

Chandra Nath Boruah

# Assamese Response to Regionalism



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Regionalism has been playing an influential role in the political process of India. As India is a 'diverse' society of heterogeneous regional specialties, so the regional urges are bound to be reflected in the political process. However, it emanates, essentially from the socio-cultural, economic and political dimension.

Assamese regionalism since the British rule, has been pioneering the interests of the Assamese middle class. But in the post-independence period, the Central Government's policies of economic disparity made the Assamese elite much disappointed. Importantly, illegal foreign national issue gave the Assamese regionalism a popular and emotive dimension. The Assamese middle class could successfully project the sentiment of the Assamese people and run the foreign national movement for long six years. The movement ended after the signing of the historical 'Assam Accord'.

Thus after the Accord, the leaders of the Movement gave birth to a regional party named 'Asom Gana Parishad'. Here the author examines how the popularity and dominance of the national parties experienced a heavy blow during the Assembly elections held in 1985 and 1996 in the State. On the contrary, the Assamese people rejected the regional parties and favoured the Indian National Congress (INC) as alternative in the 1991 and 2001 Assembly elections.

However, regional party governments in the state have witnessed fulfillment of personal interests of the leaders in power, rather than the common regional interests. The regional party (AGP) consequently split down. Secondly, Assamese regionalism created a new type of ethnic awakening among different ethnic groups. Regional party governments in the state had failed to influence the Central Government to implement the 'Assam Accord' in letter and spirit.

Thus, the author challenges the validity of the view that regionalism in Assam emerged to fulfill the common interests of the Assamese people and establishes a new thesis that Assamese regionalism is based on emotions and sentiments rather than commitment.



**CHANDRA NATH BORUAH** (*b.* 1950) obtained Ph. D from Dibrugarh University. He is currently, a Super Selection Grade Lecturer and Head of the Department of Political Science in the Dhakuakhana College, Assam.

He has published a good number of research papers. Further, he has published many articles in Assamese on diverse subjects. His area of interest is Political Theory, International Politics, International Law and Regionalism. He is also a research guide at Vinayaka Missions University, Tamil Nadu and the Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

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# **ASSAMESE RESPONSE TO REGIONALISM**

—A Study Based on Electoral Politics

CHANDRANATH BORUAH



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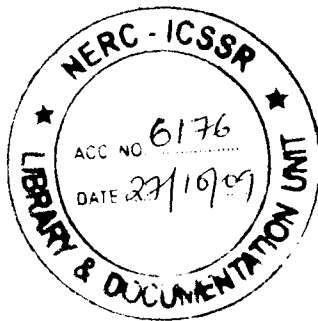
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## INTRODUCTION

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The concept of regionalism has become an important factor in the politics of India. In fact, regionalism in India assumes a considerable role as time passes, owing to the growing nationalistic urges among the people of different regions or parts. Regionalism is associated with a territory of certain limits. Hence, a region implies a part of the nation state having features of homogeneity in terms of economy or lingo-cultural characteristics. This phenomenon develops when the people of a particular region bound together by ties which are distinct from those of others living outside the region.

Regionalism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, comprising geographical, lingo-cultural as well as politico-economic factors. The situation becomes more critical when these factors arise together. In many cases a single factor also helps in increasing the consciousness of the people of a definite region. For example, economic backwardness may create a consciousness among a particular groups of people. Similarly the issue of language and cultural identity may deepen the consciousness of the people of a given region. The consciousness culminates into the growth of regional parties through which the group or groups may come to power through the means of electoral politics.

At this stage, it is desirable to take note of the theoretical dimension of the concept of regionalism. Encyclopaedia of Social Science (1968) defines the concept "regionalism" "as a cultural and political movement, which seeks to protect and foster an indigenous political structure in a particular region. It is also an administrative and political movement aiming at the creation of a democratized and integrative Governmental structure of an intermediate level between state and organs of local government".<sup>1</sup> Vakil and Rao refers 'regionalism' "to a sub-nationalism that demands preference for a region as against the country as a whole".<sup>2</sup> D.C. Barman, views 'regionalism' "as a 'multi-dimensional composite phenomenon as well as 'built in process' within nationalism".<sup>3</sup> Thus it appears that

regionalism is a feeling of greater loyalty and preference for the people living in a state in terms of their distinct language and culture.

