

ELECTION POLITICS IN ASSAM

ISSUES, TRENDS AND
PEOPLE'S MANDATE



**ABU NASAR SAIED AHMED
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This book *Election Politics in Assam: Issues, Trends and People's Mandate* is a product of an extensive research by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, with a financial support from the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi. It provides an insight into the election politics in the State of Assam taking the Lok Sabha poll of 2004 as the focal point. It covers various issues on which the elections were fought, highlights the nature of campaigns launched by the contenders, scans the process of nomination of the candidates, presents the role of media during the electioneering and finally provides an analysis of the popular mandate. It also indicates the trend in the elections, based on a dispassionate analysis of the political developments over a period of ten years. The volume has a rich academic texture with tables, maps, profiles of certain constituencies, case studies, analyses of shifts in people's choice and a useful bibliography.

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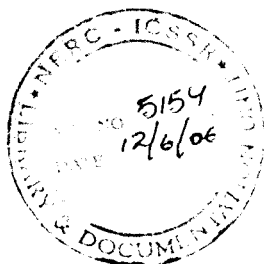
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CHAPTER 1

The Environment

I

THE POLITICAL SCENARIO

Introduction

In a discourse on the democratic theory focusing on the centrality of its subsistence, elections figure prominently. The reason is simple. Viewed from the perspective of social contract theory as propounded by John Locke, elections set the conditions of the social contract between the political sovereign (the people), and the rulers. The contract stands on a rational basis as the people who go to cast vote on the day of elections have with them the rational basis for casting vote in favour of a candidate or a party. Although the rationality paradigm may not be always drawn on the line of what John Stuart Mill has prescribed¹, educated voters too sometimes behave irrationally². Rather illiterates

¹ John Stuart Mill writes that it is wholly inadmissible that an illiterate person, who has no rational thinking capacity, could participate in elections. See his *Considerations on Representative Government* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), p. 170.

² There are strong views against the conservative perception of Mill which holds that despite lack of information, lack of knowledge and interests in public life, the electorate can demonstrate rational thinking while casting vote on the day of election. See David Apter (ed), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964) and Angus Campbell *et.al.*, *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

sometimes act more rationally than the elites. At any rate, the elections, for their decisive role in the formation of government play the most politically charged part of the democratic process in a country.

Elections in India have always been the cornerstone of the political system of the country. Each election, whether parliamentary or assembly, stands unique because of the shifting political climate of the country or the states where the Assembly elections are to be held. Accordingly, the attention, involvement and choice of the individual voters tend to change³. There are transitional issues which some times overtake perennial and national issues, and thus, transcend regional issues. At the same time, there are regional issues which spread wings across regional boundaries. There are occasions, as in the case of 1977 Lok Sabha election⁴, when one single issue dominates the entire election scenario. It becomes quite interesting to see how social forces play their roles differently at different times. The people who rejected Indira Gandhi in 1977 Lok Sabha poll brought her back to power in less than three years time.

In the context of varied and experiment-hungry Indian pattern, the 2004 Lok Sabha poll became academically interesting. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National

³ This is a universally acknowledged phenomena which makes elections so interesting and worth noticing. Almost half a century back what two American scholars, Herbert McClosky and Harold Dahlgren, asserted still holds valid. See their article "Primary Group Influence on Party Loyalty", *American Political Science Review*, 53 (1959), pp. 757-76.

⁴ It was internal emergency clamped in June 1975 by the Union Government headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi which became the main election issue of 1977 Lok Sabha Poll. All the opposition parties rallied under the banner of anti-emergency forces. The Congress Party was defeated in the election. Democracy returned with triumph. The Janata Party comprising four different parties formed the Government headed by Moraji Desai. It is also a matter of history that it did not take time to get the euphoria of instant victory evaporated. For details of this significant election see Myron Weiner, *India at the Polls: The Parliamentary Elections of 1977* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

Democratic Alliance (NDA), which was in power at the Centre for six continuous years, decided to go for early election with the expectation that it would sweep the 14th Lok Sabha poll. Their assessment of the situation was based on an erroneous speculation of outright victory caused by a sense of jubilation after the Assembly elections held in five states in which it performed magnificently, even beyond their expectation. It captured power in three states, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand. The outcome of the elections propelled the NDA to prepone the Lok Sabha elections assuming that the political climate was favourable for an early poll and the results would definitely be in its favour.

The 14th Lok Sabha poll was unique in a number of ways. It was time to assess the performance of the six year rule of the NDA and test the efficacy of the 'feel good factor' and 'India shining' slogan. As Norman D. Palmer argues that during an election a political system is on display⁵. Therefore, arguably the Lok Sabha poll did offer an opportunity to put the political system in the country on display. Further, elections have been conceived as the end product of a political process determined by the political environment which includes party system, voters' political information, awareness and participation that establish the linkage between the citizens and the polity. While Norman D. Palmer considers elections as a dependent variable⁶, James N. Rosenau, however, writes more eloquently about the role of multi-faceted variables:

An election...might be viewed as an independent variable in a model explaining the strength of political parties, as an intervening variable in a hypothesis anticipating the nature of public

⁵ Norman D. Palmer, *Election and Political Development: The South Asian Experience* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976), p. 1.

⁶ *Idem.*

policies and as a dependent variable in a position predicting the consequences of political campaign. In a feedback model, moreover, the same attribute, attitude or behavior might be conceived to operate simultaneously as all three types of variables⁷.

Rosenau's understanding of elections inspires one to find the drama and thrill in elections, which could be studied. In a methodical study taking aggregate data, it is possible to focus on the complicated political process that includes the totality of socio-economic and political environment of a country. That is why the present study has incorporated the socio-political climate of Assam in which the 14th Lok Sabha poll was held, the process of nomination, the campaign, the issues on which the elections had been fought, the role of mass media, and finally the voting behaviour in order to present the totality of the environment under which the last parliamentary elections were held in the State.

The result of the 14th Lok Sabha poll in the State was almost predictable. Its apparent predictability can be understood when one takes stock of the political scenario of the State for the last couple of years preceding the election.

The Political Scene

The results of the 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha polls and the Assembly election of 2001 indicated the trend to be set once again in the 2004 election. Although the Congress lost the 1996 Assembly election, managing to capture only 34 out of 126 Assembly seats and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) returned to power for the second time with 59 seats, it did not take time to turn the table diagonally. The ruling AGP drew a blank in 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha polls with the Congress capturing 10 out of 14 seats in both the elections (Table 1.1).

⁷ James N. Rosenau, *The Dramas of Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 171.

