

Decline of Regionalism and Rise of BJP In Assam

Shubhalikha Boruah¹, Jeuti Nath², Rashmi Rekha Taye³

¹(Former Guest faculty, Pandu College ,Guwahati, Department of political science)

²(Guest faculty, Pandu college, Guwahati , Department of political science)

³(Guest faculty, Pandu College ,Guwahati, Department of political science)

Abstract

In the context of Assam's political landscape, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represents a significant paradigm shift. The main objective of this paper is to understand this rise of BJP in Assam and its various dimensions. Moreover, the prevalence of regionalism in Assam during its earlier phase can be attributed to various factors. But with the rise of BJP, Assam witnesses the decline of regionalism. Therefore, another objective of this paper is to bring out the reasons for the decline Regionalism in Assam politics.

Introduction

Assam, just like many states of North East India has been historically dominated by Congress party. However, the Congress party has lost its social base after some time specially during 1980's. In case of Assam, during the mid 1980's Assam Gana Parishad emerged as a strong regional party and as an alternative to the Congress party. Over the past few years, particularly after 2014 General election, Bhartiya Janata party have witnessed a significant rise in popularity and influence in the northeastern state of Assam. Political stagnation of AGP and the diminishing dominance of Congress has led to the favorable condition of BJP'S rise. In 2014 election, in alliance with the regional ethnic parties AGP and BPF, BJP won a total of 86 seats. Congress faced a drubbing with only 26 seats out of 122 contested. This unprecedented performance of the BJP, a party that so far had a total tally of only 37 seats in assembly elections between 1991 and 2011, is a remarkable feat in social engineering. Bhartiya Janata party made alliance with Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bodo People's Front (BPF) as NDA; On the other hand, Congress made alliance with United Peoples Party in BTAD area as UPA. BJP won 60 seats out of 89 seats contested, AGP won 14 seats, BPF got 12 seats, Congress managed to get 26 seats, AIUDF got 13 seats. The substantial increase in the Bharatiya Janata Party's electoral triumph necessitates comprehensive analysis. Therefore, the following first section of the paper will deal with

the reasons for the rise of BJP in Assam.

1.Spilt within Congress party: Spilt within the Congress party has been one of the primary reasons, which has led to the favorable condition of BJP'S rise. The intra-party schism of the major congress leaders called "Bikhongbadi" group led by Himanto Biswa sharma the than education and health minister of Assam along with about 45 members of legislative assembly had been carrying on an anti- Tarun Gogoi campaigning within the party for two years. The ultimate joining of these leader in BJP just before election has been proved costly for congress which has led to loss of constituencies.

2.Rise of AIUDF-AIUDF emerged as the strong party for the Muslim dominated constituencies. AIUDF highlighted the issue of these minority groups, issue like D-Voters, char dwellers and harassment and humiliation faced by them as Bangladeshi's. The leader of this party, Badruddin Ajmal successfully blended religion and politics to gain support from the Muslim communities (Nani Gopal Mahanta). There are 40 assembly constituencies spread over nine parliamentary seats where Muslim voters constitute from 35% to 90% of the total. These Parliamentary seats are Karimganj, Silchar, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Guwahati, Mangaldoi, Nawgong and Kalibor. Needless to say the AIUDF'S victory was in this belt (Dhubri, Barpeta and Kamringanj). The polarization of voters helped them too to win very comfortably.

3.Issue of Infiltrators – Assam, situated in the northeastern part of India, has been dealing with the issue of illegal infiltrators. Since, the state shares border with Bangladesh, the influx of undocumented immigrants from the border nation Bangladesh has been a major issue and threat for the people of Assam. Assamese sub-nationalism began as a protest against the dominance of Bengali Hindu migrants, who came to occupy offices in government and other middle-class occupations in the province. Bengali was the court language as well as medium of instruction in new government schools of Assam from 1837 to 1873, a move widely resented by the Assamese speaking population (Baruah, 1999). Though partition politics did cause a communal rift in Assam, after Independence, the 'language movement' overshadowed the problem of illegal immigration into Assam (Baruah, 2008). The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is a regional political party in the state of Assam formed in 1885 with the primary objective of safeguarding the interest of the indigenous people of Assam and opposing illegal immigration from Bangladesh. In the 1970, the AGP with the support of AASU member use the issue of illegal immigrants and inclusion of foreigners in electoral rolls to challenge the one-party dominance of congress and also succeed to defeats Congress and came into power. Eventually, AGP had to soften its anti-immigrants stand due to electoral compulsions. The period also witnesses massive increase in ethnic polarization and the parties scrambled to new demands. Its aggressive posture often alienated other communities, and support from its core constituency of Assamese Hindus alone was not enough to come

