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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Asom Gana Parishad: The Trajectory of India's Endangered Ethno-regional Party

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## ABSTRACT

The existential crisis of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the prominent ethno-regional party in Northeast India, demonstrates that ethno-regionalism may tender only short-term political dividends to the party unless it transforms into a party to carry out a vision of development that would address the material well-being of people. In other words, the ideology and mobilisation of an ethno-regional party may not be sustainable if it deviates from its strategy from the everyday life process of development. Moreover, the BJP's glowing strategy of championing ethno-regionalism along with its Hindu nationalist ideology and its alliance with the AGP cost more adverse impact on the latter's mass base and thereby dwindling its electoral space in the Assam politics.

**Keywords:** Citizenship Amendment Bill; Northeast India; Regional Party; Regionalism in India; Assam Movement; Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act

## INTRODUCTION

Ethno-regional parties (ERPs) based on ethno-regional cleavages engage in mobilizing ethno-regional identities within ethno-territorial limits. Ethno-regional cleavages assume different form — national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions. They are often seen as the ethno-regional movements turned parties with varying demands such as autonomy and self-rule within a federation. Its mobilization and articulation premised on the articulating ethno-regional grievances of various ethnic groups, though it often enters into larger power-sharing with national parties whose ideologies and programmes are distinct from them. ERPs are not only democratizing the polity but also democratizing the communities which they represent, contributing to democratic consolidation. Since most of the ERPs emerge out of ethno-regional movements, ideology and programmes become a casualty when they transform

into a political party. It demands the parties either have to reinvent its ideologies and strategies or meet with electoral adversities in a competitive party system. The ideologies and programmes inherited from the ethno-regional movements may bring initial electoral advantages for the party, however, the durable sustainability of the party depends on its capability to address the material needs of the society. By aligning with national parties whose ideologies and programme detrimental to the ERPs and thereby anticipating to regain its eroded electoral space may turned out to be political disastrous for the ERPs. The AGP's image of the torch-bearer of the ethno-regionalism in Assam was overshadowed by the BJP's newfound interest in articulating ethno-regional issues such as illegal immigration and the protection of the ethnic communities without deviating from its hard-core cultural nationalism. Hoping to regain its eroded space in the electoral politics of Assam, the AGP entered into an alliance with the BJP and shared power in



the government, gradually proved to be detrimental to this survival. The BJP-AGP alliance brought more avenues for the BJP at the cost of the AGP as its mass base and electoral strength has shrank as explicated in the election results of both assembly and Lok Sabha.

## THE UNEASY TRANSITION

The AGP, the largest ethno-regional party in Northeast India, is a product of the Assam Movement (1979–85), which raised ethno-regional issues such as the illegal migration of Bangladeshis that it felt as threat to the cultural identity of the state. It was formed on 14 October 1985 as an amalgam of ethnic organisations such as Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP), Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) with Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who led the Assam Movement, as its president. The AGP was influenced by the ideological bedrocks of these organisations. As an ethno-regional party, it has been defending the interest of a specific community within a specific territorial location. According to AGP, it is trying to protect the identity and culture of Assamiya middle class, which is in danger due to the illegal migration of Bengalis. In the formative years, the party was able to arouse ethno-regional consciousness among the people and continued to hold power subsequently.

Before the formation of AGP, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), as an independent student movement not affiliated to any political parties, and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) initially articulated the ethno-regional interest. The Assam Movement originally emerged to protect the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and political identity of the Assamese people. The issue of illegal migration occupied the centre stage of the Movement, which felt that the identity crisis was due to migration from foreign countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. As a grave concern illegal migration affected the social fabric of the Assamese society and aggravated the unemployment and insecurity problem in the state. The AASU took up the issue of migration from Nepal and Bangladesh and demanded the deportation of all foreigners living illegally in Assam. It contended that the backwardness and growing unemployment of the Assamese youth was due to "outsiders" that broadly include Bengalis, Nepalis, and Bangladeshis. It was widely perceived that the growing expectation of people could not be realised due to the inflow of these "outsiders".

