



## The Assam Movement and its Political impact in Assam

<sup>1</sup>Author Jadav Chandra Basumatary

---

### ARTICLE INFO

RECEIVED 23 SEPTEMBER 2022

ACCEPTED 30 NOVEMBER 2022

PUBLISHED 21 DECEMBER 2022

---

### ABSTRACT

The Assam Movement (1979-85) is one of the historic social movements in Assam, North-East India. The All Assam Students' Union was formed in 1966 in Assam for greater interest of the student community in particular and the region in general. The students' organization took the leadership of the protest movement against what was alleged to be illegal enfranchised foreigners in the region. The All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad, a broad based committee was formed in 1979 to run the movement. The organization took constitutional means to achieve their goals. Six years of rigorous movement beginning from 1979 for detection and deportation of illegal immigrants came to an end after the Central government promised to give legislative as well as administrative safeguards to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity of Assamese people. Therefore, the Assam Accord signed between the Central government and the leaders of the movement in 1985 brought the movement to a halt. The Asom Gana Parishad is an offspring of the Assam Movement. The Asom Gana Parishad, a regional political party propagates the ideology of regionalism and committed to regional interest. The paper aims to examine whether the Assam Movement has been successful or not along with its political consequence. The Students' organization has been a regular voice of the people of Assam, still it has been alleged that the apparent goals of the movement are yet to be achieved. The various Clauses including Clause-VI of the accord are still alive after 36 years as well.

### Keywords:

Assam, Assam Accord, Assam Movement, Coalition, Regional Party.

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author : Ph.D. Research Scholar, Bodoland University  
Email – [jadavbasu1967@gmail.com](mailto:jadavbasu1967@gmail.com) , Contact No. 9864890907



## **INTRODUCTION**

The Assam Movement is one of the historic social movements in the North-East India (NE) in general and Assam in particular. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) took leadership in the protest movement against what was alleged to be illegal enfranchised foreigners in Assam. The movement which continued for six years from 1979 to 1985 was known as the Assam Movement. The long movement which aimed at detection, deletion, and deportation of foreigners was planned, well-organized, and collective efforts. The ASSU formed All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) at the Central Committee meeting held at Dibrugarh Law College on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1979 for bringing non-students' supporting forces to a single platform. The main objective was to garner support for the anti-foreigners movement from a broad based conglomeration of Assamese society.<sup>1</sup> The movement which originated in 1979 got its highest momentum in 1980s and ended with signing of the Assam Accord between the Central-State Governments (Govt.) and the leaders of the movement in 1985. The students' organization emphasized on constitutional means to achieve its goals. It was successful in mobilizing people for the mass participation in the movement. The leaders of the movement also followed the path of agitation as policy to pressurize the Govt. for solution of the problem. This paper aims to study on the Assam Movement as one of the historic social movements in Assam. This paper will also try to explore the support bases of the movement as well as political outcome of the agitation. However, the paper has limitation as it is concentrated on political consequence of the movement by ignoring social and economic aspects. The study is analytical based on secondary data sources.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT**

The students' organization, AASU involved itself with every social, political, and



economic events of Assam. The AASU began to be more active and very vigilant on issue like reorganization of the state of Assam .But the students' organization could not become popular and strong with mass support base until the Assam Movement. The anti-foreigners movement did not occur either in vacuum or in single affair. However, the sudden death of the Member of Parliament, Hiralal Patowary of Mongaldoi constituency on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1979 led to the apprehension that the number of foreigners had increased many fold in Assam. The verification of voters' list that time brought suspicion that 45000 voters were of suspected foreigners. Thus psyche of being marginalized within the state by unabated influx from other countries developed in mind of the enlightened middle class Assamese in post-independence period.

The caste Hindu-Assamese middle class took an active role to build and make the nationalist forces strengthened and involved actively in several agitations after independence. However, it has been observed that two diverse views of explanations came to the forefront and nature of Assam agitation. The first one assumed that due to unabated infiltration, the indigenous people had become a minority from the perspective of demographic composition and also claimed India as a border or fringe colony. It had been a fact that in the subsequent periods this view took a hardliner shape and got consolidated as the driving force of the extremist group, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The second perspective was related with the rise of Left forces in Assam. The emergence of the Left as powerful force in the Assembly election of 1979 caused worries in both the national and the regional camps. It has been thought that the Assam agitation was organized to destroy the popularity of the Left so that its expansion did not spread in whole of the NE. By the time, the Left forces had



consolidated their hold in West Bengal and Tripura. Hence the growth of Left in Assam would mean the entire areas closer to red China. Therefore, it was considered necessary to crush the Left forces of Assam through an emotional nationalistic movement in the name of anti-foreigners movement or popularly known as the Assam Movement. This perspective is still acknowledged by the Left camp, particularly the Left leaning academics in Assam, as the overall strength of the Left peaked in post-emergency era and then declined never to be recovered.<sup>2</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