Table 1.1
Results of Lok Sabha Polls in Assam (1998 & 1999)

Party	Seats Won (1998)	Seats Won (1999)
INC	10	10
BJP	1	2
CPI (ML)	-	1
AGP	-	-
ASDC	1	-
UMFA	1	-
IND	1	1
TOTAL	14	14

Source: www.eci.gov.in

The Congress staged a resurrection and came back to power in the State in the 2001 Assembly election. Table 1.2 shows the trend of this election.

Table 1.2
Percentage of Votes Polled by the Leading Parties in Assam

Parties	1998 Lok Sabha Poll	1999 Lok Sabha Poll	2001 Assembly Poll
AGP	12.7	11.92	20.02
BJP	24.47	29.84	9.35
Congress	38.97	38.42	39.75
Left Parties	1.46	1.53	1.02

Source: www.eci.gov.in

The trend undoubtedly confirms that the Congress would sustain its consolidation. The Congress having had a solid rural base in the State could not be totally wiped out even in its worst times of 1977 and 1985. It was defeated in the 1996 election mainly due to the sudden vacuum created by the death of Hiteswar Saikia, the then Chief Minister of Assam, only a few weeks before the election. The party, therefore, did not take time to get the scenario changed soon after the 1996 elections.

The BJP although made notable inroads in these elections, it was yet to emerge as a force to be counted in the formation of the State government. The party was yet to find enough space to even share power in the State where the social set up is not communally divided and where the Muslims constitute a significant factor by virtue of their demographic composition, constituting 30 per cent of the total population. The AGP, on the other hand, did not have a secured base, not even among the Assamese middle class⁸. The outcome of the State Assembly election of 2001 hence was an unassailable indicator to forecast the result of the 2004 parliamentary election, because even in an adverse situation in 2001, when both Dispur and Delhi were under anti-Congress rule, the Congress scored an emphatic victory capturing 65 seats.

The Congress Government in Assam soon after taking the reins of power held the elections for the panchayat bodies which had been withheld by the AGP Government since 1997. In the Panchayat elections too, held in December 2001, the Congress backed candidates captured about 80 per cent of the seats⁹. It, therefore, became even more difficult for other political parties to face the Congress decisively in 2004.

⁸ Sandhya Goswami, "Mixed Verdict", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. xxxix, No. 51, December 18-24, 2004.

⁹ Official results did not reveal the party affiliations of the winning candidates. However, the newspaper reports suggested that the Congress Party was in winning spree in the last Panchayat elections held in December 2001.

In this context and perspective, the Lok Sabha poll held in May 2004 covering the 14 parliamentary constituencies in Assam, turned out to be politically exciting. The formal announcement of the election on February 29, 2004 was not unexpected, because, soon after the Assembly elections of 2003 in five states, the NDA Government had sounded that the Lok Sabha poll would be advanced. It was rather a culmination of political speculation marking the beginning of a tense, action-packed period of electioneering and finally making the stage ready for the final act of the drama, the polling day. At any rate, the preparation for the 14th Lok Sabha poll had been geared up in Assam by all the leading parties. While the Congress decided to go alone without forging electoral understanding with any party, as it was confident of its strength, there were speculations about the possibility of other parties going for alliances. There were reports that the AGP would try for an electoral alliance with the BJP. At the time of Assembly poll in 2001, there was a loose alliance between them, for, in some prestigious constituencies, despite their alliance, both the parties fielded their candidates in the same constituency proving thereby that the alliance was too loose and fragile to work. Being confident of their own strength, both the parties ultimately abandoned the idea of an alliance. Other parties too tried for alternative alliances. P.A. Sangma¹⁰ took the initiative to build an anti-Congress platform and organised a conclave of small like-minded parties like the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The effort fizzled out, as various components could not work united under one umbrella. Thus, even with

¹⁰ P.A. Sangma has a long political background. A former Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Sangma has been representing the Tura constituency in Meghalaya in the Lok Sabha and also has been the Speaker of the Lok Sabha from 1996 to 1998. He resigned from the Congress along with Sarad Pawar in 1998 on the issue of foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi and since then has occupied a key position in the newly formed Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). However, he snapped his relations with the party and joined the Trinamool Congress, from which he again has resigned recently.

the atmosphere of polls looming large on the State, the old phrase "politics makes strange bed-fellows" failed yet once again in Assam.

In earlier occasions too the alliance building syndrome did not work. Prior to the Assembly election of 2001, the ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) led coalition alliance in Assam showed clear signs of cracks and strained relationships¹¹. Abdul Muhib Mazumdar, leader of the United People's Party of Assam (UPPA) and a then State Cabinet Minister, voiced his dissatisfaction with the AGP over some differences long time back. Similarly, the CPI (M), another key partner in the government, served a virtual ultimatum on the AGP seeking clarification of its relationship with the BJP.

Just before the Assembly election of 2001, the CPI (M), which was trying to come up steadfastly as a 'third front' of political alternative at the national level, had made it clear about its one-point agenda in the State for the coming poll. Defeating the BJP and Congress at all costs by putting up all necessary efforts in Assam became the sole aim of the party. With this aim, Prakash Karat, the CPI (M) leader, who was in Guwahati for addressing a State-level rally of the party, literally asked the AGP for clarifying its stand over BJP. As the party doubted AGP's tacit overtures with the BJP just before the poll, and also for its failure in solving popular grievances of the State's masses, it decided to review its relationship with the AGP. Added to it, Karat later reiterated that AGP's action of voting in favour of the BJP-led NDA government in the Rajya Sabha over the

¹¹ The signal of an imminent crack in the relationship of the ruling coalition members was seen right from the time the Asom Yuba Parishad (AYP) - a front organisation of AGP held its annual convention. In this rally none of the Left allies were formally invited while the highly placed office-bearers of Shiv Sena from Mumbai were given a red carpet welcome. It was imminent that the two left allies, the CPI and CPM would show their dissatisfaction. This crack only developed further without there being any check initiatives.

Ayodhya issue did not go very well with the CPI (M). He, therefore, called on the AGP to come out with a convincing justification for the action. Karat later told the press. "Besides, further continuation of the alliance with AGP will actually depend upon AGP's agreeing or not to our line of 'defeat BJP and Congress' agenda in a straightforward manner without leaving any scope for duplicity later on"¹².

Significantly enough, the CPI (M) salvo was fired just on the eve of the AGP's convention at Nagaon that began on January 29, 2001. This convention was expected to discuss in detail, issues like poll alliance, manifesto for polls and the general poll strategy, among others. The idea of having alliance with the Left parties thus disappeared in no time.