The genesis of ethno-regionalism in Assam is traced back to the 1960s, though the Assam Movement and the subsequent emergence of the AGP cemented it. The party often constructed a narrative that the Congress government in 1967 did not give much importance to the regional issues confronted by the State of Assam. This laxity on the part of the Congress not only resulted in growing discontent towards its government, but also sowed the seeds of ethno-regionalism. The language issue was the

preparatory ground for the ethno-regional movement. It is one of the pertinent reasons for the emergence of sub-regionalism in many parts of India also. This argument is validated from the Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu against the imposition of Hindi as a national language in India in the 1960s. In Assam too, the AASU demanded Asamiya language as the medium of instruction up to the graduate level in addition to the existing English language. Hussain argues that 'though, the movement was apparently on the issue of medium of instruction, the ruling classes in Assam used the movement to revive the Asamiya-Bengali conflict once again in Assam after 1960'.<sup>1</sup> The language issues generated Assamese discontent towards the Bengalis. It is believed that 'the conflict, rooted in the centuries-old love-hate relationship between Assamese and Bengalis, has been fueled in this century by Assamese apprehension that their language and culture are threatened'.<sup>2</sup> Not only Bengalis, other linguistic communities of United Assam-Nagas, Mizos, Khasis and others expressed concern over the introduction of Assamese as a medium of learning in educational institutions. Tribal groups like the Bodos, Rabha, Cachari, Koch, Hajong, Karbis, etc., too voiced their discontent against the Official Language Act. The AASU ethnicised the students for the cause of protecting their distinct identity. The ignited minds of young students became the graveyard of ethnic chauvinism. The outcome of this phenomenon was that the 'little nationalism' (Assamese Nationalism) turned to be 'chauvinist'.<sup>3</sup>

In 1972 the government accepted the demand of the AASU and introduced Assamese along with English at the graduate level. The subsequent years saw the fizzling out of the ethno-regional movement and the shift towards class issues. In the 1978 elections, a year before the beginning of the Assam Movement, the left parties performed comparatively better. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) alone captured 11 out of the 126 seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly thereby making inroads into the ethno-regional sentiments. The AASU took up new issues like the illegal migration of foreign nationals in the state for sustaining the ethno-regional consciousness and mobilisation. It demanded the detection and deportation of illegal foreign nationals from Assam and the removal of their name from the electoral rolls, and launched a new movement called the Assam Movement in 1979.

The six-year-old movement finally ended with the Assam Accord of 1985- the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) reached between the Union Government and AASU in New Delhi on 15 August. As per the Accord, 1 January 1966 would be the base date and year for detecting foreigners and 1971 was for deporting the foreigners. All persons who came to Assam, prior to 1 January 1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularised. Foreigners who came to Assam after 1 January 1966 and up to 24 March 1971



shall be detected and their names will be deleted from the electoral rolls. Initially, the AGP promised to protect the distinct socio-cultural and political identity of the Assamese people, and also to find out solutions to illegal migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. Mahanta argues that 'after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, the regional aspirations of the Assamese people got articulated in the formation of the AGP'<sup>4</sup>.

After the Assam Accord, the Assam Legislative Assembly was dissolved, and the Congress Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia resigned paving the way for fresh elections in the state. In the 1985 election, the first-ever election after its formation, the party manifesto promised to protect the political rights of the Assamese people and the implementation of the Assam Accord. Reiterating its commitment to protect the distinct socio-cultural and political identity of the Assamese people, the AGP promised to find out solutions to illegal migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. It was in fact an attempt to woo the Assamese-educated middle class towards the party. It also promised to implement the Assam Accord and put an end to separatist tendencies and strengthen national integration and bring about trust and good will among the various religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities of the state. Further, it promised the people of Assam to strengthen the federal structure<sup>5</sup>. The ethno-regional consciousness generated by the Assam Movement provided a conducive atmosphere for the emergence of an ethno-regional political formation called the AGP. When the AGP turned into a regional political party after the Movement, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) rejected the democratic path established in the Assam Accord.

