
COMMENTARY

Communalising Assam: AGP's Loss Is BJP's Gain

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Politics of regional identity had kept hindutva at bay in Assam for over two decades. But the AGP government's poor performance and the bogey of Muslim fundamentalism led Bengali and Assamese caste Hindus to the BJP. AGP tried to play the same game and succeeded in driving the Muslims to the Congress. While the ethnic-linguistic divides in Assam may mend, the religious divide seems set to widen.

MOST intellectual discussions on north-east India revolve around familiar topics, such as regionalism, immigration, nationality question, ethnic identity, insurgency and human rights. Thanks to the social scientists working on the problems and dynamics of the region, the people in other parts of India could learn how different politics of this region is, compared to politics in the rest of the country. However, too much of emphasis on the specificity of the north-east sometimes makes one assume that the national parties have lost all their charm in the region now dominated by regional and ethnic forces. But such a notion was proved wrong in the recently concluded parliamentary elections in Assam, where the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as the victors, sidelining regional and ethnic parties. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), whose leaders at one time spearheaded the Assam agitation, could not win even a single seat in the state for the second consecutive time.

The victory of the Congress Party, which has a considerable base in the region, was not a big surprise. But the emergence of BJP, whose ideology and practice were considered to be alien to the ethos of the north-east, as the main opposition party, sidelining the AGP, raised many an eyebrow. Although the BJP has had a presence in Assam since the 1980s, it had never enjoyed such an eminent status as it is enjoying today. To comprehend how the BJP could find a foothold in the state, we need to study meticulously the recent political developments in Assam.

Assam's long border with Bangladesh and the presence of a sizeable Muslim population make the region a fertile ground for the rise of Hindu communal parties like the BJP. The growth of the BJP was, however, halted to a considerable extent by the Assamese caste Hindus, who used to see BJP only as a Marwari party. The

BJP's policy of being soft to the Hindu immigrants and hard on the Muslim immigrants did not find many takers among influential section of Assamese society, who were more obsessed with the fear of domination by the Bengalis – both Hindus and Muslims – in all public spheres. Fear that their language and culture would be wiped out and the Assamese people would become minorities in their own land drove them to the so-called 'anti-foreigners' movement in the late seventies. Apart from the educated Assamese middle classes and the Assamese peasantry, the movement received wholehearted support from the rising Assamese bourgeoisie, which was worried about the rise of the left parties in the 1978 assembly elections in Assam. When they lost faith in the Congress Party, they looked for a regional party to serve their interests. Hence after the Assam accord, when the leaders of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) formed AGP and contested the elections, they lent all-out support to the new party.

The Assam accord talked of disenfranchising the immigrants who had settled in Assam between 1965 and 1971 and deporting all the immigrants who came from Bangladesh after 1971. Following the outcome of the All Party Conference, the parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act (IM(DT) Act) which set out the procedures for identifying the immigrants. When the AGP came to power, the Assamese people believed that the Assam accord could be implemented in toto. Very soon it was realised that detecting and deporting the immigrants is almost impossible under the IM(DT) Act, as the onus of proving anyone a foreigner rests with those who make a complaint. Much to the dissatisfaction of the AASU leaders, so far only a few lakh people have been identified as doubtful cases and virtually none could be deported to Bangladesh.

Apart from the immigration problem, the people expected the AGP leaders to solve the problems of underdevelopment, industrialisation, unemployment, etc, against which the student leaders raised their voice during the Assam agitation. But the AGP leaders proved themselves as corrupt and inefficient as the Congress leaders. Factionalism and splits weakened the AGP and brought the Congress Party back to power in 1991.

Dissatisfied with the performance of the AGP, a radical section formed the militant organisation, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which proclaimed secession from the Indian Union as the only panacea for all the ills affecting Assam today. Taking their clue from the Assam agitation and later from the rise of ULFA, the Bodos and Karbis also began raising the question of their identity in Assam and floated different militant groups for achieving their goals.

The authoritarian and corrupt rule of Hiteshwar Saikia brought regional, ethnic and left parties together on the eve of the general elections in 1996. The leaders of AGP, who had by then become more pragmatic, entered into an alliance with CPI and CPI(M), which they had branded earlier as Bengali parties. Understanding the significance of minority votes, they wooed the Muslim community and won the support of the United People's Party of Assam (UPPA). These political adjustments brought AGP back to power in the assembly elections in 1996.