The issue of insurgency has remained a vitally important political plank for all parties. Insurgency has become a part of life in most of the states in Northeast India. It is more so in Assam, which has been experiencing the wrath of insurgency-related violence since 1979 when the United Liberation Front, Assam (ULFA) was formed¹³. During the subsequent period of two decades since the formation of the ULFA, many more ethno-centric insurgent groups emerged. The Bodos formed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) on October 3, 1986, another parallel militant outfit called the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) was born on June 18, 1996. A section of the Muslims formed their own outfit called the Muslim United Liberation Tiger Force of Assam (MULTA) in 1993. Later on, the ethnic tribes, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Hmars and the Kukis formed their own militant groups. The inter-ethnic conflicts, together with the position taken by the insurgent groups against the State

¹² "Assam: The Pre- Poll Panorama", A Freelance Peace, *Vedanti: Burning Assam*, Back Issues, <http://www.vedanti.com>.

¹³ Samir Kumar Das, *ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam): A Political Analysis* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994). Also see B. Pakem (ed), *Insurgency in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Omson Publication, 1997) and Chandra Bhushan, *Terrorism and Separation in North-East India* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2004).

and the Central government, made the political situation terribly unstable. There were speculations about which group would take the side of which political party. In earlier occasions in 1991 and 1996, the Assembly elections in the State and the Lok Sabha election in 1998 were held under the shadow of the militants' guns, as pointed out by Wasbir Hussain¹⁴, so was the case in 2001. The spectre of fear and uncertainty loomed large even at the time of the 2004 electioneering.

While analysing the burning problem of insurgency in the State, it was found that the State government claimed that a total of 823 militants belonging to different groups have been killed during counter-insurgency operations between January 21, 1997 and December 31, 2000. Added to it the Government also claimed that 5,827 militants had surrendered to the authorities during the same period¹⁵. Moreover, the alleged unholy relationship between the politicians and militant organisations made the political situation extremely volatile and uncertain. As such, no headway could be made on political fronts to settle the vexed insurgency problem with mounting operations of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT), the Muslim United Liberation Tiger Force of Assam (MULTA) and the United People's Democratic Solidarity¹⁶ (UPDS). The casualty in terms of loss of life and permanently

¹⁴ Wasbir Hussain, "Elections under the Shadow of the Gun", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol xxxvi, no 5 & 6, February 3-10, 2001. Also see Girin Phukon, "Assam Elections 1998: A Phase of Assamese Regionalism" in his edited volume *Political Dynamics of North East India: Essays in Honour of Professor Barrister Pakem* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2000) pp.156-164.

¹⁵ But the fact remains that the rebels had killed as many as 1,548 people, including 333 security personnel in Assam between 1997-2000. Appeared in *Vedanti-Burning Assam*, Back Issues <http://www.vedanti.com>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* UPDS gunned down eight Hindi-speaking people in Karbi-Anglong Hill district, supposedly with the support of Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI).

maimed in an insurgent ridden political situation in the State is shown in Table 1.3(A) and 1.3(B)

Table 1.3(A)
Insurgency Related Casualties (1991-2004)
(A Summary of Counter Insurgency Operations)

Year	Insurgents Killed	Security Personnel Killed	Civilians Killed
1991	12	21	163
1992	15	41	72
1993	29	23	54
1994	40	38	88
1995	21	66	125
1996	44	80	261
1997	136	89	237
1998	165	77	387
1999	196	87	179
2000	328	80	412
2001	307	86	261
2002	322	36	218
2003	276	15	260
2004	135	25	202
Total	2026	764	2911

Source: Police Records, Government of Assam

Table 1.3(B)
Fatalities in Insurgencies and Terrorist Conflicts in Assam (1992-2001)

Year	Category	Fatalities
1992	C	80
	SF	34
	M	19
1993	C	74
	SF	24
	M	33
1994	C	173
	SF	35
	M	63
1995	C	170
	SF	73
	M	27
1996	C	302
	SF	87
	M	62
1997	C	285
	SF	85
	M	167
1998	C	531
	SF	72
	M	180
1999	C	214
	SF	77
	M	212
2000	C	366
	SF	65
	M	327
2001	C	264
	SF	59
	M	283
Total	C	2459
	SF	611
	M	1373
State		4443
Cumulative		
Total		

Source: "Survey of Conflicts & Resolution in India's Northeast", Ajai Sahni Faultlines: Writings on Volume 12. New Delhi: Bulwark Books May

Note: Cumulative Total (All Categories): M: Militants; SF: Security Force Personnel; C: Civilians

It is not out of context to mention that in the recent times there has been symptoms of graduated reduction of violence in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam after the Bodo Accord was signed in 2004¹⁷, facilitating the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and holding the elections to form the elected Council in May 2005. But the gun factor yielded by the active insurgents, it is feared, will continue to play a dangerous role threatening the democratic process in the State for an indefinite period of time.

The Issues

It is only certain that the issues taken up by political parties just before the polls are something ornamental. In Assam some of the issues such as flood, insurgency and influx of foreign nationals, have always remained ornamental as parties take up these issues at the time of elections to be forgotten soon after the polling day. It remains only to be seen how the voters actually react to the political banter, which begins in right earnest. The politicians at times promise even the impossible to be fulfilled in about a month's time. The whole gamut of promises on the part of the party candidates are so weaved which can easily hoodwink the masses once again for another period of five years.

With 1.5 crore people enrolled in the updated voters' list out of a total population of 2.2 crores in the State, the parties before the 2001 Assembly election unfolded a red carpet of promises to woo the voters.

¹⁷In 1993, an accord was reached between the Bodos, and, the Central and State governments. The accord established the Bodoland Autonomous Council, which gave the Bodos limited political and administrative autonomy. This, however, could not root out the problem completely. Violence once again broke out in 1994. Members of the Bodo Security Force, in the wake of demands for a "liberated Bodoland" took to mass killings. Both local counterinsurgency forces and army units were sent in to engage the Bodo militants. The movement continued and was at its peak during the AGP's rule. Cleansing of the non-Bodo communities allegedly by the Bodo militants, through plunder, arson, massacre and persecution became the order of the day during the AGP tenure of 1996-2000. A large number of the non-Bodos were forced to take shelter in the relief camps in the BTC areas.

- In the poll plank, the parties promised to the population yet again to end insurgency and bring back peace.
- To usher in economic growth reducing unemployment was yet another promise.
- Flood control and better flood damage management seemed to be another area of concern for the parties. This was one of the popular issues taken up by the different political parties prior to the elections in the State.
- The parties also seemed eager to fulfill the promise of lifting of ban on State government jobs, appointments, etc.