## AGP'S ROAD TO POWER

In 1985, in the first State Assembly elections after its formation, the AGP won 63 seats with a voting share of 34.54% out of 126 it contested. The party was able to muster the support of seven independent candidates and formed the government under the leadership of P. K. Mahanta. The great casualty was the national party, Congress, which could not tackle the waves of ethnic regionalism unleashed by AGP. The Congress was under a difficult situation when the regional mobilisation took place because it ultimately affected its electoral prospects adversely. As an umbrella party representing the interest of all sections, it faced the dilemma of accommodating regional issues and ethno-regional consciousness. The AGP came to power with the legacy of ethno-regionalism generated by Assam Movement and played a dominant role in the state politics challenging the long-year domination of the Congress politics in the state. However, the party adopted a lukewarm attitude towards the issues of illegal migration in the state when it came to power. The government could deport only 6743 Nepalese in 1987 who reportedly migrated from Meghalaya<sup>6</sup>. The government could not complete its

five-year term as President's Rule was imposed in the state. In the late 1980s, when coalition politics gripped at the centre, the AGP became an alliance of the National Front government in 1989. While firming its commitment to the cause of ethno-regionalism in the state, the party aligned with a conglomeration of national and regional parties at the centre.

As an ethno-regional party, the AGP reiterated its commitment to secure more rights for the state in the federal union, to provide full protection of the interests of local candidates in all matters of employment, and respect for the legitimate rights of small nationalities<sup>7</sup>. It claimed that the sustenance of regionalism in Assam is the result of colonial regime of New Delhi. Further, it stated that the central government often took an 'attitude that the resources of Asom belong to the nation, but the problems of Asom are not national problems. These are the own problems of the state'<sup>8</sup>. At the age of 28 Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, AASU's young vibrant leader, became the Chief Minister of Assam, perhaps the youngest Chief Minister in India. The AGP, which controlled political power twice (1985-90 and 1996-2001) in the state, took a lukewarm attitude towards the illegal migration issue. Perhaps, one of the reasons for such an approach was the fear of losing immigrants' vote to the party. The ascendancy of AGP saw the end of years of domination of Congress politics in the state. Initially the AGP had tactic support from the ULFA, which turned against it later with crackdown on ULFA cadres.

In the 1991 election manifesto, the AGP made more promises like greater autonomy and right to self-determination of the state. Surprisingly the key issues, which were taken up during the Assam Movement, were put into back burner. The party lost power to the Congress in the elections, as it managed to secure only 19 seats with 18.36% vote. Migrants and minority communities in the state had a feeling that national parties can accommodate their concerns. It was one of the reasons for the decline of AGP and the emergence of Congress. Even though the AGP won 59 seats with 33.48% votes in the 1996 elections, the subsequent elections of 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016 saw huge electoral setback of the AGP and the massive erosion of its support base. An in-depth analysis of the election manifestoes of 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016 shows that the two main issues raised by the party illegal migration and the implementation of the Assam Accord got diluted. In other words, these two regional issues on which the party was formed were slowly erased from its agenda.

The manifesto to the 2006 State Assembly election reiterated that

*... before the strong advents of regional political trend in Asom, the legitimate demands of the state were being neglected in the national platform. But as the regionalism flourished in the state, the centre is bound to reduce its indifference towards the state at least to some extent. The rise of regionalism is in the*



*root to draw the national level attention towards the problems of Asom since the Assam agitation. But still it is not the time for self-satisfaction for the people of Asom. In coming days, regionalism will be the only effective instrument to make New Delhi agreed to provide legitimate dues of the state regarding the issues like the Gas Cracker Project, the fourth bridge over the Brahmaputra at Bogibill, modernization of railways, development of road communication and permanent solution to the flood problem etc.*<sup>8</sup>

As an ethno-regional party, the AGP focused on ethnic identity of the Assamese. It demanded regional autonomy for Assam and the control of the state over the resources through a real federal system. The AGP did not favour secessionism and, on the contrary, reposed its commitment to secularism, democracy, and socialism. It always insisted on decentralisation of power. It wanted the central government to exercise control only in sectors like defence, external affairs, foreign currency, communication, economic cooperation, etc. It shows that though AGP championed the cause of ethno-regionalism initially, it has undergone many political churning in its basic ideologies and programmes over time. The AGP not only played a vital role in the politics of Assam, but also in the national politics. The party was a constituent of the V.P. Singh-led National Front government in 1989, Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral-led United Front governments in 1996-97. Later it became a part of NDA, and the BJP and AGP jointly contested the 2009 general election in the state. In 2011 Assembly election it parted away with NDA but joined the alliance again in 2016 Assembly election.