### **A. Support base of the Movement**

The ASSU itself took the leading role in the movement while the AAGSP represented all sections of the society. The political parties, organizations, and civil societies associated with AAGSP were AASU, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Assam Yuba Samaj, Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal(AJD, Girin Barua), Jatiyatabadi Dal(Nagen Hazarika), Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Purbanchalya Lok Parishad (PLP), Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA- Brahma faction), Karbi Parishad, and All Assam Tribal Sangha. In subsequent period, teachers' associations, employees' associations, women's associations joined the AAGSP. The intellectuals, the journalists, the lawyers, peasants, and working class people also supported the movement. Women of Assam whole heartedly participated in the movement. The involvement of women in the movement had changed the course of the protest mode. The women stood at the forefront to confront the police first. Their involvement increased the spirit of the AASU. A new element of discipline became visible in carrying out the program. They had absolutely no hesitation to block roads at night after night.<sup>3</sup> The AASU called for 12 hours 'Assam Bandh' against the influx on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1979 and that was the beginning as a formal commencement of the Assam Movement.



There was spontaneous participation of all sections of society in the mass Satyagraha that took place from November 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 1979. In the Satyagraha program or act of symbolic disobedience to the law where nearly 700,000 people in the city of Guwahati and estimated two million people in the state as a whole courted arrest were simple people.<sup>4</sup> Golap Borbora, the Chief Minister (CM) extended moral support to the anti-foreigners agitation and strongly supported the exclusion of names of foreigners from the electoral rolls. But the stand of CM brought tremendous dissidents of the Janata Govt. and strong opposition came from the Congress (I) on the issue. Finally the 18 month Borbora ministry fell on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1979. Jogen Hazarika became the CM after Borbora and he also wanted to revise the voter list of the state within a specific time. He called an all-party meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1979 to discuss the immigrants' issue. The meeting called upon the people to seek amicable solution to the problem of illegal immigrants by constitutional and legal procedure.

The civil disobedience campaign extended to trade and economic blockade and movements in December, 1979, stopped flow of crude oil and plywood from Assam to other parts of Indian states with public support. The central Govt. recruited Indian Army to break the blockade in 1980.

The most significant event of the movement took place on December, 1979 when the Assam Movement got its first martyr, Khargeswar Talukdar, a local student leader of Barpeta District in protest against the declaration of election process for the seventh Lok Sabha election in India. The leaders of the agitation called for boycott of the parliamentary elections unless the Govt. agreed to remove the names of the foreigners from the electoral rolls. There had been confrontations of the movement supporters with police and thus casualties occurred. The owners of printing press in Assam did not



cooperate with administration to print out the electoral rolls for election. The Govt. officials of all levels also did not carry their election duty. The election in 12 out of Assam's 14 parliamentary constituencies had to be cancelled. Only the elections of two constituencies located in Cachar could be held. The seventh parliamentary election became the turning point for the AASU to convert the students' movement into mass movement. The intensity of the movement reached its peak spreading all across the Brahmaputra valley.

A mass hunger strike was observed all over Assam on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1980. A bi-lateral talk between the Prime Minister (PM) and the leaders of the movement was held on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1980 but without any solution. The AASU had submitted a memorandum of 199 pages demanding 1951 as the cut off year to correct the voter list and demanded expulsion of foreigners. The Prime Minister again had discussion with leaders of the AASU and the AAGSP on 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> March 1980. The Prime Minister and the leaders of the movement had another discussion on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1980 when PM, Indira Gandhi came on a visit to Assam on 12<sup>th</sup> April of the same year. The All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), representing religious minority students of Assam came into being in 1980. The discussion resumed in May 1981 where Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Bhriugu Kumar Phukan, Atul Bora, and other leaders of the movement represented. In most of the discussions that took place between the government and the agitators, the issue of cut off year for detection and deportation of foreigners created problem in arriving at an amicable solution. However, it was also alleged that the leaders of the movement took greater interest on the talks rather than agitation in and after 1981 where every time they failed to arrive at final decision.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the government of India made preparation to hold Assembly Elections in

the first part of 1983 in Assam. The Election Commission declared on 6th January, 1983 to hold election in three phases in Assam. Elections were held on 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> February in 62, 37, and 27 constituencies as the first, the second and the third phases respectively. The strong opposition and mass public protest also could not stop the election. As a result, there occurred unprecedented violence and almost total boycott of the elections.