to power. At the same time, its popularity was already on the wane during its first term in government due to its lackadaisical attempt in implementing the Assam Accord. The detection, deletion and deportation of 'illegal' immigrants from Assam seemed politically less viable for the AGP, the promise with which it had come to power in the first place. Moreover, AGP's inability to form government at the state level in subsequent elections was also a result of rampant factionalism, lack of leadership and its ambiguity in dealing with the separatist group of ULFA. The rapidly diminished political capital of the AGP, once considered an indomitable regional force, demonstrated the limits of aggressive ethno-nationalist politics in a state with complex ethnic diversity and the presence of crosscutting cleavages. Interestingly, this brand of nativist politics also ended up creating space for the BJP. The rest of the paper explores the rise of the BJP and saffron politics in the same socio-political context" (Saikia 2020). Narendra Modi and the BJP made the promise before 2014 Lok Sabha election to highlight the issue of 'illegal immigrants' and how the party will deport them back to Bangladesh if the party comes into power.

4. Declaring Sarbananda as leader before election-Another Masterstroke of BJP that helped BJP to established its stand in 2016 assembly election was declaring chief ministerial candidate Sarbananda Sonowal, a tribal also known as Jatiya Nayok who was also erstwhile AGP leader. This masterstroke helped BJP gain confidence of the people of Assam that BJP is the only potential party to right leader to solve the issue of illegal immigrants.

In the next section will deal with the issue of leadership and will explain how leadership played a crucial role in the rise of BJP in Assam. Leadership plays an important role in electoral politics of a democratic country. It is the power of a leader who can manipulate voter. Many social scientists have always been intrigued by the questions of how people vote and how leaders develop electoral support. For this purpose, national level large sample surveys carried out by Lokniti group of political scientists in India, located at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. From the survey conducted in Assam after 2021 Assam assembly election (Post poll survey) it is shown that more than a majority of voters say that have voted on their own and party and candidate are the most important consideration in exercising their vote.

Over the past few decades we are a witness to the phenomena of the rise of powerful leaders in various parties. Most parties are leader centered whether these parties are national or provincial, old or new. Most liberal and social democratic parties in India are known not by its programmers and policies, but by its popular leaders. At the center the wave of Modi in 2014 give success to the party. Similarly, in Assam power shift from Congress to BJP become possible after Sarbananda Sonowal's switched to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP). He is popular among the people as Jatiya Nayak, the former leader of All

Assam Students Union (AASU). Sonowal was named president of BJP's state unit 2012, within a year of joining the party. The party's assembly election debacle of 2011, where it won just 5 of the 126 seats, prompted it to look for replacements of state leaders. Sonowal in alliance with AGP has managed to do what no leader has been able to do in Assam in 15 years, end the three-term reign of congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi. There is no doubt that Sonowal's leadership and his popularity as Jatiya Nayak bring changes in electoral politics of Assam but the external and internal factors also help in this regard. Himanta Biswa Sarma's switch from congress to BJP in 2015 due to internal conflict in with the former chief minister Tarun Gogoi completely changed the politics of Assam. During his stay in congress he was popular among the people for his strong leadership quality. 2016 Assam assembly election bring changes in the government and BJP allies form the government under the chief ministership of Sarbananda Sonowal. During the reign of Sarbananda Sonowal, Himanta Biswa worked very actively and earn his popularity within the party as well as among the people. People as well as party leader started appreciating his hard work specially during the time of covid19. 2021 Assam assembly election BJP again came to power. This time Himanta Biswa Sarma became the chief minister of Assam despite the fact that Sonowal was the most wanted chief minister according to Assam post poll survey 2021. The survey result shows that 23% people wanted Sonowal as chief minister again where only 10.7 % people wanted Himanta Biswa Sarma as next chief minister of Assam.

