



# ASOM GANA PARISHAD (AGP) AND THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL POLITICS IN ASSAM

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, Assam's political landscape has witnessed a large number of confrontations due to rise of regional political forces like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). AGP was born out of the socio political unrest and the cultural identity crisis caused due to various concerns around the illegal immigration from Bangladesh having potential that threatened the demographic and cultural fabric of the state. Formation of AGP in 1985 ushered in a new period of regional politics in the country and the party climbed onto the important crusader role for safeguarding Assamese identity and autonomy. Even though AGP began from a successful start, the party's rise and eventual fall questions the future viability of regional parties in Assam. In this paper, AGP's story is discussed as one of historical and political significance which while addressing the question, 'how has the AGP brought about such a decisive change in the character of Assamese politics and how had this come about through its distinct manner of engaging with the question of regional identities and examining the place of the regional identity within the larger discourse of regionalism in Northeast India?' The challenges that AGP encountered in preserving its influence are evaluated by scrutinizing the electoral patterns, political dynamics, and landmarks like the Assam Accord, and the opportunity (still there) for regional parties operating in Assam's changing political situation is investigated. The paper also studies the role of regionalism in the future of Assam claiming that although the political milieu has changed, circumstances have yet created a context for a resurgence of regional political forces if the regional political forces can adjust with the shifting voter concerns and demands.

**Index Terms:** Regionalism, assam accord, AGP, elections, assamese identity, immigration, political parties

## I. Introduction:

Assam's political landscape has undergone significant transformations, particularly with the rise of regional political movements. In the post-independence era, the Indian National Congress (INC) dominated Assam's political scene, reflecting national trends. However, by the late 1970s, concerns over illegal immigration from Bangladesh emerged, leading to shifts in the political dynamics of the state (Ahmed, 1999). The presence of immigrants was felt to be a threat to the socio cultural, linguistic and political identity of the indigenous Assamese people and caused regional political movements. Leading a mass agitation on the same issue, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) sealed the deal for the Assam Accord, 1985, an agreement meant to trace and deport the illegal immigrants (Bora, 1992). The accord turned out to be a landmark event in Assam's political history and was instrumental in the beginning of a regional party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which strove to protect the interests of the Assamese people from the domination of the national parties, such as the INC (Goswami, 2004). The development of AGP was the inauguration of a new age of regionalism in Assam and it contended for the preservation of Assamese identity and settlement problems.

Election of 63 out of 105 contested seats by Assam Gana Parishad in Assembly elections of 1985 marked a shift to regional politics in Assam (Baruah, 1986). Its early success was built on support for Assam Accord offered by the public, in demand of representation in its locality on relevant matters. Nevertheless, in recent years, AGP's influence has been declining as cracks began to appear within the party, for not being able to implement the Assam accord and the rise of new political forces like BJP and AIUDF (Borah & Bhuyan, 2024). However, despite

these problems regionalism still dominates the scene and as far as influencing the political landscape of the state concerned, the role of AGP is as important as it has been (Talukdar, 2020).

This paper aims to explore the rise and fall of AGP and how this party affected Assam's political milieu; it is only the beginning of trying to comprehend the future of regional politics in Assam. This study attempts to understand the changing Assam political scenario by reviewing the party's electoral performance, internal challenges and also impact of Assam Accord in the long run.

## II. Importance of the Topic:

The regional parties like the AGP are important for understanding what is fast becoming an increasingly complex socio political state, driven by marked ethnic diversities. The very case of Assam where regional politics was formed by AGP, particularly after the signing of Assam Accord in 1985, offers a very important example of how these tensions between regionalism and national political forces get formed. The resulting emergence of AGP was due to the concern of indigenous Assamese people with the problem of illegal immigration and preservation of their culture. Its rise and fall are historically instructive in regards to the dynamics of regional politics in a state that has yet to reconcile the tangle of issues that involve identity, migration and autonomy. In addition, the wane of AGP would be an important source of reflection for the discourse on regionalism in India, as it perhaps indicates the next step in the life of all similar political movements in the country. So, analyzing AGP's evolution helps the policymakers, political analysts and even the voters to think rationally about the relevance of regionalism in the rich Indian political geography.

