



Six Years Assam Agitation and its Consequences: A Critical Analysis

Dr. Abdus Sobur

Asstt. Professor cum HoD, Department of Political Science
Rajiv Gandhi Memorial College, Lengtisinga, Bongaigaon, Assam.
E-mail: asobur786@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Assam is said to be called a land of red rivers and blue hills. According to National Register of Citizens (NRC) published in 2019, there is more than 3.12 Crores of population in the state. Different caste, community, language and tribes have been living in the state since long past. Before independence of India, the some parts of the state were administered with British High Commissioner. They encouraged large scale of migration from erstwhile east Bengal (now Bangladesh). Therefore people from those parts of undivided India came to the state for better livelihood and employment. The migration was took place in large scale which resulted demographic change of the state. Keeping the adverse consequences of such migration in the state, the conscious people of the state specially the student organisations and other non-political bodies raised the issue of deportation of illegal migrants from the state of Assam. This led to the historic Assam movement from 1979 to 1985. This is known as six years Assam Agitation led by All Assam Students Union (AASU). But after the end of the agitation, AASU decided to form regional political party which led to the emergence of regionalism in the state. The Article aims to analyse the Six Years Movement in Assam and its Consequences from a critical view points.

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Introduction:

Assam is said to be called a land of red rivers and blue hills. According to National Register of Citizens (NRC) published in 2019, there is more than 3.12 Crores of population in the state.¹ Assam is a land of multiculture and multi lingual with many tribes and sub-tribes living here. After attainment of independence, big challenges of infrastructure development were faced. The first chief minister of Assam Mr. Gopinath Bordoloi could successfully handle the situation and earned name and fame within the territory. He was able to achieve respect from all section of people of Assam. The last fifty's decade passed peacefully.

Assam is a land of multi-culture. The population pattern in Assam is Assamese Hindus 53.08%, Muslims 30.29%, Bodos 5.29%, Nepaliies 2.30%, Rabhas 2.04%, Karbi 0.98%, Santhals 0.99% and other comprises the rest but in Assam witnessed language movement led by nationalist groups in Assam.² The language movement spreaded misunderstanding among various tribes in Assam that led to creation of separate Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur provinces from Assam.

Causes of Assam Movement:

In 1978 the sitting member of Lok Sabha Hiralal Patowary from Mangaldoi constituency in Assam was died and by election was declared to fill up the Lok Sabha seat. During the electioneering process, about 70,000 names of suspected illegal Bangladeshi migrants were noticed in the electoral rolls,³ which caught the eyes of indigenous nationalist leaders of Assam. The All Assam student's Union (AASU) demanded that the elections be postponed till the names of foreign nationals are deleted from the electoral rolls. But government of Assam did not find concrete prove and logic to delete the names from electoral rolls only on the basis of suspicion and emotional sentiments. The fact was that AASU was creating extreme nationalist sentiments in the Assamese society against government's inaction of deportation of illegal Bangladeshi nationals. They made publicity about large number of influx from Bangladesh to Assam which will make the indigenous Assamese people as minority in their home land. At that time it was viewed that there are almost 60 (Sixty) Lac of illegal migrants in Assam. Rumor grasped the Assamese society about Bangladeshi migrants.⁴ AASU and other nationalist organizations expressed concern that due to Bangladeshi aggression, Assamese people must loss their home, property and security. This type of publicity created much havoc among the Assamese people and they extended grand support to the AASU to their activities and programmes. At the initial stage of the agitation, the activities were peaceful. But as the days passed, it became violent and to some extends communal.



Society was going to divide and faith, trust, universal brotherhood, harmony etc. were destroyed. President's Rule was declared to bring the situation under control. *Thousands of people lost their lives, home and properties. According to official report, 2191 people (unofficial sources claim it around 5000 people) lost their lives in Nellie (an interior place in Marigaon District in Assam).*⁵ Such other effected places include *Chauldhowa Chapori,*⁶ *Saikhowa,*⁷ *Samaria,*⁸ *Mukalmua*⁹ etc. The general people of Assamese society thought them as 'Messiah' of new thinking and bringing dynamic changes in the society. *The AASU leadership promised to make Assam as "Sonar Asom"*¹⁰ (Golden Assam) by deporting such suspected foreign nationals from Assam. But they failed to provide concrete prove against such suspected foreign nationals. Therefore the Assam government could not agree with AASU demands. This led them anger and dissatisfied and subsequently launched agitation to compel the government to identify and expel immigrants. *This agitation was run from 1979-1985 for a period of six years. So it is popularly known as "Six Years Assam Agitation". This movement came to an end on 15th August, 1985.*¹¹ With the signing of Assam Accord between union Govt. and AASU with P.M. Rajiv Gandhi was standing witness to it.

