam politics until the early 1990s. in 1991 assembly elections it won 10 assembly seats, began its systematic growth in Assam. The 2016 Assembly elections was a mark moment for the party because with coalitions the BJP form its first government in Assam, it was a decisive shift away from regional and Congress dominance in Assam politics. The party continued its strong performance in subsequent every election, including the 2019 & 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the 2021 Assembly elections which make BJP the first non-Congress political party who retained power consecutively for two terms and in 2025 Panchayat elections. Now BJP established as the dominant political force in the state. Here we discuss some of the key factors of BJP's success in Assam politics.

BJP'S STRATEGIC ENTRY AND ALLIANCESS:

Traditionally BJP was weak in Assam but it strategically began to building its base in the state through sustained organizational work and by aligning with regional parties like AGP and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF). The BJP built a broad coalition by partnering with major regional forces like AGP and ethnic parties BPF initially but in later it dominating the coalition. After weakening its allies, BJP absorbed their support base. BJP not only formed strategic alliances with regional parties but also with some independent candidates to maximize electoral gains. In the 2016 Assembly elections, the BJP formed a pre-poll alliance with AGP and BPF, presenting a united front against Congress and success with remarkable wining of 60 seats, its allies AGP 14 and BPF 12 but interestingly dominant Congress only managed 26 seats. Another strategic moved of BJP was the formation of the North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) which help to consolidate non-Congress forces not only in Assam but also in other parts of North-East states. The alliance with AGP was a big benefit for BJP because it provided regional legitimacy, access and influence AGPs organizational network, especially in grass root level.

APPROPRIATION OF REGIONAL SENTIMENTS:

The BJP hijacked the regional sentiment from the regional parties present in Assam. The BJP successfully co-opted core regionalist concerns, particularly the protection of "Jati, Mati, Bheti" (Community, Land, and Homestead), protection of indigenous rights. It positioned itself as a party committed to safeguarding the interests of the indigenous population against illegal immigration, saves Assam from unusual demographic changes, a sentiment that traditionally fuelled by the major regional parties of Assam. The BJP's extensive outreach programs and welfare schemes have further eroded the grassroots base of regional parties.

DECLINE OF THE CONGRESS:

The Congress party was one of the strongest political parties with presence support in every part of Assam and dominated Assam politics for decades. The weakening of the Congress party created a political vacuum that the BJP effectively filled. Internal dissent, conflict within the Congress, including the departure of many influential leaders and most importantly Himanta Biswa Sarma who later joined the BJP and become the Chief-Minister of Assam, significantly

boost the saffron party to dominant Assam politics. His leadership has been instrumental in expanding the BJP's influence across the state, particularly in regions traditionally dominated by regional parties.

5. RISE OF AIUDF AND RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION:

Another factor which favour BJP to emerged as a political force in Assam was the emergence of the All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), which consolidated a significant portion of the Muslim vote, inadvertently contributed to a counter-consolidation of votes. The BJP capitalized on anxieties regarding demographic change and presented itself as the protector of Hindu interests, leading to a degree of religious polarization that benefited the party mostly. The leaders of the BJP always take it an advantage for them and build a solid base of voter in Assam.

HINDUTVA TO REGIONAL CONTEXT:

While Hindutva is a core ideology of the BJP, in Assam, the party often blended it with regional cultural symbols and concerns, thereby making it more palatable to a wider section of the Assamese electorate.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH AND RSS CADRE:

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the back bone for the BJP and almost presence in all part of India with its huge cadre base support. The BJP, backed by the robust organizational network of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), worked diligently at the grassroots level. The RSS's efforts in tribal areas and among communities like the tea tribes helped expand the BJP's social base. RSS-affiliated organizations also expanded grassroots networks for BJP in Assam and the Northeast region.

DEVELOPMENT AGENDA AND THE “MODI FACTOR”:

The BJP capitalized on widespread dissatisfaction with Congress and AGP's governance, promising development, good governance, and an end to corruption. The BJP has implemented several welfare schemes, such as the “Orunodoi” Scheme, aimed at providing financial assistance to low-income families. These initiatives have enhanced the party's appeal among marginalized communities, including indigenous Muslims. The BJP's campaign in Assam particularly from 2014 onwards, focused on a development agenda, promising economic growth and infrastructure development. Another major boost to popular BJP in Assam, the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi also played a crucial role in attracting voters. The BJP's national trajectory from a marginal party to a major force culminated in Narendra Modi's leadership. The party's core ideology of Hindutva, nationalism, and development resonated with diverse electorates.

NATIONAL APPEAL WITH LOCAL ADAPTATION:

BJP successfully combined its national ideological agenda (Hindutva, nationalism) with local issues such as illegal immigration, ethnic identity, and development. Projected itself as a party that could ensure both regional security and national integration. While AGP's regionalism waned, BJP's brand of nationalism-combined with promises to protect indigenous rights-attracted a broad spectrum of voters.

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP POLITICS:

BJP capitalized on anti-immigrant sentiments, promising to protect indigenous Assamese identity. The NRC (National Register of Citizens) and CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) debates, though controversial, mobilized both support and polarization that benefited BJP in consolidating Hindu votes.

CHANGING VOTER BASE:

Another factor was now many younger voters are less attached to the memories and sentiment of the Assam Movement and are more attracted to BJP's promises of jobs, infrastructure, development agenda and protection of national integration. AGP's traditional support base has fragmented, with maximum supporter moving to BJP, few others to newer regional outfits or abstaining from politics altogether.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CAMPAIGNING:

One of the important factors which helps BJP to rise and reach in masses of Assam was utilizing of digital technology. The party leveraged social media and modern campaigning techniques to reach a wider electorate. the BJP's robust organizational network and effective use of technology have enabled it to reach voters more efficiently. The BJP's adept use of media and technology has played a crucial role in its rise. The party has effectively utilized social media

platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), membership drive through miscalls etc. which helps to communicate directly with voters, bypassing traditional media channels. This approach has allowed the BJP to shape public discourse and mobilize support more effectively than other major and regional parties.

6. CONCLUSION:

The political landscape of Assam has experienced a significant transformation over the past few decades traditionally the land was governed by Congress and AGP but the trend was changed. The decline of regional politics and the rise of the BJP in Assam is a significant political development that reflects broader shifts in the state's political landscape over the past two decades. The rise of BJP reflects broader national trends, coupled with local issues resonating deeply with voters. The decline of AGP signifies the challenges regional parties face in adapting to new political realities, especially in the context of the BJP's strategic outreach and policy focus. While BJP's ascendancy has brought about stability and development opportunities, it also necessitates addressing complex socio-cultural issues to ensure inclusive growth and social harmony. The future of Assam's politics will depend on how parties balance regional aspirations with national narratives, and how they address the diverse needs of its multifaceted society. In 2025 Panchayat elections results BJP won 274 Zilla Parishad and 1261 Anchalik Panchayat while its ally AGP won 27 and 184 seats respectively and counterpart INC bagged 72 Zilla parishad and 481 seats in Anchalik Panchayat. Now we move towards the 2026 Assembly elections, the future of regional parties like AGP and national party Congress remains uncertain. Whether a new wave of regionalism will emerge or Congress come-back or BJP's continuous dominance and retained power for consecutively for third time will deepen depends on how well these parties can address the evolving aspirations of Assam's diverse population.

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