However, a vital issue like the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) (Act) [IMDT Act] passed by the Parliament in 1983 was left out. This was one of the key issues on which a candidate or party could see the light of a win or to that extent even lose the elections in the State. However, not to mention the repeal of the IMDT Act, the ruling party, AGP¹⁸ declared only 219 persons in the State to be illegal migrants from January 1, 2000 to November 30, 2000. Out of these 219 persons detected, only 111 were served expulsion orders. Further, the irony was that out of these 111 persons, only 11 were actually expelled. It is rightly argued that not a single political party would like to raise the issue of scrapping the controversial Act because of the fear of losing the immigrant Muslim votes.

The common mass in the State was rather disenchanted. The AGP led government had failed miserably in the State.

¹⁸ The AGP came about in 1985 with the very promise of freeing the state of the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and scrapping the IMDT Act. That the same AGP even after being in power for almost two terms in the State has failed to fulfill its promise is another matter. The BJP too has been always vocal with the demand of reverting the IMDT. But it did not initiate any step to do so during its rule at the Centre for six years. Only recently on July 12, 2005 the Supreme Court in a historic judgment declared it as unconstitutional and thus void. For some details on IMDT, see Indrani Barpujari, "Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act and Assam—Promulgation and Repeal: A Contextual Analysis" (New Delhi: Akansha, Forthcoming).

Insurgency reached new heights. This only kept the potential investors away from the State. Almost all the development works in the State had been at a halt following the financial mismanagement of the State treasury¹⁹. Failure to pump in funds left the most sought after Gas Cracker project in the State in jeopardy. A severe fund crunch that almost stifled the development works in the State kept its economy within the confines of stagnation. Added to it, the unemployment figure rose to more than 16 lakhs in the State. All sorts of recruitments were stopped officially. Of course, the Government of Assam did come out with a draft paper on employment scheme on the eve of polls. The draft paper quoted:

Live registers of employment exchange had 12.39 lakh job seekers in 1995, which increased to 14.96 lakh in 1997, 16.19 lakh in 1998 and 16.35 lakh in 1999. This indicates a growth of 31.96 per cent from 1995 to 1999. There is a strong tendency for the educated unemployed to seek government jobs. But the government sector itself has reached a saturation point. To arrest this situation some thrust areas has been identified for providing self-employment to the unemployed persons in the coming two years, i.e., the remaining period of the Ninth Five Year Plan (2000-2002). The areas are agriculture, fisheries, rural development industries and commerce, handloom and textile, sericulture, khadi and village industries, tourism, transport and public distribution system.

¹⁹ Persisting fiscal deficits had emerged as one of the most significant weaknesses of the state economy, with public sector borrowing crowding out the private sector borrowing and thereby, increasing macroeconomic risks. The fiscal deficit in 1999-2000 of the State stood alarmingly high at 9.90 per cent. While net central loans contributed 0.89 per cent to cover the deficit, the market borrowings for the same stood at 1.39 per cent.

However, the State government failed to implement the draft plan. These factors laid an impact on the voters' choice. They at best preferred to choose the Congress party rather than a disunited and incompetent AGP, the regional party which was given two chances to rule the State. While Bhriku Kumar Phukan, who once happened to be the Home Minister, and second in the power position in the AGP ruling echelon, left the party and joined the NCP. A few stalwarts named Atul Bora, the Minister for Public Works Department, Pulakesh Baruah, the former Speaker formed a new party called Trinamool Gana Parishad. The clash of personality between Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Brindaban Goswami already surfaced prominently. The AGP turned out to be a divided house. Further, the AGP's share in coalition politics at the Centre was too small to be counted. This left the voters with a limited or to that extent even a negative choice and to elect the Congress to power.

The unrest among the tea-garden labourers in the State heightened. Their pathetic economic condition and the failure on the part of the government and the tea-garden owners to solve the long standing demands of the labour community for regular payment of wages and bonus led to a volatile burst of anger in many tea gardens of upper Assam. This, however, remained unresolved. This was one issue that the State government failed to bring to solution.

Rampant corruption ruled the State secretariat²⁰. Tara Pada Das, the Chairman of the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) was charged with mass corruption. Das did not resign from his office despite the fact that valuables, illegal assets and cash worth several lakhs were recovered from his residence. The AGP government did not initiate

²⁰ The then Chief Minister Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was himself not above corruption. The 'LOC' scandal associated with him was not over. Moreover, the faction ridden State government failed to come to grips with rampant corruption in its various departments. See *Vedanti-Burning Assam*, Various Issues.

any legal prosecution and the Income Tax Department too took excruciatingly long time in completing the investigation. This created the impression that Das would get a free go²¹. There was also dissatisfaction among the State government employees because of irregularities in payment of salaries. The State had to grapple under severe financial crunch. All these culminated into mass dissatisfaction with the ruling Asom Gana Parishad. The deteriorating and almost dying Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC) was a case in point. The then ruling party failed to support and revive the dying ASTC. This created a sense of despair among the ASTC workers and the organisation was almost on the verge of closing down, laying at stake the lives of those involved with the organisation²². This only added to the woes of the AGP, the ruling party. The teaching community in the government schools was the most severe victims of the government's failure in payment of regular salaries²³. With these flaws in AGP²⁴, the Congress once again appeared to be on a comeback trail when it won 10 of the 14 Lok Sabha seats in the 1999 poll. The AGP, despite being the ruling party drew a blank. This background not only had an enduring impact on the political scenario of the State till the 2001 Assembly election

²¹ This incident made it more evident that the government does not exercise sufficient care while appointing an officer for a prestigious post whose probity is not beyond doubt.

²² The ASTC employees went on a hunger strike for a month during the AGP tenure on non-payment of their salaries for nine months.

²³ A large number of the teachers could get their salaries for a month after a gap of three months period. In some cases, salaries remained unpaid for six months or more. Under the events, the AGP led coalition Government's monthly tug-of-war with the Reserve Bank of India at Guwahati for lifting the ban on taking overdrafts to meet the salary component of the State government employees every month spoke volume of the State's financial position.

²⁴ After ruling for five years, what the Mahanta Government achieved was a chronic financial crisis with no signs of improvement. Whatever little was done did not get recognition as unaccomplished promises and tasks weighed heavily against the little done. Consequently, almost all constituencies reeled in backwardness in the State.

but also went on to decide the outcome of the Lok Sabha poll held in 2004.

In the Lok Sabha poll of 2004, three major players were in the fray- the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As in the case of the rest of the country, a general impression was created by the media in the State that the NDA might be able to come back to power yet once again at the Centre. With Assam having only 14 seats in the Lok Sabha, it was felt that if the AGP could improve its performance by capturing at least one or two seats it could have a role to play in the formation of the next NDA government. While even if the Congress retained its earlier position it would not have an impact if the NDA returned to power this time too. However, in democracy the number game matters, and it is more so in the era of coalition politics, in which each individual member, including the Independents matter. Further, where each individual candidate as well as each party would not like to be a loser, the election fever was destined to be strong.