Growth of Regionalism in Assam:

*After the peaceful solution of the agitation, a convention of the people of Assam was held on the auspices of AASU in Golaghat on October 13-14, 1985 which decided to form a Regional political party in Assam by the name of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and elected Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as president and Mr. Bhrigu Kumar Phukan as general secretary respectively (Both of them were president and general secretary of AASU during Assam Movement).*¹²

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the largest ethno-regional party in Northeast India, is a product of the Assam Movement (1979–1985), which raised ethno-regional issues such as the illegal migration of Bangladeshis that it felt as threat to the cultural identity of the state. The party was formed on 14 October 1985 as an combination of ethnic organisations such as Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP),¹³ Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD),¹⁴ All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) with Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who led the Assam Movement, as its president.¹⁵ The AGP was influenced by the ideological bedrocks of these organisations. *As an ethno-regional party, it has been defending the interest of a specific community within a specific territorial location.*¹⁶ According to AGP, it is trying to protect the identity and culture of Assamiya middle class, which is in danger due to the illegal migration of Bengalis. In the formative years, the party was able to arouse ethnoregional consciousness among the people and continued to hold power subsequently. Before the formation of AGP, the All Assam



Students' Union (AASU), as an independent student movement not affiliated to any political parties, and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) initially articulated the ethno-regional interest. The Assam Movement originally emerged to protect the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and political identity of the Assamese people. The issue of illegal migration occupied the centre stage of the Movement, which felt that the identity crisis was due to migration from foreign countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. As a grave concern illegal migration affected the social set up of the Assamese society and annoyed the unemployment and insecurity problem in the state. The AASU took up the issue of migration from Nepal and Bangladesh and demanded the deportation of all foreigners living illegally in Assam.¹⁷ It contended that the backwardness and growing unemployment of the Assamese youth was due to “outsiders” that broadly include Bengalis, Nepali's, and Bangladeshis. It was widely perceived that the growing expectation of people could not be realised due to the inflow of these “outsiders”

*The six-year-old movement finally ended with the Assam Accord of 1985- the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) reached between the Union Government and AASU in New Delhi on 15 August.*¹⁸ As per the Accord, 1 January 1966 would be the base date and year for detecting foreigners and 1971 was for deporting the foreigners. All persons who came to Assam, prior to 1st January 1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularised. *Foreigners who came to Assam after 1 January 1966 and up to 24th March 1971 shall be detected and their names will be deleted from the electoral rolls.*¹⁹ Initially, the AGP promised to protect the distinct socio-cultural and political identity of the Assamese people, and also to find out solutions to illegal migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. Mahanta argues that ‘after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, the regional aspirations of the Assamese people got articulated in the formation of the AGP’. After the Assam Accord, the Assam Legislative Assembly was dissolved, and the Congress Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia resigned paving the way for fresh elections in the state. In the 1985 election, the first-ever election after its formation, the party manifesto promised to protect the political rights of the Assamese people and the implementation of the Assam Accord. Reiterating its commitment to protect the distinct socio-cultural and political identity of the Assamese people, the AGP promised to find out solutions to illegal migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. It was in fact an attempt to woo the Assamese-educated middle class towards the party. It also promised to implement the Assam Accord and put an end to separatist tendencies and strengthen national integration and bring about trust and good will among the various religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities of the state. Further, it promised the people of Assam to strengthen the federal structure. The ethno-regional consciousness generated by the Assam Movement provided a constructive atmosphere for the emergence of an ethno-



regional political formation called the AGP. When the AGP turned into a regional political party after the Movement, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) rejected the democratic path established in the Assam Accord. *The newly formed party contested Assembly election held in December 1985 and could won 67 seats to its capacity.*²⁰ *The first regional party of Assam assumed power on December 26th, 1985. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the youngest ever Chief Minister in Assam*".²¹

Consequences of Regionalism in Assam:

Meanwhile, insurgent activities led by united liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) were too increased. Social unrest and insecurity of life and property of people were on triggered of rifle. Law and order situation were breakdown. Existence of government was ceased to feel. His excellency, the governor of Assam Mr. Devi Das Thakur reported the union government describing total collapse of law and order in the province and accordingly *presidents Rule under article 356 of the constitution was imposed on November 27th 1990.*²² The first regional party of Assam then got another jolt in 1991 when it was underwent split by – Leaders like Bhriku Kr. Phukan, General Secretary, AGP and took new name by Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP).