In a similar vein, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1974) defines regionalism "in terms of a single or multiple features or in terms that approach the total content to human occupancy of an area".<sup>4</sup>

As a widely discussed phenomenon, Professor G.R. Reddy (1979) rightly states "It (regionalism) should not be regarded as something that is anti system, anti-federal and against the basic interests of a well integrated and developed polity".<sup>5</sup> Regionalism, thus, is essentially a political phenomenon of nationalism, and as one social scientist adds, "as an example of micro-nationalism a region provides a meaningful frame for overlapping interaction of several social process and thereby cements unity instead of disintegrating".<sup>6</sup> Regionalism also has negative roles. It reflects the psyche of alienation from the national mainstream which originates due to excessive centralization and discriminating attitude of the ruling elite.<sup>7</sup> Narain and Pande view "Regionalism is also a product of resource, acute competition and inequitable distributive justice".<sup>8</sup> "Regionalism develops from the sense of identity within a region and an ideology or a social movement which emphasises the distinct physical and cultural characteristics of a homogenous area".<sup>9</sup> Above all regionalism grows from the question of identity.

However, as a political phenomenon, regionalism needs more close analysis so far as its meaning is concerned. In its operational dimension, it is a means to achieve the objectives of the groups, who plead for development of a particular region and continue to struggle with the centre. In the context of what has been said so far, it can be said that regionalism grows essentially amidst social diversities, economic disparity and political differences. Regionalism, therefore implies a kind of sub-nationalism, which demands preference of a particular region and engaged in the welfare of a particular region, group or groups interests of the population.

In view of this, most of nationalists regard regionalism as something not good for the national interests. Hence, much apprehension is entertained about the growth of regionalism. Shanti Swarup writes, "there is no reason to be terribly upset about the emergence of regionalism. After all if nationalism and national consciousness is natural, so is regionalism and regional consciousness".<sup>10</sup>

## II

In any case regionalism has been playing a pivotal role in the

political process of India. Since diversity is in existence, the regional urges are bound to be reflected in its political process. As already noted, "regionalism" refers to a kind of sub-nationalism which demands preference for a particular region. Regionalism in India mainly emanates from socio-cultural diversity and uneven economic development. In fact, regionalism has been a significant force moulding the nature of politics in India for a long time. It is not only based on emotive identities such as tribe, caste and language but also perceived as a distinctive territorial identity. The regional political actors therefore have to rely on emotive and politico-territorial laden loyalties according to their convenience. Since last few decades, the state politics of India has been the manifestation of politics of regionalism. Several regional movements on regional issues in different regions of the country have culminated in the formation of regional political parties challenging the dominance of national parties. Thus, the Akali Dal in Punjab, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam (AIDMK) in Tamil Nadu, Telegu Desham Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in Bihar formed in late, 1972. All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) demanded Hill state for the Khasi, Jaintias and Garos in the sixties, Chattisgaris of Madhya Pradesh also exercised regionalism to preserve their own homeland. Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh Peoples Party (APPP) in Arunachal Pradesh are some of the significant events in the current political scenario of the country.

Like other parts of India, regionalism in North East India and Assam have been a living phenomena. The term North East India itself signifies regionalism. Regionalism in North East India, is in fact, connected with the search for identity.<sup>11</sup>

The Eastern Indian Tribal Union in 1954, the All Party Hill leaders conference (APHLC) in 1960, Hill State Peoples Democratic party in 1968 were formed in demands of only hill state. In Arunachal Pradesh Peoples' Party emerged as an influential regional party.

### III

Regionalism in Assam has been a living phenomenon. Regionalism is not new to Assam. It may be even traced back to the period of the British rule. During the British regime, Assam had been under Bengal for many years and hence influx of non-Assamese people from East-Bengal took place into the fertile soils of Assam at different times. Introduction of tea gardens in Assam, and other developmental works such as construction of road, industries, coal,

railways steam communication etc. also are factors for the migration of innumerable non-Assamese people from Orissa, UP, Bihar, Bombay (now Mumbai), Madhya Pradesh and so on. Other non-Assamese people also came to Assam for grasping the opportunities of business and commerce expanded by the Britishers. Even to fill up the low graded professions in Assam, a good number of non-Assamese people came to this state from different parts of India. Since the nineteenth century, the Assamese middle class became unhappy with all these developments. They had to face keen competitions for jobs in their own home. Similarly they failed to compete in the field of trade and commerce with their counter part of the migrant communities. As the number of non-Assamese people both the Hindus and Muslims started increasing, socio-economic as well as socio-cultural problems became acute in Assam. Since the Muslim immigrants also happened to be Bengali linguistically, they combined with the Bengali Hindus, constituted a still larger Bengali population in the province. The increase of Bengali population, both the Hindus and Muslims, appeared to be a 'threat' to the Assamese. The 'threat' whether 'real' or 'imaginary' posed by the East Bengal immigrants, generated a sense of Assamese regional sentiment in the minds of the middle class Assamese. To fight these problems Assamese middle class started mobilizing the Assamese public. The formation of 'Assam Association' (1903) was the first step in this direction. Similarly the 'Assam Samrakshini Sabha' (1926) was founded by Ambikagiri Roy Choudury to protect the interest of the Assamese people.