Although the Assam Movement roused regional consciousness among the people, it could not extend its influence among the tribals of the state. The larger Asamiya identity and regional consciousness created by the Assam Movement did not address the problems of the plain tribal communities of the state, which led to their virtual exclusion during and after the Movement. Hussain argues that though, officially, the Movement was dominated by the AASU, it was not a student movement. Behind the AASU, stood the weak and small Asamiya bourgeois press, the Asamiya professionals, the bureaucrats, the middle class, contractors.<sup>1</sup> The assertion of the Bodos shows that the ethnic consciousness is rising at different levels even though major regionalism accommodated it into the system. According to Hussain, it is 'needless to say that the high caste Asamiya dominate the society, polity and bureaucracy in post-colonial Assam wherein Bodos have virtually no power even to manage their own internal affairs. Since early sixties particularly, they have been trying to revive their culture and distinct identity on the plank of ethnicity'.<sup>9</sup>

The electoral performance of the AGP in the last three Assembly elections shows its diminishing role in Assam politics. The BJP emerged as an alternative opposition force to Congress in the political space vacated by the AGP. However, both the Congress and the BJP, which are more

centralising and communal in nature, respectively, often find to suit the social fabric of the state. The regional politics of AGP has certain limitations as it was based on ethno-regionalism. The 2014 general election witnessed the virtual rout of the AGP as it was not able to win a single Lok Sabha seat though it contested 12 seats in the state. In terms of vote share, the AGP could secure only 3.87% against its 14.61% (with one seat) of the 2009 general election. The Congress and the BJP got the upper hand in the election. The Muslim voters, who constitute one-third of the electorate in the state, which had supported the AGP once, shifted their loyalty to the AIUDF. In 2014, the AIUDF won three seats with 14.8% vote share in contrast to one seat with 16.1% vote share in 2009. The people of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, once a stronghold of the AGP, also drifted away from the AGP and moved towards the BJP. Many Assamese caste Hindus feel that the AGP deviated from the provisions of the Assam Accord, especially those related to the detection and deportation of foreigners from Assam. In Assembly Election 2016, Assam became the first state in the north-eastern region, where the BJP could form its own government with the support of the AGP and BPF ending the 15 consecutive years of Congress government led by Tarun Gogoi. In May 2016, when the election results were declared for the 126 seats of the State Assembly, the BJP won 60 seats with a vote share of 42%, while its alliance partner AGP secured 14 seats with a vote share of 8%. The BJP's pre-poll alliance with the AGP and the BPF consolidated anti-Congress votes in its favour. Initially there were local protests against the alliance from both the BJP and AGP in certain regions like Bongaigaon, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Amguri and Tezpur. The growing marginalisation and setback of the party compelled the AGP to align with the BJP as a junior partner.

The general election 2019 not only saw the ascendancy of BJP, but also witnessed the decline of regional parties in Assam. In fact, the largest share of BJP's spectacular electoral victory in the northeast came from the party ruled Assam. The BJP won nine of the 14 seats, while the Congress got three. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and independent won one seat each. In 2014, the BJP got only seven seats, while the Congress and AIUDF got three each and one by independent. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP's alliance partners like the AGP, and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) drew blank. Of the 10 constituencies the BJP contested, it emerged victorious in nine such as Karimganj, Jorhat, Guwahati, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Mangaldoi, Silchar, Autonomous District and Tezpur, and got defeated only in Nowgong by the Congress. On the other hand, the Congress contested all the 14 seats, but could win only three seats- Nowgong, Barpeta and Kaliabor. The AIUDF, which contested in three of its strongholds, could win only Dhubri where its leader and two-time Member of Parliament (MP) Badruddin Ajmal defeated the AGP. Kokrajhar, the lone constituency where the





BPF contested, was won by the independent candidate Naba Kumar Sarania. In Assam, the ruling BJP secured 36.05% votes against the narrow margin of 35.44 % of the Congress. The AGP secured only 8.23%, while the AIUDF and the BPF got 7.80 and 2.48%, respectively.

### STEADY EROSION OF THE AGP

After the initial fanfare, AGP is losing its pre-eminence in the state politics as it has undergone a crisis. In March 1991 the party underwent a major split with the formation of Natu Asom Gana Parishad (new AGP) under the leadership of the then general secretary Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, Dinesh Goswami and Pulakesh Barua. In the recent past, the AGP faced a number of inner party problems and defections. The second split in AGP in 2000 was under the leadership of Atul Bora. On 3 July 2005 P.K. Mahanta was expelled from the AGP, and he formed the AGP (Progressive). Mahanta's party merged with his parent party on 14 October 2008. However, the merger did not signal the strong position of the party in the state as it faced the worst form of factionalism. Senior AGP leaders Atul Bora and Sarbanand Sonowal joined the BJP in 2011 and 2013, respectively.