II THE ECONOMIC SCENARIO

Endowed with rich natural resources, the State once accounted for higher per-capita income than the all-India level in the early 1950s. However, since then the State has continuously slipped down in the process of economic growth compared to not only the all-India level, but to the other states in the country as well, including the states of Northeast²⁵. Along with the other reasons, this slow growth in the economy also has been attributed to - (a) the two wars of 1962 and 1971 in the eastern front, and (b) influx of population (Table 1.4), mainly the large scale migration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan both immediately after

²⁵ Mohan Guruswamy, *Left Behind: A Case Study of Assam* (New Delhi: Centre for Policy Alternatives [CPA], 2005).

independence and after the creation of Bangladesh, while in the later decades – especially, the seventies and eighties, the growth process of the State was adversely affected by the socio-political movements in the State.

Table 1.4
Population Variation in India and Assam

Years	Assam	India
1901-11	16.99	5.75
1911-21	20.48	-0.31
1921-31	19.91	11.00
1931-41	20.41	14.22
1941-51	19.93	13.31
1951-61	34.98	21.51
1961-71	34.95	24.80
1971-81	23.36	24.69
1981-91	24.24	23.82
1991-01	18.85	21.34

Source: Census of India, Various Years

Inter alia, as there is an inter-relationship between the social and political factors on one hand, and the economic factors on the other, it was but natural that the State's economy suffered the most amidst the tensed socio-political environment.

Though, Assam had a lower incidence of poverty at 51 per cent in 1973-74 compared to the national average of 55 per cent, the fall in the poverty ratio since then has been slower in the State compared to the all-India level. Post reforms, 1991, the poverty scenario has not changed much. The State has been successful in reducing the extent of

poverty only by about 5 per cent between 1993-1994 and 1999-2000 (to 41 per cent) as against about 10 per cent for the country as a whole (to 36 per cent) (Table 1.5). Despite the decline, its relative ranking among the major states in the country has dropped from 6 to 12²⁶, and compounded by the large-scale migration, this has aggravated the problem of unemployment as well.

Table 1.5
Percentage of Population Below Poverty Line
(Official Estimates)

Years	Assam		All-India			
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
1973-74	52.67	36.92	51.21	56.44	49.01	54.88
1993-94	45.01	7.73	40.86	37.27	32.36	35.97
1999-2000	40.04	7.47	36.09	27.09	23.62	26.1

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

As the per-capita income growth reflects the movement of poverty ratio, it will be in fitness of things here to focus on the growth in the per-capita income as well in the State. In 1950-51, the per-capita income in Assam was 4 per cent above the national average. Five decades later, in 1998-99, it dropped to 41 per cent below the national average at current prices and 45 per cent below the national average at 1980-81 prices. There has been a constant rise in this gap and between 1980 and 1998, the per-capita income in Assam grew by 10 per cent compared with 39 per cent for all India (Table 1.6).

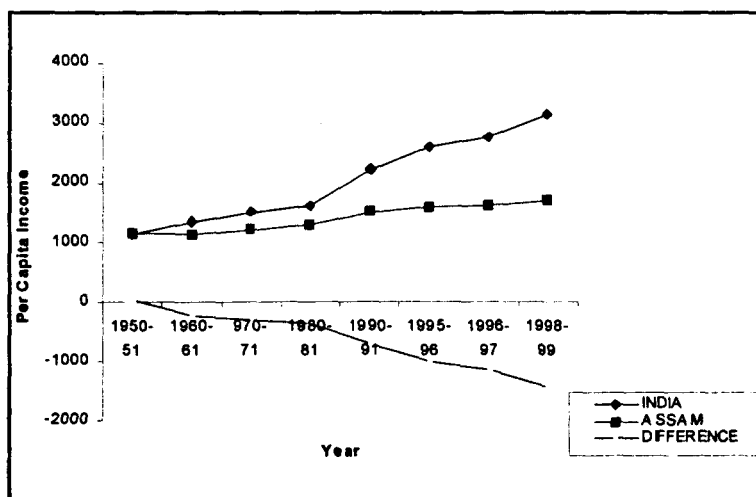
²⁶ Apart from Haryana, Assam saw the drastic worsening of its rank [Agarwal and Srinivasan (2000)], Assam Development Report, 2003.

Table 1.6
Per Capita Income (at constant 1980-81 prices)

Year	1950-51	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	1995-96	1996-97	1998-99
India	1127	1350	1520	1630	2222	2608	2761	3132
Assam	1173	1140	1221	1284	1524	1606	1628	1708
Difference	46(+)	210(-)	299(-)	346(-)	698(-)	1002(-)	1133(-)	1424(-)
Assam/India	1.04	0.84	0.80	0.79	0.69	0.62	0.59	0.55

Source: *Vision Assam 2025*, Government of Assam

Figure 1
Per Capita Income (at constant 1980-81 prices)



During 1951-79, Assam's economy grew more or less at the same rate as that of the rest of India. But as the Indian economy grew at 6 per cent over 1981 to 2000, the State GDP grew only at 3.3 per cent. In the post liberalization era, the State's economy decelerated instead of accelerating without any indication of change in the trend growth rate. Examining this trend growth rates by the three broad sectors - primary, secondary and tertiary, it has been found that the primary sector has grown at around 2 per cent during the decades of 1980s and 1990s. The growth rates in the secondary and tertiary sectors too have remained the same around 4 and 4.5 per cent respectively²⁷ (Table 1.7 and 1.8). Thereby, it is not that Assam could make any compensatory progress in the sectors other than the primary, which too showed a slow growth. Therefore, notwithstanding a decade of relatively rapid economic growth rate in India following the sweeping economic reforms in 1991, the pace of growth in Assam, in fact, has slowed down in recent years.

Table 1.7
State GDP at Factor Cost Industry of Origin at
Constant (1980-81) prices

Sector	Average Annual Growth Rates		Per cent of Total SGDP			
	1981-82 to 1990-91	1990-91 to 1999-00	1981-82 to 1990-00	1981-82	1990-91	1999-00
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Logging	2.6	1.6	2.1	41.6	38.3	33.5
Mining and Quarrying	0.1	2.0	1.0	5.2	3.8	3.4
Manufacturing	2.4	3.4	2.9	7.7	6.9	7.1

(Contd...)