After the election result, the Congress Party came to power with huge majority, 91 out of 109 constituencies (see Table-1). The other parties which participated in the elections won meager seats. Hiteswar Saikia, the leader of the Congress became the CM of Assam. Saikia government suggested enacting a new set of laws to the government of India applicable only in Assam. The Law Minister of Assam, Abdul Muhib Mazumdar prepared the draft of the bill and it was placed in the parliament on 15th December, 1983. This bill was passed on the same day of its placement and it became an Act. The Act was known as Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act, 1983 [IM(DT) Act, 1983].

Table-1

Result of Legislative Assembly election of Assam, 1983

Political Parties	Seat won
Congress (I)	91
Congress (S)	02
CPI (M)	02
CPI	01
PTCA	03
Independents	10
Total	109

Source: Post-Colonial Assam (1947-2019), 2019



## **B. The Assam Accord:**

The public support to the movement was declining from the last part of 1983 and the movement slowly began to disintegrate from 1984. Both the Central and the State governments showed interest to solve the problem of Assam. The Government of India began to find a negotiated solution to Assam's long standing demands in January, 1985. In the discussion, two new demands got preference. The first was to dismiss the Saikia government and the second was to revoke the controversial IM (DT) Act, 1983. The Lok Sabha also suggested on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1985 to take measure for solution to the foreigners' issue.

After series of discussion between the Central government and the leaders of the movement, the 'Assam Accord' was signed on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1985 between the Central-State governments and the leaders of Assam Movement. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Bhrigu Kumar Phukan from the AASU and Biraj Sarma from the AAGSP signed on this memorandum of settlement. As per accord, illegal foreigners who had entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for 10 years and those who came after March 1971 would be expelled from the state. The accord also assured that constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve, and promote the cultural, social, and linguistic identity of the Assamese as per Clause-VI of the accord. The other clause said the government would take this opportunity to renew their commitment for speedy all round development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Along with it consent was obtained to dismiss the elected state government of 1983 by terming it illegal.

Leaders of the AASU and their supporters felt the need for strong regional party in





Assam capable of focusing the aspirations and sentiment of the Assamese middle class. The leaders of the AASU with this concept organized the first National political convention at Jorhat on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> January 1984.<sup>6</sup> In that convention there emerged a consensus on the formation of a regional political party to capture power in state. The AASU held series of discussions with existing regional parties with a view to uniting them and forming a new regional party. The AASU organized the second National political convention at Jorhat in November, 1984. At this convention 11 member preparatory committee was constituted headed by Brindaban Goswami and Dineswar Tasha as joint convenors to prepare the ground for common political platform. The leaders of the movement after signing the accord in felt urgent need to form the much awaited political party. The third National political convention was held on 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1985 at Golaghat.<sup>7</sup> Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, ex-president of the AASU presided over the session which was attended by large number of delegates representing the regional political parties namely the PLP, the AJD, the PTCA, the Karbi Anglong Peoples Conference and the Cachar Indigenous Peoples Conference. Educationists, Journalists, lawyers, and well-wishers also attended the conventions. In the convention, a four member presidium with Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as working president, three general secretaries, and 33 members of the executive committee was elected to run the new party. Thus a new regional political party in the name and style of Asom Gana Parisad (AGP) came into existence on 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1985 in Assam.<sup>8</sup>

### **C. The Asom Gana Parisad and Assam Accord:**

The AGP is a Union of leaders of different regional parties, youth organizations, and students' organizations of Assam. They all are of strong nationalist sentiment in their outlook. The AGP participated in eight Assam Assembly election held on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1985. The party contested in 105 out of 126 constituencies. It was successful