The appointment of Sarbananda Sonowal, the then Union Minister of State for Sports, as the president of the Assam State BJP in 2015 gave further boost to the saffron party. Sonowal, the former leader of the AASU and MLA of the AGP, is a crusader against illegal migration of Bangladeshi in Assam. In 2011, Sarbananda Sonowal resigned from the AGP and joined BJP alleging that the AGP is moving closer to AIUDF and ignoring the illegal immigrant's issue. In 2012, he accused the illegal migrants for deteriorating the life of the indigenous people of Assam. He said that in the last 32 years the indigenous people of Assam have been cornered and pushed to the status of minority due to the huge influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup> Illegal migration from Bangladesh is a sensitive issue in Assam as it developed far reaching consequences in the political, economic, and socio-cultural life of the people. As stated earlier, the Assam Movement demanded the detection and deportation of illegal migrants (often used as 'foreigners') in the state. In its effort to end the movement, the Indian government formulated the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act 1983 to protect the interest of Assam. According to the Act, anybody settled in Assam before 25 March 1971 is a legal citizen. However, the cut of date for acquiring Indian citizenship for rest of India is 9 July 1948. Further, the person accused had to do nothing to prove his/her citizenship whereas the compliant had to prove that someone was illegal. The Act also provides special protections against undue harassment to the minorities affected by Assam Agitation. The Act is applicable only to Assam while rest of the states in India is covered by the Foreigners Act, 1946. It was viewed that the provision of the Act has been designed to make it difficult for authorities

to identify, leave alone deport, illegal Bangladeshis from Assam.

### STRAINED RELATIONSHIP WITH BJP

Although the AGP struck an alliance with the BJP in the Assembly Election in 2016 and became a partner in the BJP government, the issue of Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) 2016 brought by the BJP-led NDA government at the centre continued to strain its relationship with the party. Unlike the first wave of ethno-regionalism championed by the AGP against the illegal migration in the state, the second wave of ethno-regionalism championed by BJP tilted towards Hindu nationalism. During the first wave, the AGP was critical of illegal migration to the state irrespective of the religious identities of the migrants. However, in the second wave of ethno-regionalism, the BJP added a religious colour to the illegal migration issue. The CAB categorised illegal minorities into two- Muslims and non-Muslims by changing the definition of the illegal migrants. The Bill sought to amend the Citizenship Act, 1955 to provide citizenship to illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, who are Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian extraction. In other words, the proposed amendment sought to make non-Muslim illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh eligible for citizenship. It is also surprising that the Act does not have a provision for Muslim sects like Shias and Ahmediyas who also face persecution in Pakistan.

The AGP described the Bill "Anti-Assam" as it makes Assam a "dumping ground for Hindu Bangladeshis" and against the cultural and linguistic identity of state. It stated that the CAB violates the Assam Accord, according to which all Bangla migrants, Hindus or Muslims who entered after 28 March 1971 are foreigners. There was growing concerns over the constitutional validity of the CAB where religious criteria were used for granting citizenship rights. Moreover, it is argued that the 'proposed amendment that overtly favours citizenship status on religious identity will violate Assam Accord, secular status of India, and numerous judgments of Supreme Court which has ruled that citizenship cannot be granted on the basis of religion' (Sharma, 2019: 13). The AGP even threatened to break alliance with the BJP in the state. In September 2018, the AGP cautioned the BJP government that if the centre passes CAB 2016, it would break away from the alliance and pull out of the government. On the other hand, the BJP claimed that granting citizenship to Hindus persecuted in the neighbouring countries is in consonance with its manifesto and very much part of the election campaign in 2014. In the wake of the strained relationship with its ally, the central government constituted a sixteen-member Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) headed by the BJP Member of Parliament, Rajendra Agrawal. The JPC visited many places of Assam to seek different shades of opinion. However, the CAB was passed by the Lok Sabha on



