

Regional Politics in Assam

Abstract

The regional politics dominates a crucial place in Indian political system. In Assam, regional feeling is not new for people of the land. It has a long history, prior to the independence. But the emergence of AGP has paved a new milestone in regional politics in Assam. In post 1985, many regional political parties has emerged, some of them have played an important role in politics in Assam. Although only in 1985 and 1996, regional party was able to form government, but regional political parties play a vital role in Assam politics till now. The election verdict also reveals the importance of regional political parties in Assam. Therefore this study tries to analyse the trend of regional politics in Assam.

Keywords: Alliance, Election, Politics, Regional, Verdict.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, many waves of migration touch this valley of Mighty Brahmaputra. From east to west and from north to south, many people came to this land and settled down. Assam is a land of fragmented ethnic groups. Through this process this land developed a separate culture, tradition and a separate identity. Although in ancient time there were many kingdoms, Ahom gathered these entire kingdoms and established Bor Asom, which created a new identity to people of Assam. So, as a part of greater India, due to problems of deprivation, regional imbalance, underdevelopment etc. people of Assam had a regional feeling prior to independence.

As the regional feeling of people of Assam is a pre-independent phenomenon, the oldest political organization All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) formed in 1893, which was later renamed as Ujani Ahom Rajya Parishad (UARP) in 1970. After independence, All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was the main regional party formed in the then composite State of Assam which struggle for the hill districts of Assam. The other parties of Assam are Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA), Asom Jtiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP), Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (Biplobi), Karbi Anglong People's Conference, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), United Minority Front (UMF), Bodoland Peoples Party (BPF), Bodoland People's Progressive Party (BPPF), All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) etc. Since independence to present time in Assam, a number of regional political parties are there. This study statistically mentions only after the 1985 onward election results. Because, the regional politics in Assam had developed only after the emergence of AGP. Which is a full fledged regional political party in Assam in the real sense. So, it is interesting to see the trend of regional politics in Assam. What is in the mandate of people of Assam?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are

1. To analyse the verdict of people of Assam.
2. To understand the trend of regional politics in Assam.

Methodology

The present study is basically based on secondary data. The secondary data is collected from government records, election handbooks, books, journals, news papers and articles etc. The method of study is partly analytical and partly descriptive in nature.

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In the conceptual part of the study, we must try to understand the term regional political party. A precise definition of regional political party is difficult to find. The fact is that B. Pakem writes, "There has been no acceptable definition of the term regional political parties so far". Theoretically speaking, a regional political party is one, which has its base in a region. Encyclopedia of Social Science defines region as a homogeneous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighbouring area. Practically however, a party may cover more or



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less than a region. The regional parties are those parties which do not operate in many states but whose activities are mainly confined to only single of a handful of states. They are the bye product of religious, linguistic, economic, caste and ethnic factors.

According to B. Pakem, a regional political party refers to any political party at the district, provincial, or regional level of a country propagating for the preservation of certain specific regional interests as differentiated from the general national interests, and which interests are expressed constitutionally through demands ranging from an aspiration for a separate cultural identity, a separate political identity, or a different level of socio-economic development, to an aspiration for an environmental or geo-political detachment.¹

The term politics used to refer traditionally merely to the action of monarchs, parliaments and ministers and to the activities of politically committed who helped or hindered their accession to authority. Everything else was social or private life. With the expansion of the power of governments, nearly everything has come to be described, in one way or another, as 'political'.² According to Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar, politics at the state level was about power, personal aggrandizement, parochial interests and their protection through lobbying. Political practice is monopolized by a minority of professional politicians; and the bulk of the community is given no place in the practice. According to MacMillan Dictionary, party politics is that political activity involving different parties that compete with each other. It also says that party politics is political activity for the benefit of a particular party rather than for all the people in the country. In Indian context, politics is the art of acquisition of power for specific goals. In politics one must identify those allegiances which can be mobilized to get votes or popular support.³ An elucidation of party politics in India should begin with an understanding of the role of political parties in democratic systems generally.⁴