²⁷ There has been a marginal fall in the growth rates of the primary and secondary sectors in the last decade but that has been compensated by a marginal rise in the service sector. Overall, the State projects a picture of stagnancy in growth rates for all the three sectors.

	1981- 82 to 1990- 91	1990- 91 to 1999- 00	1981- 82 to 1900- 00	1981- 82	1990- 91	1999- 00
Construction	3.7	2.4	3.1	4.3	4.3	4.1
Electricity, Gas and water Supply	9.4	0.9	5.0	1.2	1.9	1.6
Trade, Transport, Banking and Other Services	4.9	4.5	4.7	40.1	44.7	50.3
Gross SDP	3.6	3.1	3.3	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Table 1.8
Growth in Real Gross State Domestic Product
(Per cent per annum)

Period	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	GSDP
1980-1990	2.16	4.13	4.37	3.34
1991-2001	1.89	3.88	4.52	3.27
1980-2001	1.81	3.80	4.57	3.25

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Note: Estimates of growth rate for the period 1980-2001 made by fitting the equations of the type $\ln(Y) = a + bT$ where Y is relevant income series and T is time trend.

For the sub-periods, growth rates are computed from the equation $\ln(Y) = a + bT + c.D$ where D is a dummy variable with value 1 for 1991 onwards and 0 otherwise.

Above all, persisting fiscal deficits has emerged as one of the most significant weaknesses of the State economy, with public sector borrowing crowding out the private sector borrowing and thereby, increasing macroeconomic risks. The declining contribution of Central transfers to the total State spending in the last decade has led the State to rely increasingly on market borrowings²⁸ (Table 1.9, 1.10 and 1.11).

²⁸ The 'debt servicing costs' account for as much as 95 per cent of fresh debt contracted and the payment of principal and interest on Central loans exceed the receipts [GoA (1999)], Assam Development Report, 2002.

Table 1.9
Percentage Share of Expenditure in GSDP

Years	Development Expenditure		Non-Development Expenditure		Other Capital Expenditure		Total Expenditure				
	Capital Expenditure	Total Expenditure	Capital Expenditure	Total Expenditure	Repayment of Internal Debt	Loans and Advances Central by State					
1990-91	12.40	2.28	14.685.61	0.05	5.66	0.46	0.01	3.18	1.72	4.91	25.70
1991-92	13.54	2.35	15.893.73	0.06	3.78	0.07	0.07	0.65	2.07	2.78	22.53
1992-93	12.10	1.76	13.866.63	0.06	6.69	0.05	0.12	2.24	1.07	3.44	24.04
1993-94	12.60	1.66	14.264.01	0.05	4.06	0.06	0.12	2.02	1.04	3.18	21.56
1994-95	12.43	1.62	14.057.35	0.06	7.41	0.04	0.01	0.79	0.78	1.58	23.07
1995-96	13.31	2.10	15.426.93	0.05	6.98	0.11	0.01	2.13	1.05	3.20	25.71
1996-97	11.84	1.25	13.086.92	0.03	6.95	0.06	0.09	1.64	0.65	2.38	22.48
1997-98	12.09	1.58	13.677.60	0.03	7.63	0.05	0.13	2.53	0.53	3.19	24.54
1998-99	12.82	1.64	14.467.26	0.02	7.28	0.05	0.17	1.41	0.35	1.93	23.72
1999-00											
(RE)	19.02	2.88	21.9011.75	0.08	11.830.05		0.18	1.60	1.13	2.92	36.71
2000-01											
(BE)	19.58	7.29	26.8610.42	0.07	10.480.05		0.19	1.48	1.28	2.95	40.36

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Table 1.10
Composition of Expenditure (Percentage of GSDP)

Years	Revenue Expenditure	Capital Expenditure	Total Observed Expenditure	NIPFP Projections (with state level reforms)
1990-91	18.46	7.24	25.70	
1991-92	17.34	5.19	22.53	
1992-93	18.78	5.25	24.04	
1993-94	16.68	4.88	21.56	
1994-95	19.81	3.26	23.07	
1995-96	20.36	5.34	25.71	
1996-97	18.82	3.66	22.48	
1997-98	19.75	4.80	24.54	26.25
1998-99	20.13	3.59	23.72	31.69
1999-00 (RE)	30.82	5.89	36.71	30.61
2000-01 (BE)	30.04	10.31	40.35	28.04

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Notes: GSDP figures from 1997-98 are projected based on past trends
The NIPFP trends incorporate increased salaries due to the 5th Pay Commission recommendations but with a downsizing of staff

Table 1.11
Fiscal Deficit as a Percentage of GSDP

Composition of Fiscal Deficit				
Year	Fiscal Deficit	Revenue Deficit	Capital Outlay	Net Lending
1998-1999	1.54	-0.14	1.66	0.29
1999-2000(RE)	9.90	5.84	2.97	1.09
2000-2001(BE)	8.31	3.63	7.35	-2.68
Financing of Fiscal Deficit				
Year	Fiscal Deficit	Net Loans	Central Net Borrowings	Market Net Lending
1998-1999	1.54	0.64	1.62	-0.72
1999-2000(RE)	9.90	1.12	1.44	7.33
2000-2001(BE)	8.31	0.89	1.39	6.03

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

In addition to borrowings, government guarantees are growing and are being used extensively in mobilising funds for capital expenditure (Table 1.12 and 1.13). Diversion and inefficient utilisation of funds is not only aggravating the problem of fiscal deficit resulting from an unsustainable level of indebtedness, but is in fact, blocking the channelising of funds for strengthening the foundations of economic growth.

Table 1.12
Gross Fiscal Deficits (1999-2000)
(Percentage of NSDP)

Assam	
1998-99	338.2 (1.6)
1999-00	1605.8 (6.4)
2000-01	1923.5 (7.1)

Source: CMIE, Public Finance 2002 and Economic Survey 2001

Table 1.13
Guarantees (contingent liabilities) given by Assam
State Government (Rs Lakh)

Year	New	Outstanding Guarantees Total	% Given to ASEB
1991-92		102796	80
1992-93	11921	109399	76
1993-94	12462	122984	68
1994-95	32482	138382	64
1995-96	14214	124986	53
1996-97	500	114939	56
1997-98	850	143000	63
1998-99(RE)		143000	66

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Note: ASEB refers to Assam State Electricity Board

Overall growth is a product of many a factor, among which, infrastructure development and social advancement matters most. To add to the poor performance of Assam in almost all economic aspects compared to the national level, she fails in other indicators of development as well. The existing infrastructure and facilities of transport and communication are hardly adequate enough to meet the requirements of the State. Infact, Assam has the poorest infrastructure and social indicators²⁹. The total road length in the State stood at 33,343 Km. in 1999-2000, of which only 26 per cent has been surfaced. The road density per sq.km hence stands at 0.425. The other modes of transport like the railways, airways, and water transport are also in a sorry state of affairs. However, the postal and telecom facilities have been growing steadily in the State in the recent years.