#### IV

After the partition of the country, heavy influx of Hindu refugees flowed to Assam, from the East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh). The Census Report: 1951 reveals that as many as 2,74,455 refugees entered Assam. Of these, 2,72,055 were from the erstwhile East-Bengal and the others were from West Pakistan and other unidentified places.<sup>12</sup> Thus, they created a new feeling and anxiety in the minds of Assamese people. Reacting to this development,<sup>13</sup> The Assam Tribune, a leading English daily wrote "the Hindu refugees would apparently create a Bengal in this province".<sup>14</sup>

But the then congress government in the state formed of the representatives of the tea planters, land owners and the emerging middle class showed no seriousness, rather provided them with lots of land for their permanent settlement with the hope that they will assimilate with the Assamese language and culture.<sup>15</sup> Also the

Assamese elite were very much concerned about the economic backwardness of Assam. They felt that economic disparity was the root cause of underdevelopment of the state. It appeared to the Assamese elite that they are being deprived of benefits of mineral resources, by the centre, i.e. its due share of revenues of crude oil, tea jute, plywood industries, coal etc. To express their dissatisfaction, the Assamese people after independence, demonstrated a series of protest movements. The first oil refinery movement in 1958, construction of more bridges over the Brahmaputra river, official language Movement in 1960, second oil refinery movement in 1968, broad gauge of railway link between Assam and the rest of India, medium movements in 1972, All Assam students union 21-point charter of demands 1974 (popularly known as 'Food movement') were prominent. Even as the socio-economic movements mentioned above were in full force, a completely new kind of anxiety gripped the mind of the Assamese people. The apprehension of threatening the 'Assamese identity' both politically and socio-culturally, reappeared when it was found that a large number of foreign nationals were enlisted in the voters list of the Mongaldoi Lok Sabha constituency in 1979. This vital and sensitive issues of foreign nationals, was taken up by the dominant Assamese elite for launching the movement, under the leadership of the 'All Assam Students' Union (AASU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), which came to be known as anti foreigners movement.

Thus it appears that the heavy influx of illegal immigrants to this state generated a sense of regionalism in the minds of Assamese. In other words, the foreign national movement, which continued for long six years (1979-85) articulates the regional sentiments of the Assamese people, which culminated in the formation of the AGP, a regional party in October 14, 1985.<sup>16</sup> The AGP came into power in the same year. Now it will be an interesting point to examine how the Assamese responded to the sense of regionalism through participating in the elections. But it is surprising that, although the Assamese voted in favour of Asom Gana Parishad in 1985 Assembly elections, they had pulled down the AGP from power in the 1991 elections and it was voted to power again in 1996. But the AGP could not retain power in the 2001 Assembly Elections. The political development, noted above involved the questions such as why the Assamese people had changed their minds so frequently even to the extent of rejecting the regional party? Whether the sense of regionalism is merely based on emotion and sentiments rather than rational ground? Whether regional leaders led the regional

movements on the issue of foreign nationals as a part of their strategy to grab political power? In view of this, this study is an attempt to examine some of these questions in the light of the Assamese response to regionalism based on the electoral politics in Assam (1985-2001).

## V

In a democratic political system, the election plays a significant role. The political parties take an active part in the elections. In fact, election is one of the most democratic means for expressing opinion. Different political parties try to mobilize the public opinion in favour of themselves. Thus, through elections political parties can measure their strength and support base. At the same time, it is a means to assess the response of the electorate to the issue raised by the political parties. Thus party system and the democratic process are the two sides of the same coin. The former cannot exist without the latter. Political parties try to attract the minds of the voters through their election manifestos.