8 January 2019 in spite of spiraling protests in the Northeast.

Ignoring protests by civil society and ethnic organisations, the BJP pushed for the Bill in the Rajya Sabha, and it promised that the burden of people migrating under the Bill would be shared by the country as whole. However, due to the mounding protests inside and outside the Parliament forced the government to withdraw the Bill before placing it in the Rajya Sabha. Although the government has temporarily withdrawn the Bill in the Rajya Sabha due to the lack of majority in the House, spiraling protests and the fear of impending electoral adversities in the region, the BJP did not abandon it altogether. In the party's Sankalp Patra (manifesto) for 2019 election, it promised that the government is committed to the enactment of the CAB for the protection of individuals of religious minority communities from neighbouring countries escaping persecution. The Sankalp Patra affirms that 'we will make all efforts to clarify the issues to the sections of population from the Northeastern states who have expressed apprehensions regarding the legislation. We reiterate our commitment to protect the linguistic, cultural, and social identity of the people of Northeast. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs escaping persecution from India's neighbouring countries will be given citizenship in India' (BJP, 2019: 12).

In January 2019, the AGP pull out of the BJP-led government over the CAB. It accused the BJP of not committed to implement the letter and spirit of the Assam Accord. It apprehended that once the Bill is passed, Assam will be the breeding ground of Bangladeshis. The AGP was under tremendous pressure from the various organisations led by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS). P.K. Mahanta himself observed that CAB would frustrate the Assam Accord by lifting the constitutional safeguard accorded to indigenous people in the state.<sup>11</sup> Mounting pressure from civil society and ethnic organisations forced three AGP ministers to resign from the Sarbananda Sonowal-led BJP government, which was not accepted by the chief minister. The AGP stitched its alliance with the BJP towards the close of the general election 2019, though it created rankles in the party as some leaders openly criticised the move. Along with other organisations protesting against the CAB, the AGP met the JPC when it visited Assam and apprised their stiff opposition to the amendment. In 2021 assembly election, the AGP contested 29 seats with the BJP alliance, in spite of the brewing discontent of the Assamese against the CAA, won only 9 seats, five less than its last election of 2016 (14 seats) though it contested 26 seats in alliance with the BJP. Under the pressure from the BJP, the AGP denied ticket to its veteran leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta from contesting Barhmapur constituency which he represented for six consecutive terms in the Assembly. It is to be noted that Mahanta expressed his strong resentment against the CAA.

## TRAJECTORY OF THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Symbolising the pride and self-respect of Assamiya middle class, AGP dominated Assam politics as an ethno-regional party. Ethno-regional chauvinism has only a limited reach among certain groups and communities and often fulfills the aspirations of middle class and elite sections. The social base of AGP was primarily premised on the educated middle class. However, unlike other regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab, AGP failed to reorient its ideology and mobilisation strategy. They are mobilising cross sections of the people in their respective states. After the initial phase of ethno-regional mobilisation, they adopted populist politics and social security policies, which helped them to reach out cross sections of the society. For instance, the DMK in course of time mobilised cross sections of people in Tamil Nadu and thereby emerged as a formidable political force not only in the state politics, but also in the national politics, though it initially raised the issue of ethno-regionalism-Dravidian identity with non-Brahmanism. Both DMK and TDP became part of coalition governments in the Centre and developed a bargain politics for the development of their respective states.

Moreover, the AGP failed to develop a new regional bourgeoisie unlike the DMK, TDP and SAD. It neither developed a regional bourgeoisie nor corporate business nor agrarian capitalist in the state. The party relied only on the middle class, educated sections and emotive issues of ethno-regionalism, and failed to take any other issues to mobilise people. In 1985, people voted AGP to power with high expectation. However, the party and its government failed to rise up to the expectations of the people. As a regional political party, AGP failed to address the concerns of smaller communities and groups. Although it championed the cause of ethno-regionalism in the state, it ignored sub-regionalism and material well being of smaller communities and groups. The major problem with AGP has been its understanding that rising ethno-regional issues would strengthen the party. In course of time, the AGP developed intolerant attitude towards smaller communities and groups in the state. Although during the movement and in the aftermath of its ascendancy to power, the AGP proclaimed its commitment to protect the Assamiya identity, it failed to protect the interest of the Bodos, the largest plain tribes in Assam. The upper caste Hindus and the Assamese middle class, who extended their overt support to the Assam Movement, turned against the concerns of the plain tribal groups in Assam. In other words, ethnic regionalism as epitomised by the Assam Movement did not evoke much positive response from these sections. In the late 1980s, the demand for the formation of a separate Bodo state resurfaced in the north of the Brahmaputra. The Bodo Movement (1987-93) led by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and the Bodo