Leader centrism in the electoral politics of Assam could be explained in three plausible explanation - a cultural explanation, crisis of governability explanation and a functional explanation. Firstly, such leader could be the result of cultural values prevalent in the state. In the state of Assam, the Assamese people want to preserve their cultural identity which facing crisis due to migration. According to post poll survey 2021(Lokniti) people support BJP for protection of Assamese culture. Religion is a factor of culture. Hindu constitute 61.47% (2011 census) of Assam population. Leaders attitude towards the religion which is prevalent in the state help them to gain popularity. It is clear from a study of voting patterns that Assam is getting increasingly polarized on religious lines. (Mahanta,Nani Gopal). Secondly, supreme leader arises partly because people perceive them as an antidote to the erosion of ethics in politics and see them as instruments of good government. The report of post poll survey conducted by CSDS shows that maximum number of people supported BJP for their developmental approach and good governance. Thirdly, without strong leader a party may not be successful in elections. For organizational and electoral purposes, a strong leader has a utilitarian function. Himanta Biswa Sarma emerged as an unbeatable leader in Assam by making the government near to the people. Welfare as well as some populist scheme attract common people towards him. Despite of ideological differences many people wish him as a leader because of his strategical strength to overcome any unpleasant situation.

The next section we will highlight how after coming up of BJP the policies were changed and how the changed policies ultimately helped BJP to retain its power. The BJP government in Assam is well-known for its hard-liner stance on immigration issues, especially those involving the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The government's goal was to identify and remove illegal immigrants while providing a path to citizenship for certain religious minorities from neighboring nations.

Apart from that infrastructure development, including road and bridge construction, had been a government priority in both urban and rural areas. Focus was placed on initiatives to improve connectivity, particularly in remote regions. The government launched a number of healthcare initiatives to improve access to medical services, including the Atal Amrit Abhiyan, which aimed to provide health coverage to economically disadvantaged segments of the population.

The government had taken measures to enhance the quality of education, particularly in rural areas. Their education policy included initiatives to upgrade school infrastructure and provide better facilities for students. The government had prioritized promoting economic growth and investment within the state. Their economic policies included initiatives to attract industries, create job opportunities, and strengthen the agricultural sector.

The government also recognized Assam's tourism potential and sought to develop the state into a popular tourist destination. There were efforts to promote cultural heritage, wildlife, and natural beauty. The youth's employability has been increased through the implementation of skill development programs. These programs aimed to provide the necessary training and skills for a variety of industries. The government had launched schemes and initiatives to empower women, including financial support for self-help groups and assistance for women entrepreneurs.

The government had been concentrating on modernizing agriculture, enhancing irrigation, and supporting farmers through a variety of programs. Efforts were made to preserve Assam's rich biodiversity and protect the environment. Their policy agenda included initiatives related to the conservation of forests, wildlife, and natural resources. By including these people centric policies in their agenda, the party has gained the trust of the people.

A crucial aspect of the BJP's strategy is its Hindu nationalist rhetoric. As in so many other states, the party has adopted the local Hindu cultural variant. This vernacularizing process led to the promotion of an Assamese icon, Sankardev, a Hindu saint and scholar from the 15th to 16th century who settled in the Ahom kingdom in 1516-1517.

Conclusion

To conclude, the rise of the BJP in Assam was characterized by electoral

victories in both state and national elections. In the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly elections, the BJP and its allies formed a coalition government and assumed power in the state for the first time. At both the state and national levels, the BJP demonstrated effective leadership. The charismatic leadership of Sarbananda Sonowal and Himanta Biswa Sarma contributed to the growth of the party's popularity.

The BJP campaigned on a platform of economic growth, development, and good governance. Their emphasis on infrastructure, job creation, and improved services resonated with a large number of voters. The BJP formed alliances and coalitions with regional parties such as the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), which increased its support and broadened its appeal to voters.

The BJP's strong performance in national elections and its position as the nation's ruling party contributed to its visibility and popularity in Assam. Assam is home to a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities. Regionalism and identity-based movements have frequently resulted from historical grievances and concerns over preserving cultural identities.

Illegal immigration from neighboring countries, particularly Bangladesh, has been a major political issue in Assam. Numerous individuals view these immigration issues as threats to the state's linguistic and cultural fabric, so these concerns frequently intersect with regionalism. Assam has a history of cultural and linguistic preservation movements. Occasionally, these movements have been affiliated with regional political parties. The rise of national parties, such as the BJP, has at times altered the political landscape. Voters can be influenced by the BJP's emphasis on national issues and ideologies, but regional concerns remain significant. The relationship between the rise of the BJP and the dynamics of regionalism may change over time due to variables such as policy decisions, economic shifts, and shifting political alliances.

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