In a country like ours, there has been mushroom growth of both the national and the regional political parties. As is well known, the regional political parties have emerged in order to protect the regional interests. However, there had been a very weak role of the regional parties in Assam till the middle of eighties. For the first time, the regional party, i.e. Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), contested the fourth general election in 1967 to the Assam legislative Assembly and could secure only 1 seat. The Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad (UARP) another newly formed regional party contested the Lok Sabha election 1971 and had secured second highest votes in all the constituencies where its candidates were fielded. But it could not win a single seat. The Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) contested the elections 1972 unsuccessfully. The Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, which also contested the Assam Assembly election of 1978 failed to open its account. As a matter of fact, the regional parties in Assam till then were not sufficiently organised and capable to dislodge the Congress party, which had a strong mass base. In the late seventies the Congress party had lost its grip in Assam due to the Janata Party (JNP) wave in the Assembly elections held in 1978. Since then regional sentiment began to be articulated more vigorously than ever before. When the official attention to the problem of the foreign nationals was brought about by the then Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) S.L. Shakhdar, on 24 October 1978 in a conference of the state Election officers, he stated that the large

scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral roll in some states particularly in the North Eastern region was alarming and required drastic action.

Subsequently, the issue of foreign nationals was taken up by the AASU and it led a vigorous movement which culminated in the formation of a regional political party, the AGP. As such, for the first time, the regional political party came into power in Assam with the overwhelming support of the Assamese people. But from the different elections held after 1985, it appears that the Assamese voters have been frequently changing their minds towards regionalism. This proposed work is primarily intended to examine the changing trends of the Assamese voter's response to regionalism on the basis of the electoral politics and analysis of Assembly election results in Assam from 1985 to 2001. In this academic exercise, the 'region' refers to the Brahmaputra valley of the state of Assam. Because, this valley is predominated by the Assamese. The caste Hindu middle class is the most articulate section of the Assamese society who, by and large mobilize the Assamese public. The parliamentary elections that were held simultaneously with the state Assembly excluding 2001 have not been examined, since, it is the members of the Legislative Assembly through whom the masses make their most effective contact with the elite to manage their needs and interests. Here Legislative Assembly is accepted as the institution of socio-economic and political changes of diverse groups of Assam. Further, in this study therefore, the operational definition of 'regionalism' would be to mean the sentiment expressed by the dominant section of the Assamese. This section of the middle class Assamese projects its own interest as the interest of the entire Assamese masses so as to gain their support for the purpose of acquiring bargaining capacity to bargain with the national elite for promoting their own interests.

## VI

As to regionalism, a good number of studies have been carried out by a number of scholars. Most of them are carried on general perspective of regionalism and elections in particular. The scholars who carried out these tasks are sociologists, historians and eminent political scientists serving in different capacities.

G.R. Reddy's published work entitled "Regionalism in India: A Study of Telengana", New Delhi, 1979, is very important to be referred to the general context of regionalism. He examines the Telengana

regionalism of Andhra Pradesh. N.K. Chowdhry's published work entitled "Assembly Election: 1993" Delhi (1994) is worth mentioning here. It was a study based on assembly elections of four dismissed states (Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh) of Northern India along with the newly formed, the state of Delhi. The elections were held amidst the Ayodhya dispute. The author successfully analyses the different aspects of elections and the central finding was voter's anti-BJP response. The major contenders were the Congress and the BJP.

Another study accomplished by R.C. Prasad is of much importance to be referred to in this context. Prasad in his book, titled "The Mature Electorate" (1987). The author has succeeded in analyzing the maturity of electorates in the elections in a democratic political process, more so, in a parliamentary democratic system. The findings, as evidenced by the study are:

- I. Political maturity related to inhabitation in a modern (urban) environment.
- II. Better education.
- III. Higher income.
- IV. Higher conversation.
- V. More frequent habit of political conversation.
- VI. It also related to younger age and greater experience of electoral experience.

Edited by Girin Phukan and Adil-UI-Yasin, the book titled *Parliamentary Democracy and Electoral Politics in North East India* includes as many as 19 articles covering different aspects of regionalism and exhaustive election studies of the North Eastern states. Let us have a look at some of the important findings of the studies. Samir Kumar Das, in his paper titled, "Community Goes to Polls: An Interpretation of the Assam Elections of 1996" interpretes the Assam election, 1996 and finds that the Asom Gana Parishad which symbolizes Assamese regionalism initially favoured to exclude non-Assamese speaking citizens from the broad framework of the Assamese society. But in 1996 elections, the AGP changed its perception by accommodating the minorities whether autochthones or immigrants into the broad preview of 'Assamese Community' as part of tactics to come back to state power.

Sandhya Goswami in her article titled "Assam Lok Sabha Election, 1996: An Analysis" examines the voting pattern of the

electorates to the Lok Sabha election 1996. She viewed that scientific analysis of voting behaviour in Assam is a complex tasks due to its demographic and population structure.