At various stages, the Central government has recognised the need to pay special attention to infrastructure development in Northeast. A number of initiatives were taken in the 1990s. A committee was constituted in February 1990 under the chairmanship of L.C. Jain, the then Member of the Planning Commission. A high level commission was set up under the chairmanship of S P Shukla yet again in 1997 to tackle the problem of backlog in basic minimum services and infrastructure needs of the Northeast. The recommendations of these committees were reflected in programmes announced by the various Prime Ministers. Thus, an economic package of Rs. 6,100 crore for specific projects in Northeast states as announced in October 1996 by the then Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, included fourth rail-cum-road bridge over the Brahmaputra at Bogibeel in Upper Assam, up gradation of Guwahati Airport and a few industrial growth centres in addition to some road projects, drinking water supply schemes and health care

²⁹ Its infrastructure development index is only 79 in comparison to the base level of 100 for the country [NIPFP (1998)].

programmes. He also introduced the Northeast sub-plans in all Central Ministries for which 10 per cent of their budgets would be earmarked. I. K. Gujral, who followed Deve Gowda as the Prime Minister, also assured the implementation of the package in toto. In January 2000, Atal Behari Vajpayee further announced Rs. 10,271.66 crore package for the region.

Though the road network in Assam is extensive in terms of road density, that is, road length per thousand square km, in terms of density of surfaced road, Assam is way behind the country and the gap is increasing. However, the increasing length of highways in Assam in the recent years would only imply that the State government has invested on extending the road network rather than on improving the quality of roads. Though it was expected that the recent improvement and initiation of new projects would add even more national highways but unfortunately with emphasis on new roads, inadequate attention is being paid to the maintenance of the existing roads. Many roads are in poor state and all weather connectivity for many villages is limited (Table 1.14).

Table 1.14
Roads in Assam and India

Year	Road Length ('000 Km)			Road Density (Km Per '000 Sq. Km)		
	Surfaced Road	Unsurfaced Road	Total	Surfaced Road	Unsurfaced Road	Total
All India						
1970-71	398	520	918	121	158	279
1980-81	684	802	1486	208	244	452
1990-91	1025	977	2002	312	297	609
1996-97	1394	1072	2466	424	326	750

(Contd...)

Year	Surfaced Road	Unsurfaced Road	Total	Surfaced Road	Unsurfaced Road	Total
Assam						
1970-71						
1980-81						
1990-91	10	55.6	65.5	127	709	836
1996-97	11.6	56.8	68.4	148	724	872

Source: CMIE, Various Issues

For public transport, the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC) was set up. But it failed to put up the effort required with dearth of finance needed to meet the demands of the staff. ASTC had an annual deficit of Rs.22.55 crore and accumulated liability of Rs. 80 crore including 12 months of employee salaries of Rs. 28 crore. The bus staff ratio stood at 1:40³⁰. Notwithstanding this failure, the implementations of the recommendations of the various committees are said to be in progress in the State (Table 1.15).

Table 1.15
Roads: Recommendations of Different Committees

Recommended by	Recommendations	Status in April 2001
Jain Committee (April 1990)	1. Improve efficiency and economic viability of Assam State Road Transport Corporation (ASRTC)	No progress

(Contd...)

³⁰ However, the ASTC registered a spectacular resurgence in recent years mainly due to the efforts made by the Minister in charge of the Corporation. Now it is known as a vibrant sector.

Recommended by	Recommendations	Status in April 2001
S P Shukla Commission (March 1997)	2. Develop as National Highways a Daboka-Silchar Highway b Kohima-Amguri between Nagaland and Assam (241 km)	No objection for handing over land to Centre given by State on 9.3.99. Estimate was not sanctioned by GOI till 14.3.01.
Prime Minister Vajpayee's Announcement of January 22, 2000	3. Road Projects a Baithalangshu -Raha (48 km) b Naharkatiya-Khonsa (57 km) c Panchgram-Hailakandi (58 km) d Megherita-Changlang (43 km) e Zamuang-Durlavcherra (79 km) f Jotte-Balijan (58 km) g Fatikroy-Kailashwar (98 km)	Work initiated and is in various stages of completion
	4. New National Highways totaling 1962 km in the NE of which 433 km is in Assam.	Declared as National Highways and consultancy quotations invited.

Similarly, the development of railways (Table 1.16) took a long time to reach a reasonable level. Things have changed in recent times as Dibrugarh is being connected by lines which are under construction. The recommendations of the Jain and the Shukla Committees (Table 1.17) thus seem to have had an impact.

Table 1.16
Development of Railways in Assam

Year	Route Length		Density	
	All India	Assam (Km)	India	Assam (Km/1000 Sq Km)
1990-91	62367	2467	19.0	31.4
1993-94	62462	3728		
1996-97	62725	2435		
1998-99	62809	2392	19.1	30.5

Source: CMIE, Various Issues

Table 1.17
Railways: Recommendations of Different Committees

Recommended by	Recommendations	Status in April 2001
Jain Committee (April 1990)	1. Speed up and complete a Rail-cum-Road Bridge at Jagighopa	1a Inaugurated in April 1998
	b BG line from Jagighopa to Guwahati which were taken up in 1983-84	1b. Completed Feb.2001

(Contd...)

Recommended by	Recommendations	Status in April 2001
S P Shukla Commission (March 1997)	2. BG line from Guwahati to Dibrugarh	2. Most of it completed, rest expected by end 2001
	3. New BG line from Jalukbari to Panikheti	3. No proposal for survey work
	4. Extension of BG track from Lanka to Silchar	4. Conversion work sanctioned in 1996-97
	5. A rail-cum-road bridge at Bogibeel near Dibrugarh	5. Final location survey completed. Final clearance is awaited.
	6. Expeditious completion of Bogibeel bridge	6. Final clearance is awaited.
	7. (a) Diphu-Karang and (b) Bairabi-Sareng lines be taken up in 9 th plan	7.a. Survey completed by Mizoram has indicated preference for a new alignment. 7.b. Survey work awarded for a proposed line but facing local opposition

(Contd...)