The AGP, which assumed power for the second time, gave up much of its militant rhetoric. Despite AASU's demand for repeal of IM(DT) Act, the AGP avoided taking any drastic action that would invite the ire of the minorities. Although many of their leaders earlier had close contacts with ULFA, gradually AGP distanced itself from the militant outfit. It even co-operated with the Indian army's operations against the ULFA. At the centre, AGP became a partner in the United Front government.

However, when it came to administration, its performance fell far short of the expectations of the people. Due to rampant corruption, continuing militancy and diversion of huge funds for maintenance of the armed forces, Assam virtually became bankrupt. It is now not in a position to regularly pay its employees' salaries. It could not take up any developmental activities worth mentioning. No new industries could be established in the state because of the activities of the militant groups. Because of these failures, the AGP has gradually started losing support even among the Assamese masses. Because of

AGP's tacit support to the army operations and also because of its alleged support to the surrendered ULFA (SULFA) militants, the ULFA turned against the AGP. Even members of AASU and other influential non-political organisations of the Assamese people became highly critical of the performance of the state government.

It is against the background of what is happening to the AGP that we need to examine the growth of BJP. Although the BJP did not initially get the support of the Assamese Hindus, as early as in 1991, it could make a dent into the Bengali dominated Barak valley region, where it won parliamentary seats from Silchar and Karimgunj constituencies. In the Barak valley, the influx of a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees following the partition and the presence of a sizeable Muslim population had created the social base for communal politics long back. However, it was only during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which coincided with the anti-Bengali riots in the north-east, that the BJP could gain considerable clout among the Hindu Bengalis in the Barak valley. In the state assembly elections in 1996 also the BJP won seats from the Bengali dominant region. During this period the BJP improved its vote share in other regions as well.

However, the real breakthrough for the BJP in the Brahmaputra valley came during the 1998 parliamentary elections, when its election manifesto offered an attractive package to the whole of the north-east. The manifesto spoke of the dangers of illegal migration and vowed to take steps to intercept illegal infiltrators and detect the already settled immigrants and delete their names from the voters' list. It promised to repeal the IM(DT) Act and strengthen the existing immigration laws and rules. It talked of national register and identity cards for all legal citizens. These promises went very well with the Assamese middle class Hindus, especially in the urban areas.

In the next parliamentary elections in 1998, although BJP could win only from Silchar, its vote share in the state increased to 24.5 per cent. The AGP's failure to win even a single seat in the 1998 parliamentary elections gave an indication of things to come. But the intellectuals by and large ignored the new alignment of forces taking place in the state. The AGP explained its failure by blaming the ULFA, which had given a call for the poll boycott and prevented the citizens from voting in the AGP-dominated areas. After the parliamentary elections, when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power at the centre, the AGP hesitated to join the NDA due to the fear of losing the minority votes. The AGP had to pay

a heavy price for this strategic mistake.

After the NDA came to power at the centre in 1998, the BJP national leadership started giving special attention to Assam. The prime minister and the home minister visited Assam and promised to take measures to check immigration and sanctioned about Rs 90 crore as special assistance from the central government. The Assam governor, Lt Gen S K Sinha also took certain initiatives that won the appreciation of the Assamese elite. On November 8, 1998, he sent a 42-page report to the home minister, wherein he mentioned that illegal infiltration into Assam had changed the demographic pattern of the state and posed a grave threat to both the identity of the Assamese people as well as the security of the nation. He expressed the fear that the large-scale influx of Bangladeshi nationals may lead to the demand for the merger of certain areas of Assam with Bangladesh. He recommended repeal of IM(DT) Act and sought a practical and expeditious approach to detecting illegal immigrants and declaring them stateless citizens without voting rights and without right to acquire movable property.

Although the report appeared an impartial assessment of the ground reality, its communal character became evident when the governor, like a BJP member, pointed his finger only at Muslim immigrants and blamed political parties of appeasing the Muslims for electoral gains. The report was welcomed by organisations like AASU, which have been advocating stern action against illegal immigrants. The home minister promised to take appropriate actions to check immigration. In the parliament, the BJP leaders chose to maintain silence on issues that embarrass the AGP such as the question of Bodos or human rights violations. Without antagonising the AGP directly, the BJP leaders attempted to win over the traditional mass base of AGP to its side, wherever necessary, by appropriating some of AGP's demands.