as the party won 60 seats it contested. The ruling party, Congress won only 25 seats while the United Minority Front (UMF) begged 17 seats. The AGP formed the State Government when they received support of seven independent candidates who later joined the party. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the CM of Assam. A significant aspect of 1985 elections was the AGP, as a regional party was able to form Govt. for the first time in State and earned fame as historic achievement in political history of Assam. However the emergence of UMF was also considered a counter product of the AGP. The AGP was voted to power in the interest of implementation of Assam Accord and aspirations of the People.<sup>9</sup> In pursuance of this goal the party took steps to increase foreigner tribunals and activate them to detect and deport the foreigners. The AGP Govt. established 18 such tribunals to detect the names of foreigners and 12 tribunals to delete the names of foreigners from electoral rolls. The AGP Govt. was able to deport 654 foreigners in its first five years term (see Table-2). The success of the party was putting Assam under special category state status. Assam could get central funding pattern into a ratio of 90:10 where 90 percent was grant and 10 percent was loan in 1989-90. The party was able to get berth of two ministers in National Front (NF) coalition Govt. led by VP Singh.

Table-2

Data showing numbers (No) of deported foreigners from 1985 to December, 2014

Year	No. of foreigners deported by IM (DT) Act	No. of persons deported after recognized as foreigners	No. of re-deported foreigners	State where deported (foreigners)
1985	21	00	1121	Bangladesh
1986	21	06	1578	Bangladesh
1987	114	05	2183	Bangladesh
1988	122	13	3093	Bangladesh



1989	127	21	2901	Bangladesh
1990	116	88	1790	Bangladesh
1991	523	101	2303	Bangladesh
1992	138	63	1943	Bangladesh
1993	37	46	1100	Bangladesh
1994	67	24	1104	Bangladesh
1995	27	33	1313	Bangladesh
1996	31	35	1161	Bangladesh
1997	106	46	1063	Bangladesh
1998	05	32	585	Bangladesh
1999	25	55	684	Bangladesh
2000	12	67	871	Bangladesh
2001	03	09	539	Bangladesh
2002	06	20	376	Bangladesh
2003	20	03	283	Bangladesh
2004	15	07	240	Bangladesh
2005	10	00	203	Bangladesh
2006	01	00	170	Bangladesh
2007	-	00	144	Bangladesh
2008	-	30	142	Bangladesh
2009	-	46	125	Bangladesh
2010	-	57	65	Bangladesh
2011	-	61	91	Bangladesh
2012	-	30	36	Bangladesh
2013	-	01	22	Bangladesh
2014	-	02	22	Bangladesh
Total	1547	901	27251	-

Source: Axom Andolon, 2015

The AGP showed interest in implementation the accord in its first tenure. But they could



not succeed much in this regard. AGP failed to come to power in Assembly election held in 1991 due to failure in the accord implementation. The AASU did not support the party in that election as the students' organization was annoyed over the non-implementation of the accord by the Govt. The AGP party was soon suffered factional politics within the party. The party could come to power in 1996. That time a pre-poll alliance of AGP,CPI(M), CPI, United Peoples' Party of Assam, Peoples Democratic Front, and Assam State Demand Committee<sup>10</sup> was made and formed a coalition Govt. led by AGP. The people of Assam gave the party second chance to rectify its previous failure. However, that time also the AGP became failure in immigrant issue. The AGP Govt. could be able to deport less number of foreigners compare to its previous terms. Only as many as 386 foreigners could be deported in its second tenure (see Table-2).

Many new developments took place in politics of the region during the last three decades. The Bodo Movement during the periods took serious turn. The movements led by the Bodo created Bodoland Autonomous Council (1993), Bodoland Territorial Council (2003) under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India, and the latest Bodoland Territorial Region (2020) after Accords made between the Central-State governments and the leaders of the movements. Many regional parties came into being after 1985. The BPF (2005), another regional party had been partner of coalition Govt. in Assam since its inception except a few months break till 2020. The AGP aligned with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and has been the ruling partner in the region since 2016. A high Powered Committee under the chairmanship of Justice, Biplob Kumar Sarma, former, Judge Guwahati High Court was constituted in July, 2019 by Govt. of India, Ministry of Home Affairs to study Clause-VI of accord under its custody (Prag News, 22/09/2020). The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Govt. led by the BJP passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in 2019 and it came to be known as

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). However, the AGP opposed the CAA in principle which sought to provide citizenship to the Hindus till 2014. Before the Assembly elections of 2021 regional political parties like Axom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), Rajjor Dol(RD) etc. have come into being. Both of the AJP and the RD fought the elections as alliance partners each other this time.