## III. Objectives:

This paper aims to explore the role of the AGP in shaping Assam's political landscape. It seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To understand the historical context, socio-political forces, and key events that led to the formation of AGP in 1985.
- To analyze AGP's electoral performance over time, the factors contributing to its rise and decline, and its impact on regional politics in Assam.
- To examine the challenges and opportunities regional parties like AGP face in adapting to evolving political dynamics, such as economic development, governance, and the dominance of national political forces.

## IV. Methodology:

### 4.1 Research Design:

The study is qualitative in character and is backed by analytical and descriptive methods. It depends on both primary and secondary sources.

### 4.2 Data Collection Methods :

#### a) Primary Sources:

- Interviews: Conducted with the participation of former AGP members, intellectuals, student leaders, and political analysts.
- Surveys: Distributed to voters across different age groups in Assam to understand public perception.

#### b) Secondary Sources:

- Books, journals, newspapers, government reports, party manifestos.
- Election Commission of India data on AGP's electoral performance.
- Online academic articles and news portals.

## V. Discussion of the Topic

### 5.1 Historical Context and the Emergence of AGP

The anxiety over illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh resulted in the changed political and social terrain of Assam in late 1970s. Indigenous Assamese came under widespread unrest about this issue as they thought that influx of migrants would change the demographic composition, cultural heritage, linguistic identity etc. of the region. From then on, the Assamese people began to assert themselves and protect their rights and maintain their different socio-cultural identity, and this change in the political fabric of the state began. But the

mounting unrest of these issues merged into the gigantic mass movement by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which called the people of the state on the question of the immigration problem (Bora, 2009).

It gathered considerable force in the years until the Assam Accord in 1985 contributed to the recognition of the problems of the indigenous people by making the law of detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners, especially those who came into Assam after March 25, 1971. The Assam Accord is therefore perceived as a great step for the political and cultural future of Assamese people, and done to forge a ground for building a regional political party advocating the implementation of the Assam Accord (Goswami, 2001).

After the Assam Accord in 1985, the AGP was formed with the objective of becoming a political platform of the Assamese people. The formation of AGP was an evident reaction to the perceived inability of the national political parties, especially the INC, to recognize concerns of immigrants and attempts to safeguard the Assamese cultural identity. AGP, the first major regional party in Assam, has carved itself as a party of the guardian of the interests of Assamese vis-a-vis regionalism, conservation of cultural heritage and political autonomy in Assam (Bora, 2009).

The rise of AGP was marked by the success of AGP in the 1985 Assembly elections of Assam. In these elections, a regional political party that championed the cause of Assamese identity sweeping the polls, becoming the party for which the people voted in these elections – AGP won 63 out of the 105 contested seats. This was a clear indication of how regional politics had become stronger in Assam, where the national parties, like the INC, had been dominating for quite long. This is one of the turning points in state's political history and it showed the growing regional representation demand for the state and the shifting away from national issues and towards more local issues (Goswami, 2001).

Emergence of AGP as a political force was a significant landmark in Assam's electoral politics. This was part of a wider process of regional assertion seen all over India at this time. AGP rose to power because people were unhappy with national political parties whom they considered to be too far away from the distinct problems of the people of Assam. The rise of regionalism in Assam, the growth of local political parties as key players in the state's political scenario, started with the formation of AGP.

## 5.2 Electoral Performance and Political Dynamics

The path of AGP in elections has been extremely variable, particularly reflecting the internal strife of the party and development of politics in the state. At first, AGP supported a lot because the indigenous Assamese population considered another political force which could save their cultural, linguistic and political identity. This formation of AGP after the Assam Accord in 1985 (Srikanth, 1999) represented Assam regionalism and was viewed as a reaction to the growing uncertainty related to illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

The first major electoral triumph for AGP was in the Assam Assembly elections held in 1985; the party won contests for 63 out of the 105 assembly seats. This was not only a big achievement for AGP, it also heralded in regional politics in the state where AGP came up as a powerful voice for Assamese identity and a platform to address local issues. But success in the beginning of the party was short lived and quickly faded away, becoming less influential. Despite their efforts to maintain internal cohesion, AGP split into two factions in 1991, namely AGP and NAGP (North Asom Gana Parishad). This polarization weakened AGP's position and in 1991 elections it suffered a massive loss and was reduced to winning only 19 seats against the 54 it won during its first general elections. However, new political forces coming from every region of the country like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) also added to the fragmentation of the party as they gained traction to the frustration of the electorate at the failure of AGP in solving the area's political and economic problems (Srikanth, 1999).