People's Action Committee (BPAC), among other things, demanded the inclusion of Bodo language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The movement ended in 1993 with the setting up of Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). The assertion of Bodos proves that the regional consciousness roused by the Assam Movement and the AGP did not address the concerns of the largest plain tribes of Assam. Access to political and administrative system was denied leading to their further socio-economic deprivation. Moreover, the emergence of the Bodo Movement proves that the big regional movement while projecting the Assamiya identity sidelined the identity differences among other ethnic communities of the state. In other words, the larger regional identity appeared to be oppressive to other smaller identities.

The AGP's alliance with the BJP costs has damaged the electoral prospects of the former. The mass base of the AGP is eroding due to the BJP's expansionist strategy and the former position degrading as a secondary to BJP. The initial expectation of the AGP that its role and prominence in Assam would be revived by aligning with the BJP has not materialised. On the contrary, the BJP has actually swallowed the AGP, as its survival threatened. It is further argued that AGP's lust for power sacrificed its ideology. The BJP could attract sizeable number of Assamiya middle class by raising the ethno-regional issues. Although the first wave of ethno-regionalism championed by the AGP brought short-term benefit to the party, the second wave of ethno-regionalism with more religious colour championed by the Hindu nationalist politics enabled to consolidate BJP's mass base in the socially and culturally diverse society in the state. On the issue of illegal migration, the AGP always emphasised that all illegal migrants, irrespective of their religious identities, should be detected and deported to their respective neighbouring state. However, the BJP added a religious dimension stating that the illegal migration of the Muslims would be prevented and other religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, who are Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian extraction would be welcome to India. Such an approach of BJP emerged out of the anticipation of electoral dividends in the politics of competitive ethno-regional politics in the state. The AGP caused great injury to its own cause by transforming from a predominant ethno-regional party in the region to a junior partner in the BJP government in Assam. Further, the AGP always maintain meaningful rapport with the AASU since its inception. However, over the time, the relationship between these two strained when the AASU alleged that AGP was moving away from the core issue of illegal immigration. Perhaps, this may be seen as one of the reasons for its enduring crisis in the politics of the state.

**Table 1: Performance of the AGP in Assembly and General Elections**

Year	No. of seats won	Percentage of votes secured
<b>Assembly Election</b>		
1985	63	34.54
1991	19	18.36
1996	59	29.70
2001	20	20.02
2006	24	20.39
2011	10	16.29
2016	14	8.00
2021	9	7.91
<b>General Election</b>		
1991	1	18.60
1996	5	27.20
1998	0	12.70
1999	0	11.92
2004	2	19.95
2009	1	14.61
2014	0	3.87
2019	0	8.23
2024	1	6.46

Source: Data drawn from [www.eci.nic.in](http://www.eci.nic.in)

## CONCLUSION

Ethno-regional chauvinism has only a limited reach among certain groups and communities and often fulfills the aspirations of middle class and elite sections. With a social base primarily premised on the educated middle class, AGP failed to reorient its ideology and mobilisation strategy to reach out cross sections of the society. AGP's sole reliance on the middle class, educated sections and emotive issues of ethno-regionalism, limited its outreach to take any other issues to mobilise people. It failed to orient ethnic regionalism to development and to ensure the material well being of the cross sections of the society. Mobilisation on the basis of ethnicity and regionalism may produce short-term benefit for a political party. The durable existence of a regional party depends on its mobilisation of cross sections of the people and its ability to deliver good governance and distributive politics. In other words, for sustaining in a competitive party system based on liberal democracy, the ethno-regional political parties have to transform into regional parties distributing goods to the people.

Regional politics based on ethno-regionalism is a detrimental to democracy. The growing ethno-regional consciousness dilutes the emergence of class consciousness in a society and leads to further ethnic and sub-regional mobilisation of more ethnic communities and ugly identity politics. Ethno-regional parties increase ethnic conflict and secessionism by reinforcing ethnic and regional identities.



The existential crisis of the AGP demonstrates that ethno-regionalism may tender only short-term political dividends to the party unless it transforms into a party to carry out a vision of development that would address the material well-being of people at large. In other words, the ideology and mobilisation of an ethno-regional party may not be sustainable if it demarcates its strategy from the everyday life process of development.

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