Recommended by	Recommendations	Status in April 2001
Jain Committee	8. Overnight trains between Dimapur and Guwahati	
	9. Linkage with Bangladesh	9. Survey on Indian side completed, awaiting Bangladesh Report
	10. Linkage with Myanmar	10. No proposal
	11. Establish a railway training institute	

Source: Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002

Being one of the lowest ranked States in the country in terms of per capita electricity consumption, the per capita electricity supplied is mere 116 kwhr/person/year which is only one fourth of the all India per capita generation of 479 kwhr. In spite of large resources in Assam and the Northeast, the abysmally low per capita consumption of electricity reflects both poor quality of life and low level of economic activities. The installed capacity remained the same at 574.4MW since 1997-98 to 2003. The power generation in the State gradually declined from 1996-97 and this downward trend continued till 2001-2002. In order to meet the domestic demand, the State continued to purchase power from other sources (Table 1.18). Therefore, since the past several years the overall power supply position in the State has not been much satisfactory.

Table 1.18
Power Supply Position in Assam

ITEMS	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
1	2	3	4	5
Energy Requirement (Million unit)	3,073.00	3,077.00	3,323.16	3,415.32
Availability (Million unit)	2,832.78	2,985.21	2,984.97 (R)	3,301.59
Shortage (Percentage)	7.80	2.90	10.18 (R)	3.33

Source: *Economic Survey, Assam 2002-2003*

Note: (R) – Revised Estimate

Telecommunication is one area in which technological progress has overcome traditional bottlenecks and some relief is observable. Though the telephone density has grown fourfold in Assam, it is still only about 40 per cent of that in India.

Agriculture in Assam is also subject to various social and institutional constraints. The most obvious is the land holding pattern, which is dominated by the small holdings, i.e. the small operational size of the farms (Table 1.19). Nearly three-fourths of all operational holdings are either 'marginal' or 'small'. As a result, the average size of holdings in Assam is only about 1.27 hectares. These small and marginal farmers typically face severe financial constraint. Considering the importance of agriculture in the State's economy, the topmost priority of the government of Assam has been on development of this sector. Hence, in 1996-97, the government of Assam enthusiastically initiated the

scheme of installation of shallow tubewells under Samriddha Krishak Yojana (SKY) with finance from NABARD and Assam Rural Infrastructure and Agricultural Service Project (ARIASP) financed by the World Bank to accelerate the pace of development of agriculture in the State. The government of Assam had aimed at and installed 1, 47,250 STWs by March 2001, and the primary objective of the scheme had been to increase the area under assured irrigation for increasing productivity and cropping intensity and thereby bridge the gap between production and requirement. Considering the technical and geo-hydrological parameters, 18 out of 23 districts had been brought under the scheme. Installation of the STWs in different parts of Assam had definite visible impacts on the agricultural sector of the State. The programme had been successful to create an additional potential to irrigate about 294 thousand hectares or approximately 13 per cent of the net area sown in the State. However, the programme failed to achieve the norm of self-sufficiency in food grain production in the State.

A Few Insights

Reasons for Low Growth Syndrome in the State

Wars of 1962 and 1971

Failure to implement the Green Revolution of the 1960s

Socio-political movements in the State

Population influx

Persisting problem of insurgency

Lack of infrastructural facilities

Lack of investments

Table 1.19
Number, Area and Average Size of Operational Holding in Assam, 1990-91 and 1995-96
(all social groups)

Size/Class	Number of Holding			Operational Area			Percentage to Total			Average Size of Holding		
	1995-96	1990-91	1995-96	1990-91	1995-96	1990-91	1995-96	1990-91	1995-96	1990-91	1995-96	1990-91
Marginal												
<0.05	1036853	914496	212834	208415	6.80	6.50	0.21	0.23	0.21	0.23	0.21	0.23
0.5-1.0	632399	606337	402073	398707	12.84	12.44	0.64	0.66	0.64	0.66	0.64	0.66
1.0-2.0	561078	559863	769698	784081	24.58	24.47	1.37	1.40	1.37	1.40	1.37	1.40
Small												
2.0-3.0	241615	237135	565823	566720	18.07	17.68	2.34	2.39	2.34	2.39	2.34	2.39
3.0-4.0	109630	105420	358435	351277	11.44	10.96	3.27	3.33	3.27	3.33	3.27	3.33
Semi-medium												
4.0-5.0	50482	49567	212436	210999	6.78	6.58	4.21	4.26	4.21	4.26	4.21	4.26
5.0-7.5	38914	38267	225145	224140	7.19	6.99	5.79	5.86	5.79	5.86	5.79	5.86
7.5-10.0	7022	6864	57077	56472	1.82	1.76	8.13	8.23	8.13	8.23	8.13	8.23
Medium												
10.0-20.0	3051	3051	39323	39503	1.26	1.23	12.89	12.95	12.89	12.95	12.89	12.95
Large												
>20.0	1953	2379	289144	364438	9.23	11.37	148.05	153.19	9.23	11.37	148.05	153.19
All sizes	2652997	2523379	3131988	3204752	100.00	100.00	1.17	1.27	100.00	100.00	1.17	1.27

Sources: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 1999 and 2004, Government of Assam

Are the reasons cited enough to justify the low growth syndrome in the State? Where does political will power stand amidst these reasons? The density of population figures in Assam has been pointing at the rapid rate of increase in population leading to reduction in the land: man ratio. The reigning poverty and backwardness of Assam has always been analysed in the context of abnormal growth of population due to continuous influx of migrants that is supposed to be tremendously pressurising on land-man ratio with of course recognizing the competition for natural resources, economic opportunities and even cultural identity as the main reasons behind recurring economic, social and ethnic conflicts in the State.

Assam has had its share of failures and successes on economic front since independence. If one is to analyse the little success and big failures achieved on this front by the two alternate ruling parties, the national party – the Congress (I), and the regional party – the AGP in the State, it is the national party that seems to have had an upper hand in successes achieved in the economic front in the State, than the regional party, the AGP, which is burdened rather with more failures on economic front. *The question, therefore, remains open that have the failures in the economic front, really has affected election politics in the State?*

Economic considerations, more specifically, the political economy of the State has its own course of influences over the electoral politics in the State. The relative backwardness of the State, despite resource affluences, has led to the popular belief that the cause of this backwardness is rather exogenous. This belief, when politically interpreted, upheld the view that Assam's case is more of "relative deprivation" than that of "relative decelerations". This has created a visible cleavage separating regional sentiments from the national affiliations. During the course of six year long Assam movement, this sense of differences became even more

pronounced leading to the emergence of the AGP as a strong regional party overthrowing the Congress from the seats of power. Notably, identifying the relative backwardness as a case of relative deprivation and popularly believing the reasons responsible for this being exogenous continued even in the later phases as well with the notion of region narrowed down to the lines of ethnicity and community. This political economy of the State needs to be put in proper perspective when one tries to analyse the election politics in the State.

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