However, in the 1996 elections, AGP tried to regain its fortunes by merging with NAGP but it could not get back to its earlier position. If the party managed 59 seats in the 1996 elections, it was an improvement on 1991 but still far from the heights of 1985. AGP's lack of addressing important issues such as full implementation of Assam Accord and increasing insurgency in state largely kept national parties, mostly the Congress, influential in Assam's political arena. Inability of AGP to address these key issues along with internal divisions never let the party regain its earlier popularity and the party failed to regain its old political position (Das, 2005).

In the 2021 Assam Assembly polls the AGP's position in the political spectrum was not seen any better. The party could secure only 9 seats in the 126 member legislative assembly but its overall vote share declined as compared to previous years. The performance of AGP came even though its alliance with the BJP at the centre was a part of a ruling coalition designed to consolidate the political base of the right wing parties in the state. But the alliance did not provide AGP the kind of electoral success it had envisaged. Following the decline of the party's influence was the bigger shift in Assam's politics where regional issues were losing ground to national concerns, more so when the BJP came to power and other regional players such as the AIUDF rose to influence.

So, the fluctuating electoral fortunes of AGP will be seen as an indication of the complex political dynamics of Assam politics where regionalism and identity based politics often have collision with national issues. The rise



and fall of AGP depicts the difficulties that regional parties have to confront to stay united and cope with the changing politico and socio economic realities of their own constituencies. Moreover, due to AGP's inability to realize its many assurances on the implementation of Assam Accord and the lack of its ability to bring down the insurgency movements, the political impact of AGP decreased in its own state of Assam.

### 5.3 Regional Politics and the Assam Accord

In 1985, the Assam Accord came to be one of the major watershed events in the history of Assam politics. The Accord was intended to do away with the problem of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and safeguard the rights of the Assamese indigenous population. The Accord set a precedent for regional political movement in Assam, with AGP becoming the most prominent political party championing the full implementation of the provisions of the Accord. The primary political platform of AGP was based on its promise of implementation of the Assam Accord with special reference to identification and deportation of the illegal immigrants who have come to Assam after March 25, 1971 (Bora, 1992). Though AGP had a strong political platform, there were a number of social and political pressures that posed difficulties in implementing the provisions of Assam Accord. It was very regrettable for AGP that illegal immigrants were not identified and deported properly as the party supporters were very dissatisfied. Moreover, this failure damaged both the party's credibility and disillusioned the people who viewed AGP as the custodian of Assamese identity and rights. Lacking in substantial progress in fulfilling the provisions of the accord has hindered AGP's ability to sustain the same support level as that of its initial years (Goswami, 2004).

Moreover, the escalating insurgency in Assam, mainly carried on by the ULFA, added to the political insecurities of AGP. However, demand of ULFA for greater autonomy for Assam could lead AGP in trouble, as it could not fulfil that demand. The inability of the AGP to contain the insurgency and also unable to provide for the aspirations of the youth and the militant groups in the state resulted into the erosion of its support base. Thus, national parties, such as Congress and newer political forces, such as the BJP, could increase their 'presence' in the region, after the turn of the millennium (Bora, 1992). From the time BJP started rising on the political scene of the party especially from 2001 and beyond, the political landscape of Assam witnessed a shift from being regional to more nationalistic in approach, which was opposed to AGP's regionalist approach.