The history of regional politics in Assam started in 1893, as All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) was formed, which was followed by All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC). The Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed on 27 February, 1967 at Kokrajhar. It represents Bodo-Kacharis population of Assam, which came to election fry in 1972 general elections to the Assam state Assembly and won a seat. In later period, the PTCA has played an influential role in regional politics in Assam. The leaders demanded full autonomy to create 'Udayachal', an autonomous region including northern parts of Assam, to preserve language and culture of plain tribals. The extreme socio-economic deprivations and oppressions were the main factors of emergence of PTCA.

The election is backbone of democracy, which reflects the trends of politics. In such a way election results is important to understand the politics in Assam. In the election concern in Assam, in 1972 Legislative Assembly election was important, because the only regional party PTCA entered the election for

the first time by contesting 2 seats and the party secured 1 seat in the Assembly. In this election, total 9 political parties contested the election of which 8 were national and 1 regional that was PTCA. The party's general secretary C. Narzary was elected from Kokrajhar west (ST) constituency. Though in early elections, many regional political parties tried to fight but they would not success. In this election, independent candidate captured 10 seats; however, the Congress was the only dominant party in Assam politics till 1972 which secured 95 seats out of 114 in the Assembly.

From the view of politics in Assam, the 1978 election was also important. In this election, for the first time an anti-congress government, that was Janata party formed an alliance government, where PTCA was allied to this government. Though, this government existed only for 18 months of rule. In this election, the members of two other regional political parties namely Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) and Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) came to election fry but they lost. In that elections, Janata party secured 53 seats out of the total 117 seats, INC secured 26 seats, PTCA 4 seats out of 9 seats, C.P.I. (M) secured 11 seats, and Independents secured 15 seats. The other important thing of that election was that Left party increased its strength and the number of independent candidates was also increased to 485. After the resign of the Janata Ministry, there was a split under the leadership of J.Hazarika within Janata party and formed a new regional political party, that was Assam Janata Dal which ruled the State for a short time of 3 months (October to December) 1979. Since then, there was a chronic political instability and the Presidential Rule was declared three times.

In 1983, election to the State Assembly was held, but issue of foreign nationals burnt the state and the election was boycotted. The Assam movement was started in 1979, on foreign national issue, at that time, when the electoral roll for holding the parliamentary by-election in Mongaldoi constituency was prepared. On the basis of thousands of complains received by the election officer, about inclusion of foreign nationals in the voter list, it was found that more than 45,000 foreign nationals were enlisted in the list after scrutinized the complaints by the election Commissioner. This resulted began of a massive movement, which led to political instability and state was put under President's rule. In 1983, election for State Assembly was held, but it was full of chaos and not success. It had to be dissolved on 18th August 1985, by signing of historical Assam Accord between Central Government and AASU on 15th August 1985.

This long six years of movement led to the formation of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) on 14 October, 1985. The other two regional political parties of Assam namely Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP) and Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) decided to merged with AGP. The election manifesto of the party said that it would take effective steps for the permanent solution of the State's foreign national problem and to establish peace and security among all sections of people keeping the Assam Accord in view.⁵ But

immediately after the Accord, the United Minorities Front (UMF) emerged for protection of interest of minorities at Hojai on 10th November, 1985.⁶ The Front consists of Jamiat Ulema-e-hind, Citizen Rights Preservation Committee and the Minority Forum. The party's object was to fight the 1985 election and to defeat the pro-accord forces with the help of anti-accord forces. The UMF election manifesto protests against the Assam Accord. The emergence of AGP becomes a strong step towards regional politics in Assam. Therefore, the study tries to analyse post 1985 politics in Assam.