## **FINDINGS**

The discussion and analysis on foregoing issues reflect the following major findings:

- I. The AASU had been successful in bringing the movement on foreigners issue into a mass movement. The participation of people in the movement was surprising. The AASU had been able to establish itself as a mass support based students' organization. As a result of mass movement with huge public support the Central Govt. had to enter into an accord with the leaders of the AASU and the AAGSP. The Central Govt. had to give more attention to Border areas so as to check infiltration in the state.
- II. The regional parties like AJD and PLP had become parts of the AGP for the cause of the region. The AGP had come into being just before the Assembly elections of 1985 and the party formed government itself in Assam. The credit goes to the AGP which could be able to change the nature of the state politics thereafter. The trends of coalition politics emerged in Assam since the AGP rule and they all were stable. From 2006 the state witnesses five times of regular coalition governments may they were of either of free-poll alliance or post-poll alliance till today in the region.
- III. The AGP being coalition partner was able to convince the NF coalition Govt. to consider Assam as special status state. At that time the Central Govt. provided 90 percent grant-in-aid and 10 percent loan as special package for Assam which is marked as a remarkable achievement for the regional party.



- IV. However the Assam movement had been alleged for not being much success in case of implementation of the Assam Accord. The issue of detection and deportation of foreigners, the main agenda of the agitation has been considered alive issue in the state till today .The Central Govt. and the State Govt. both of them are accused by the leaders of the movement as taking indifferent attitude on this genuine issue of the state.
- V. The leaders of the movement showed their insincerity on some provisions of the accord .The Clause-VI of the accord reflects confusing and ambiguous which created problem in its proper implementation as felt by Tarun Gogoi, ex-CM of Assam (Table talk, Prag News 19/06/2020). Important leader of the movement like Pabindra Deka, ex-AGP MLA of Patacharkuchi constituency opposed the accord from the very beginning.
- VI. It has been observed that the leaders of the movement represented middle class character which had alienated them from mass people after assuming power. It was alleged that the leaders lacked proper principle and dedication of their responsibility in spite of having potentiality in them. They failed to provide good leadership as well as good governance in the state when they came to power.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The responsibility of implementation of Assam Accord goes to the Central Govt. as the Home Ministry is the nodal authority of implementing the accord as per its terms and conditions. The implementation of the accord depends on the interest and willingness of Central Govt. as the problem of immigration involved the native country on the one hand and foreign countries on the other. The Central Govt. needs to bear greater responsibility for the interest of the people of Assam in particular and India in general. On the other hand, the role of State Govt. is also no less negligible factor. The civil society can also play as watch dog with much interest and dedication on the issue of regional importance. The constitution should be viable basis of solution to the problem



of immigrants for satisfaction of all concerned in the state.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summing up, it is proper to say that the Assam Movement is mixture of both success and failure for many reasons. The issue of movement was genuine but accord made by the leaders after martyrdom of 855 innocent agitators was mistaken. The insincerity and split on the part of the leaders reflected in Assam Accord itself. The AGP has now failed to remain as a strong regional party as earlier, rather the party has to enter into alliance with other national parties for its future. Emergence of many regional parties has created challenges in competitive and fragmented politics of Assam. On the other hand, coalition politics has become regular trends in current political situation of the region. The national political parties either the BJP or the Congress will be the anchor party in coalition of Assam for many years to come. Thus the emergence of regional parties has contributed in the change of the nature of the state politics today. Students' organizations like ASSU have taken pioneering role in making people politically conscious on important issues like issue of immigration in the region.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Talukdar, M. (2019). Post Colonial Assam(1947-2019), Bhabani Offset and Imaging Systems Pvt., Guwahati, p.-117.
2. Ibid.p.-112.
3. Deka, B. (2015). The Design, Betrayal, the Assam Movement, Orchid Publication, Assam, p.-112.
4. Baruah, S. (1999). India Against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality, Oxford University, Press New Delhi, p.-126.
5. Talukdar, M. & Kalita, K.K. (2019). Swarajuttar Assam(1947-2019), Jagaran Sahitya



Prakashan, Guwahati, Assam, p.-259.

6. Phukan,G. (1996). Politics of Regionalism in North East India, Spectrum Publication, New Delhi, p.- 51.
7. Nath, M.K. (2019). Axom Andolan, AANK-BAAK, Guwahati, Assam, p.-175.
8. Bhuyan, B.C. (2006). Political Development of the North East, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, p.-67.
9. Gassah, L.S.(Ed) (1992). Regional Political Parties in North East India, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, p.-65.
10. Bora, A. (2007). Abirata Sangram, Maa Prakashak Gosthi, Guwahati, p.-110