Also, the Assam Accord implementation made Assamese society more split. Different ethnic and religious communities had different views of the Accord and its provisions, and the state was polarized accordingly. In the backdrop of this spate of events, minority communities, particularly Muslims, began to connect with United Minority Front of Assam, a party which found space between AGP's regionalism. The rise of UMFA demonstrated a change to Assamese politics, as the ethnic division in the state only expanded. The AGP's own structure of division along ethnic lines further undermined its position that it could not lay claim any radical bridge across such developing divides within an Assamese society (Goswami, 2004). As a result of the inability of the AGP to unite the various communities in Assam and the lack of capacity of the party to address the extremely complex socio political issues pervading in the state, the political base of the party remained very limited.

### 5.4 The Decline of AGP and the Emergence of New Political Forces

Several interconnected factors including the decline of party internal struggle as well as changes in the Assam's political landscape led to the decline of AGP. AGP lost steam because except for a few promises it failed to deliver, foremost being the full implementation of the Assam Accord. In addition to this, the party also suffered from serious internal divisions that also made it difficult to maintain the unity and solve the Assamese people problems (Srikanth, 1999). In the late 1990s AGP had lost its early momentum and entered into alliance with the BJP in 2001 elections. However, this political marriage was unpopular to many a segment of the Assamese electorate, especially the Muslim community. This created a feeling of unease among Muslim voters due to BJP's hardline stand on immigration and its perception of being partial to the minority communities. Therefore, the alliance failed to garner that level of support that AGP had expected and consequently resulted in a steep fall in its political fortune (Srikanth, 1999).

During the 2001 elections, Abu Taher managed to regain power for Congress party as its divided the Congress on this matter. Secondly, the disintegration of AGP and their inability to form a united front created the vacuum which was filled by the Congress in terms of river front position whereas the advent of new political forces like AIUDF added to the political intricacy in Assam. The rise of AIUDF notably inside the Muslim community offered an alternative to AGP's regionalist agenda, and further fractured the vote-base which had previously supported AGP. Assam comes under the increased domination of national political parties like Congress and BJP, where the role of ethnic based political parties raised and this all results in the reduced role of regionalism in

Assam. It was also a noticeable alteration in the political scenery of the state that turned from the issues of region to those of the nation at a large scale (Bora, 2009).

The emergence of national parties and the decreasing importance of regional parties, such as AGP, showed changes in the political environment of Assam. With the lessening importance of regionalism, Assam's politics came to be more and attracted by national parties and new political forces of appeal for certain communities. Hence the political landscape of Assam was disrupted with not only the regional aspiration dominance and the regionalism in general gave way to some broader movements of national and identity based political movements.

**Table 1: electoral performance of AGP in key elections**

Year	Election Type	AGP Seats	Total Seats	Vote Share (%)	Comments
1985	Assam Assembly	63	105	34.54	First regional party to form a government.
1991	Assam Assembly	19	126	24	Fragmentation of AGP leads to decline.
1996	Assam Assembly	59	122	29.7	Reunification with NAGP leads to better performance.
2001	Assam Assembly	20	126	20.02	Decline in AGP's influence due to alliance with BJP.
2016	Assam Assembly	14	126	8.14	Significant decrease in AGP's vote share.
2021	Assam Assembly	9	126	5.45	Decline in AGP's seat count and vote share, despite alliance with BJP.

Source: State Election Commission, Assam.

### 5.5 The Future of Regional Politics in Assam

Assam is an area of uncertainty and changing dynamics in terms of regional politics of the future. The AGP may persist as a political entity but it, as a political force, largely has been ruined largely over the years. Decline in AGP was due to a variety of reasons, including internal schisms, failure to deliver on its promises, and the emergence of national parties like BJP. Regional parties like the AIUDF appear at the same time further complicated the political scenario of Assam (Bora, 2009).

However, despite this, regionalism continues to have its fair share of backers in Assam's voting populace, especially from the constituency who believe that their cultural, linguistic and political identity is threatened. Political developments in Assam remain closely tied to matters of ethnic identity, migration and (or) autonomy. The fears for safeguarding the indigenous rights and cultural conservation continue to be addressing, which allows the regional parties to retain their effective roles provided, they can capitalize on changing electorate requirements.