The collapse of NDA government at the centre in April 1999 generated mixed reactions in Assam. Although a section of the minorities felt happy, the way the NDA government fell generated some sympathy for Vajpayee among the urban middle class Hindus. The Kargil conflict, which claimed the lives of some soldiers from Assam also, a surge of patriotism swept Assam to the dismay of the ULFA, which had always believed that the people of Assam had nothing to do with the Indian nation. Following the bomb blast at New Jalpaiguri railway station on June 22, which left ten dead including two army jawans on their way to Kargil, the Indian army blamed ULFA for joining hands with the ISI. This misadventure brought disrepute to the ULFA and alienated it from the

masses, which were already tired of destructive activities of different militant outfits in Assam. The Kargil conflict helped the state BJP leaders project Vajpayee as a national hero capable of dealing with infiltrators.

The issue of Muslim minorities is a very sensitive one in Assam. There are over 70 lakh Muslims in the state. As they constitute about one-third of the total voters, the Muslim votes is crucial in every election. For long the Congress Party used to enjoy absolute monopoly over the minority votes in the state. But the Assam agitation, which intensified their fears and insecurity, compelled the Bengali Muslims to support minorities parties like United Minorities Front (UMF) and UPPA. Even today these minorities parties enjoy considerable clout over the Muslim population in several assembly segments and are capable of becoming kingmakers. Although the AGP came to power primarily with the support of the caste Assamese Hindus, it later saw the significance of the minority vote. Like the Congress Party, it started parleying with the minority parties.

The political advantage that the Muslims enjoy in the state has become an eyesore to Hindus who are apprehensive of Muslims dominating Assam one day. Taking advantage of such fears and suspicions, the BJP sought to consolidate the Hindu vote bank in the state. Since the days of Ram Janmabhoomi movement, it started wooing the Hindu voters with its overt communal slogans. Although it was the Bengali Hindus in the Barak valley who first responded to the BJP's overtures, with the AGP engaged in making efforts to appease the Muslims, the caste Assamese Hindus also gradually started turning the BJP.

These developments worried the leaders of AGP. It was at this point that the dates for parliamentary elections were announced. Coinciding with this announcement, the news of arrest of many ISI agents with bags full of RDX explosives was reported in different parts of the country. In Assam also the security forces claimed that they busted the ISI network and arrested four top ISI men and 27 other agents.

The regional press came out with reports about the presence of over a dozen Islamic groups, aided and abetted by the ISI. It was reported in the press that the job of these groups was two pronged – first, to spread fundamentalist works and prepare the immigrant Muslims for pan-Islamisation of the entire region from Nagaon to Barak valley, and then to ferment major troubles in the region for which army had to be rushed in from the outside region, resulting in lowered presence of armed forces

in Jammu and Kashmir. Ignoring the violent and destructive activities of the ULFA and other visible militant outfits working in the state for the moment, the regional press started publishing stories of doubtful veracity about several Islamic organisations, whose names were unknown to the majority of Muslims in Assam. In the aftermath of the fallout of the Kargil conflict, such reports attained considerable significance in Assam.

As AGP realised that it could not succeed in getting the minority votes, it was compelled to make efforts to stop further erosion of its traditional Assamese Hindu votes. Hence as a last ditch effort, it tried to take advantage of the threats posed by the so-called ISI activities. None other than the chief minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, presided over the press conference to announce the busting of the ISI network. He publicly alleged that 'madrasas', Muslim religious schools, in the border districts of Assam were playing an important role in recruiting Muslim youth for ISI-sponsored organisations. Knowing fully well the impact of such statements on the Muslims, the CM chose to gamble in the hope of winning Assamese Hindu votes. Instead of benefiting the AGP, the CM's statement on alleged ISI activities in the state, went in favour of the BJP.

The state BJP president wasted no time in announcing to the public that it was precisely what the BJP had been cautioning the people about all those years. Saying that the AGP realised the truth very late, he declared that the rise of Islamic organisations in the state was the global plan of Muslim fundamentalism. Saying that it was not a petty party matter, he made an appeal to the people to rise above party politics and fight for their own survival. Such highly exaggerated statements and reports against so-called ISI activities and the projection of madrasas as ISI training centres had polarising effects. On the one hand, they helped in galvanising Hindus in support of the BJP, and they compelled the minorities on the other, i.e., Muslims, to rally behind the Congress Party.