A.K. Baruah in his paper titled "Assam Election 1996: The Congress Debacle" analyses that during the pre-independence period the Congress championed the cause of the 'Asomiya National Identity' in terms of preserving Assamese language and culture. He further examines that, after independence the Congress gradually lost the support of the Assamese in elections. So, the Congress party generated new support base among the tea garden labourers and immigrants of linguistic and religious minorities to grab political power.

C.J. Thomas, while examining the Lok Sabha elections of the Arunachal Pradesh, 1996 finds that most significant development in Arunachal Pradesh in the post-Parliamentary election of May, 1996 is the emergence of a new regional party, i.e. the Arunachal Congress. The Volume titled "Electoral politics in North East India" edited by P. S. Dutta (New Delhi, 1986) is a pioneering effort in the field of electoral study in north Eastern India. This volume may be regarded as the periscope that analyses the political dimension of the socio-economic complexities of the North Eastern states.

Another reference may be made here to the work titled *Election politics in Assam: A Study in the Sixth General Election to the Assam Legislative Assembly* edited by K. M. Deka (Guwahati 1987).

Amiya Kumar Das in *Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis* (1982) has given an account of conflicts among the various ethnic groups as the part of the development process of the society. He also observes the cultural differences, uneven economy and severe underdevelopment, competition for jobs, political power creating bitter and violent struggle. He suggests that passionate feelings are the right way of solution to the ethnic conflict. Besides, B. Pakem's *Regionalism in India*, New Delhi, 1993, which includes as many as 30 articles on specific problems of regionalism a pioneering work in this field.

Thus it appears that no systematic and scholastic investigation has been made to test the hypothesis and research questions cited above. In view of this to fill up the gap in this research exercise an endeavour has been made to examine the response of the Assamese to the regional party i.e. the AGP in the light of questions raised above.

## VI

The entire work has been presented in five chapters in addition to the introduction and the conclusion. The first chapter deals with the historical background of regionalism in Assam.

The second chapter discusses the Assamese response to regionalism in the 1985 elections to the Assam Assembly. The third chapter deals with the activities of the AGP Government, the first regional government in the state. It also deals with how far the AGP government implemented the promises made in the election manifestos during the elections, 1985. Mention has also been made in one part of this chapter about a significant political developments of Assam during that period. These political developments cover the happenings since the time of oath taking of the AGP government till the imposition of the President's Rule in November, 1990. However, this chapter primarily deals with the Assamese response to regionalism in the Assembly elections held in 1991.

The fourth chapter remains focused on how the AGP staged a come back for the second time to the state power in the Assembly elections, 1996. The fifth Chapter devotes itself to the background of the Assembly elections, 2001. It also deals with the voter's negative response to regionalism despite having election alliance and friendly contest with the dominant national party, such as the BJP.

The work also includes a conclusive chapter which includes conclusions of all the chapters and suggestions in regard to the regional party and the dominant Assamese elite of their accountability towards the common grievances of the state.

This study is based mainly on certain primary as well as secondary sources of data. For this purpose, relevant election reports published by the Election Department, Government of Assam, Dispur; relevant documents, relevant volumes of Assam Legislative Assembly debate, proceedings etc. and such other documents available in the Assembly Library, Dispur, have been consulted. Leaflets, pamphlets, Census Reports and the likes of the contesting political parties, mouthpieces, manifestos of different political parties have been dealt with as far as possible. Memoranda submitted to the Government of India by different organisations have also been consulted. Apart from this, some leaders of political parties have been interviewed to gather a comprehensive first hand idea, relevant to this study.

The study is prepared on the basis of relevant books, articles,

journals, periodicals and seminar papers. Secondary data have been collected mostly from the Dibrugarh University Library, Gauhati University Library, District Library, Dibrugarh, District Library Guwahati. Secondary sources of informations published in newspapers, both English and Assamese, have completely been obtained from the Dhakuakhana College Library.

The data so collected from primary and secondary sources for this purpose have been systematically classified, processed, analysed, tabulated, checked, and crosschecked with utmost care. The data have been converted into table in some chapters.

Further, it may be worth mentioning that, for the purpose of substantiating the data, some relevant published as well as unpublished literatures, socio-historical information have also been taken into account. In this research exercise, historical and analytical methods have been followed to uphold the findings of the study.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. See "Regionalism in Bangladesh: A Study of Chittagang Hill Tract", *Regionalism in South Asia*, p. 116.
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14. *The Assam Tribune*, 2 August 1949, p. 28.
15. *Political Dynamics of North East India*, pp. 62-63.
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