*In the Assam State Legislatives Assembly election in 1991, the party could manage to won only 19 seats out of 126 and its split faction i.e. the NAGP secured only 5 seats.*²³ The main aims and objectives of AGP were to establish 'Sonar Asom' (Golden Assam), to eradicate corruption, red tape, favouratism, etc. from administration. It promised to deport illegal migrants from the soil of Assam and preserve the interest of indigenous people. It also promised to establish Assam's rights on natural resources and acquire greater autonomy for the state. But what a surprise! the leaders of the regional party who came to power with the slogans of unity, integrity and prosperity, was failed in all fronts and on all affairs. Corruption was so encouraged that instead of golden Assam, golden house for AGP leaders was built.

In place of unity, disunity was established, integrity was jeopardized by their activities because insurgency problem was raised to its extreme stage under AGP regime. "Criticism was labeled over AGP supporters in the manner that an AASU supporter remains in AASU banner in the morning; he turns to an AGP member in the evening and the same person become ULFA at night. These were common criticism against AGP regime. *Killing, kidnapping, torturing, extortion etc. were common situation in Assam during first AGP government regime between 1985-1990*".²⁴



The electoral set back in 1991 Assam Assembly election became an exemplary instance for AGP leaders. So, it promised good governance and requested people to pardon their past mistakes. People convinced and voted in favour of AGP in 1996, but in the second time of its governance, criticism against it labeled that the party was engaged in secret killings to root out ULFA. Many innocent people were victimized during the second phase of AGP regime, whether the party accepts it or not, people have come to believe that AGP is involved directly or indirectly with secret killings. The regional interest of the land was badly suffered. Employees did not get salaries in time due to financial crises. Illegal and fake appointments were given to the youths which established dirty image of the party among the voters. The overall image of the party got severe damages which led to its ouster from power in the successive elections of 2001, 2006, and 2011. In the election of 2014 regional political parties in Assam could secure a small share in the Government. But the influences of regional parties are under great threat because of their nexus with present Government.

Ethno-regional bigotry has only an imperfect reach among certain groups and communities and often fulfills the aspirations of middle class and elite sections. With a social base primarily premised on the educated middle class, AGP was unsuccessful to reorient its principles and mobilisation approach to accomplish cross sections of the society. AGP's exclusive dependence on the middle class, educated sections and sensitive issues of ethno-regionalism narrowed its outreach to take any other issues to mobilise people. It failed to adjust ethnic regionalism to development and to make sure the substance welfare of the cross sections of the society. Mobilisation on the basis of ethnicity and regionalism may bring short term benefit for a political party. The long-lasting subsistence of a regional party depends on its mobilisation of cross sections of the people and its capability to deliver good governance and inclusive politics. In other words, for underneath in a competitive party system based on democratic norms, the ethno-regional parties have to transform into regional parties through distributing goods to the people. Politics based on ethno-regionalism is a detrimental to democracy. *The growing ethno-regional awareness causes the emergence of class consciousness in a society and leads to further ethnic and sub-regional mobilisation of more such communities and revolting identity politics.*²⁵ In other words, it has been observing that regional parties increase ethnic conflict and secessionism by fueling ethnic and regional identities. Assam has witnessed such situation in the 90's decade with painful examples.

**Conclusion:**

The six-year-long Assam agitation started with the primary demand for identification and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Assam. But the AGP party failed to detect and deport those illegal migrants as because the rumors were in air but not on factual data and records. Those who were targeted as illegal foreigners could successfully able to prove their citizenship through various document check and verification process. Even the NRC which is prepared with rigorous document verification process compelled to include the names of those suspected migrants from Bangladesh. The asom Gana Parishad party has lost its popularity due to failure if proving illegal migrants as well as involvement in secret killings. Therefore, the regional party in Assam suffered a serious set back. The Government could not keep its major promise to deport illegal nationals from Assam and other promises like corruption free administration etc. Due to its failure, common people have again queued behind national parties. It indicates that regionalism is not always well and good if the leaders are not cleaned and people friendly. It can create havoc, chaos and integrity problem if it adopts anti people principles. AGP in Assam should take lessons from this and should work for better cause rather than personal benefits.

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