In 1985 Assam election, three regional parties like AGP, UMF and PTCA contested along with 12 other political parties. But there was lack of electoral understanding among like minded parties. The 1985 election was important for Assam politics in many ways. On the other hand, 1985 election was very significant for Assam in general and AGP for particular. Because in this election for the first time voted a regional party AGP to power with absolute seats, which indicated a strong base of regional politics in Assam. In this election AGP secured 64 seats, Congress secured 25 seats, UMF secured 17 seats, PTCA secured 3 seats, CPM won 2 seats, Congress (S) won 4 seats and independent candidates secured 10 seats. Another important point of this election was that UMF emerged as third largest single party, while all 3 regional political parties together secured 84 seats out of 125 seats, which was new trend in Assam party politics. On the other hand, all-India parties like CPI, CPI (M), RCPI, Janata, BJP and Lok Dal have been completely eliminated in the election. In this election the strong basis of regional political party was shown and AGP, the newly emerging regional political party got good support from people of Assam.

The regional politics in Assam especially after the 1985 election becomes more complicated, multidimensional. The rise of AGP implies a culmination of regional aspirations of the Assamese people. This paved the way for the multi-party system in Assam with the Congress system; it gave the space to political parties of various ethnic groups or smaller cultural communities, now they begun to play a significant role in Assam's politics. For example: Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) and Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF), Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Rabha Jatiya Aikya Manch, Tiwa Jatiya Aikya Mancha have emerged in political scenario of Assam. Among them, BPF emerges as one of the most important ethnic political parties, which represents the Bodos. The BPF becomes two time partner of ruling Congress Government and member of present BJP led alliance government in Assam. On the other hand, AIUDF, this represents Muslim group, also able to show strong presence in every elections in Assam. The result of Assam election since 1985 onward shows the trend of regional politics in Assam with the help of following table.

Table: Election performances of regional political parties and national political parties in Assembly Elections of Assam:

Year	Regional Performance	National Performance
1985	84	32
1991	28	82
1996	66	45
2001	22	84
2006	36	68
2011	40	84
2016	39	86

Source: *Statistical Report on Legislative Assembly of Assam, Chief Electoral Officer, Assam*

The above table shows that, Regional force in state was strong in 1985 and 1996. The AGP led government was form for two times. After these, Congress led government was form in Assam except last 2016 election. This time, BJP led NDA government is ruling the state. Assam is not exceptional from Indian coalition politics, many times, AGP, BPF, AIUDF, ASDC etc. regional political parties as well as national political parties like BJP, Congress, CPI, CPI(M) etc. make alliance in the state. Sometime partnership becomes fruitful and sometime not. If we see the performances of regional political parties, it is clear that people of Assam prefer regional political parties. Since 1985 election, regional political parties won a number of seats, which proves well presence of regional feeling of the state. Except, AGP ruling 1985 and 1996 and debacle of regionalism in 1991 number of seats of regional political parties is increase. Like that, the role of independent candidate also very important in Assam politics.

It is seen that the trend of regional politics in Assam has gone under changed. Many regional political parties have emerged with their diverse interest. Many ethnic political parties are formed to protect and preserve the customs, traditions, customary laws, language, religion and distinct identity of their own section of the society. Although there were many regional political parties in Assam, but AGP was the torch bearer of regional politics in Assam. On the other hand, Assamese society is fragmented, where small ethnic groups live with their diverse problems. Such a situation, it is difficult to get support from all sections of society to single regional political parties like AGP, BPF etc. from entire Assam. There fore it is inevitable of emergence of many regional political parties in Assam. So, there is a change in the trend of regional politics in Assam.

Conclusion

The presence of the regional political party is an inevitable feature in politics of India today. In considerable to size and diversity of the country, there are various factors that lead for the emergence of regional political party. Now a days, regional political parties play a king maker role in Indian politics. Assam is not exceptional from this; she has a long history, which full of rise and fall of many regional political parties. But people of Assam have faced many problems, deprivations, exploitation during the ruling period of national political parties. Obviously

they have hope on regional political parties to overcome these. So it is responsibility of all regional political parties to come together and think together for the interest of greater Assamese society.

Endnotes

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