Perhaps at no point of time in Assam politics were the common voters so polarised along communal lines. In the recent parliamentary elections the Congress Party managed to retain its earlier tally of 10 seats mainly because of minority votes. The BJP had to lose its seat in Sitchar parliamentary constituency due to the shifting of minority votes to the Congress. But the BJP could make up for its loss in the Barak valley. It also made a dent into Brahmaputra valley for the first time by winning the prestigious Guwahati and Nagaon seats. By increasing its percentage of vote polled from 24.5 per cent

in 1998 to about 30 per cent in 1999 elections, it emerged as the main rival to the Congress in almost all constituencies.

The AGP was the worst victim of such a polarisation – it could not regain the support of the caste Assamese Hindus as it expected, and at the same time it also lost the limited support it had had among Muslim voters. Even the former president of AASU, Sarbananda Sonowal, who contested from Lakhimpur constituency failed to win. As the citizens voted in large numbers despite the ULFA's call for poll boycott, the AGP cannot blame the ULFA for its miserable performance in the elections this time. Parties like CPI, CPI(M) and UPPA, which chose to ally with the AGP, also lost. The recent parliamentary elections in Assam disproved the popular belief that regionalism and identity politics would continue to dominate the politics of north-east India. The elections put the first nail in the coffin of regional politics that dominated Assam for about two decades. The performance and the failures of AGP government showed the people that there was nothing inherently progressive about regionalism or regional parties. It also became evident to the Assamese people that stressing on one identity in a multinational and multi-ethnic state is bound to provoke many other competing identities and ultimately work against the very people who had set the process in motion. Far from protecting and promoting the interests of the Assamese people, the so-called anti-foreigners movement in Assam only provoked other linguistic, religious and ethnic identities, making it difficult for the AGP government to handle those multiple contradictions.

As most leaders advocating regional or identity politics fight basically within the system and not against the system, they tend to get co-opted in the system sooner or later. The AGP leaders proved to be no exception to the rule. It is not only that they became corrupt and inefficient, they also showed themselves opportunists capable of using religion for electoral gains.

The ULFA also has bitter lessons to learn from the elections. The Assamese masses may have some respect for ULFA leaders for their sincerity and commitment to the cause of Assam, but they are clearly not with the ULFA on the question of secession from the Indian union. A majority of the people in Assam are turning against the mindless violence resorted to by different militant outfits in the state in the name of identity and autonomy. They are looking for peace and progress, and the slogans and appeals for sovereign Assam do not appeal to them any more. After the state came under the unified command structure, ULFA had to suffer heavy casualties and losses in the past two

years. The intensification of conflict between ULFA and SULFA militants has also weakened the ULFA considerably. That ULFA is fighting a losing battle became clear in the recent elections, where despite its call for poll boycott, people came out in large numbers both in the urban and rural areas to exercise their franchise. Had the left parties been conscious of the changing trends, they could have united all sections of the people and lead democratic struggles against both central and state governments for the development of Assam. But steeped in opportunist parliamentarian politics, the CPI and the CPI(M) aligned themselves with the AGP and alienated themselves from the masses. It was against this background that the BJP rose as a force in Assam politics.

To sum up, certain historical and demographic prerequisites for the rise of Hindu communal force, like BJP, were already existed in Assam. But it took 50 years for it to emerge as a strong force in the state's electoral politics. It was in the Barak valley region, where the Bengalis constitute about 70 per cent of the total population, that the BJP first got a foothold thanks to the failure of the Congress and the left parties to uphold secular politics.

In the Brahmaputra valley the predominance of contradictions between the two dominant nationalities, i.e., the Assamese and the Bengalis, had prevented the communalisation of politics all these years. But nationality struggles led by the bourgeois and petty bourgeois elements cannot remain consistently progressive. Once the Assamese caste Hindus and the rising bourgeois sections in Assam realised that the AGP, once supported and propelled by them, could not deliver the goods, they did not mind looking for alternatives.

The BJP, which promised to check illegal immigration and declare Bangladeshi refugees as stateless citizens did appeal to the Assamese elite. Once they realised that regional and secessionist politics do not benefit them, they did not hesitate to turn to the BJP, which has improved its image considerably among the people in Assam after the Kargil conflict. Press reports about ISI activities in Assam also did create a sense of fear and insecurity among Hindus of Assam, forcing them to look towards the BJP which, they felt, is the only party capable of acting tough with the terrorists and the infiltrators.

Thus with majority of caste Bengali and caste Assamese Hindus turning to the BJP and the Muslims and other minority groups rallying behind the Congress Party, Assam state is now set for yet another political experiment, perhaps, with more disastrous consequences ahead for the state as well as the people.