For a regional party such as AGP and other regional parties, it is necessary to change their psyche to cater to the changing aspirations and challenges of a multitude of people of Assam. Therefore, the evolution of this process requires rethinking of the basic issues, which once acted as the cause of their emergence e.g. implementation of Assam Accord, in keeping with the existing issues related to economic development, governance, youth employment and social welfare (Das, 2005). Also, the political autonomy demands raised by groups like the ULFA and the various other insurgent factions will have to be addressed for any regional party to resettle in Assam's politics. It is one of the key avenues that can further lead to the winning of regional parties in future, in forging new alliances, both within the state and with national parties. Given the rising might of, both, BJP, which is an obstacle for Congress in south India, and Congress, which threatens to eat into regional parties in every other state whatever be the scenario, a concerted effort will have to be made for regional parties to get together and ally to form a coalition of sorts which would stand against the breeze of these national forces. Alliances such as these could enable regional parties to wield more bargaining power and sway than they had ever had in determining the direction Assam's future political path should take. However, restoring the significance of

regional parties will also demand mobilisation support from different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities existing in the state (Goswami, 2004).

Additionally, regional parties should work on pragmatic issues which matter to the electorate rather than being trapped in the ideologies which don't address the problems of the contemporary Assam. Providing basic amenities, development of infrastructure, unemployment and the ethnic tensions which can be overcome only by the policies of inclusiveness would be critical to regaining their trust which the voters may have lost. If regional parties continue to be marginalized as the political sphere continues to fragment against these changing demands, they will likely fail to adapt to these changing demands.

Furthermore, the fate of Assam regional politics depends on the regional parties like AGP, or the emerging forces, to innovate, join forces and address the changing needs of the electorates. Regardless of the challenges, these parties can, as also adapt, respond and stay united, reassert regionalism in Assam's political maze. However, when it comes to identity, migration and autonomy, regional politics in Assam may see a comeback in the state if these parties succeed in providing visible solutions which connect around the people of Assam.

## VI. Findings/Tentative Results of the Topic:

These findings indicate a significantly diminished influence of AGP over the years, in strongest terms since 1985. The decline can be attributed, among other reasons, to the party's inability to effectively implement key provisions of the accord on which its political platform was built, as well as internal divisions that effectively weakened its cohesion and thus its effectiveness. This is further muddled by the rise of national political forces like BJP and Indian National Congress, and the rise of ethnic based parties AIUDF in the politics of Assam simultaneously marginalizing AGP and turning the attention of the Assamese politics from regionalism to a far broader nationalistic issue.

Although these challenges persist, regionalism remains popular among some sections of the Assamese electorate who believe their cultural, linguistic, and political identity is being threatened. This is an ongoing sentiment which may lead to the opportunity for the surge of the regional politics in the state. However, if AGP and other similar parties are able to take up issues like economic development, governance and youth unemployment in a positive way, might be able to rebuild its political relevance and play a significant role in future of the state politics.

## VII. Conclusion:

Assam is a perfect example where INC and BJP leads the race and the fate of AGP within the state is one of the plights of heritage political parties. The appearance and fade out of AGP in 1985 and in the decades proceeding it speaks a lot about the rise and fall of fortunes of regional parties in an increasingly acidifying political scenario. Its failure to implement fully the provisions of the Accord that provided basis for the party's initial success, coupled with its internal division, which sapped its political standing, undermined the demand for Assamese identity as well as the promise of the Assam Accord. Secondly, new political forces surfaced in the state including the BJP and AIUDF that made AGP's position in the state even more complicated.

But regionalism continues to have firm root among some quarters of the electorate in Assam because many of them believe that it is necessary for their cultural, linguistic and political identity. What lies ahead for AGP and other regional parties in the state will be determined by whether AGP and other regional parties with a regional base in Assam can make the necessary adjustment in the changed market. The lesson for all will be from AGP's experience of unity, good governance and strategic alliances. A future resurgence of regionalism in Assam cannot be completely ruled out, if the regional and similar parties can continue to enjoy the popularity among the cadres on issues like economic development, political autonomy and ethnic cohesion and be relevant to the contemporary political scenario of the state. It will depend on how AGP and other regional forces can win back the confidence of the electorate and guide such changes.

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