

The Journey of Congress in Assam: Post Independence Period

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ABSTRACT: The Politics of Assam like the national politics had been dominated by the Indian National Congress for most of the times after independence. But emergence regional politics, the gradual development of minority politics, consolidation of BJP, etc have made the politics of the state more fragmented, polarised and competitive. Due to the growth of these political alternatives, the one-party dominance of congress party started declining in the state. The party has faced several political setbacks till state assembly election held in 2016. In this article, an attempt is being made to analyze the phases of the journey of congress in Assam taking into account the State Assembly election held so far.

Key Words: Electoral Politics, Political Setback, Coalition, Political Parties, Congress, Assam

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Electoral politics of Assam has a great bearing in the policies of Congress. After independence, the people of the state started following the leaders of the freedom fighters who were mainly from congress party. With occasional breaks in 1978, 1985 and 1996 the party ruled over the state up to 2016 in spite of all allegations of misgovernance, corruption, etc. But due to the changing trend of socio-political environment, the hegemony of congress party over the politics of the state has gradually been eroded over the times in terms of its vote share, support base and seats. Assembly elections are analyzed in the following phases to ascertain factors, issues that have determined the political journey of Congress Party in the state.

Phase: I (1952-72) Congress Dominance

Trends of electoral politics of Assam in the first five legislative elections in Assam were more or less similar. In the first election held in 1952, Congress party won 79.56 percent of seats by a vote share of 44 percent. In the 1957 election, the voters started gaining maturity in terms of understanding and better judgment on the political issue compared to the first general election. In this election, Congress won 77.42 percent of total seats against their strong opposition. Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and Communist Party of India (CPI), with their stronghold, secured only 13.78 percent and 9.41 votes polled respectively.

In 1962, the third general election was held for state assembly in Assam. In this election, parties that are more political came into existence. Apart from Congress, there was PSP, CPI, Socialist Party (SP), Bharatiya Jana Sangha (BJS), All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) and Revolutionary Congress Party (CPI) in India. In this election, INC gained 48.25 percent of total votes cast and secured 83.87 percent of assembly seats. In 1967, eight political parties contested election in Assam. Besides several independent candidates, the political parties were INC, Satrantra party, Bharatiya Jana Sangha, CPI, Praja Socialist Party, All party Hill Leaders Conference. In this election, the pattern of vote and seats sharing among the parties and candidates changed to a large extent. INC secured 61.26 percent of assembly seats compared to 77.425 percent in 1957 and 83.87 percent in 1962 election. In this way, the monopoly of Congress Party in power politics of the state declined. In this election Congress ally was limited to 725 seats and opposition captured 52 seats, which was only 26 in 1962 election.

Table: - 1.1 Number of Seats Won by the Different Political Groups (1952 to 1972)

Name of the Political Groups	1952	1957	1962	1967	1972
1. Congress	76	71	79	72	95
2. Communist	1	5	-	7	3
3. Non-Congress & Non-Communist	8	9	1	11	5
4. Regional	6	10	14	7	1
5. Independents	14	13	8	25	10
Total	105	108	102	122	114

Source: Report on the First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Assembly Elections to the Assam legislative Assembly, 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1972, Election Department, Assam

Fifth general election to Assam legislative assembly was held in 1972. In this election, 9 political parties along with a large number of independent candidates contested the election. The political parties were INC (Requisitions), INC (O), SP and Communist Party of India, BJS, Satantra Party, forward Block and Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). The fifth general election of state of Assam indicated four different trends compared to earlier elections. The newly formed party under the leadership of India Gandhi received unprecedented support in the election. It secured 95 seats out of 114 seats. In this way, the position of the party was strengthened largely.

Table: - 1.2 Percentage of Votes Secured by Different Political Parties and Percentage of Seats Captured (From 1952-1978), Assam

Year	Political Party	Congress		Communist		Non Congress & no Communist		Independents	
		Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
1952		43.90	79.56	3.80	1.08	20.10	5.38	31.53	13.98
1957		52.35	77.42	9.41	5.38	13.78	9.68	17.76	7.53
1962		48.25	83.87	7.58	1.08	14.19	6.45	21.96	8.60
1967		43.60	61.26	8.68	6.31	11.68	9.91	25.93	22.52
1972		53.19	83.33	10.04	2.63	6.37	4.39	34.46	8.77
1978		32.40	26.98	15.09	17.46	31.35	45.23	21.10	10.31

Source: Compiled from data given by the Reports on the Assembly Elections (1952-1978), Published by the Government of Assam

Assam Assembly Election 1978 a Setback for Congress

All political parties, INC, INC (I), Janata Party, CPI, Communist Party of India (M), Revolutionary CPI, PTC, SUCI, RSP, AIFB, contested the 1978 assembly election in Assam and AIGL along with the independent candidates took part in the election. The Janata party, which came to power in the Lok Sabha election in 1977, tried to strengthen its position in the state of Assam.

The sixth state assembly election in Assam was held in the month of February 1978, Congress Party in spite of all positions could manage to be in power up to the election received remarkable setbacks in both Lok Sabha election in 1977 and state assembly election in 1978.

The sixth assembly election was significant from many aspects - More than 938 candidates contested the election in 126 constituencies. Congress party, Congress (I) and the Janata Party were the main political forces in this election. Two political parties the AsomJatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and Purbanchaliya Loka Parisad (PLP) contested in many constituencies. In this election participation of voters increased up to 66.86 percent. The INC, which had 95 seats in the last election, could only secure 26 seats. Janata Party became the single largest party by winning 63 seats and its ally PTCA won four seats. The INC (I) could win only eight seats out of its 105 candidates. Significantly left parties CPI (M) and CPI and RCPI had remarkable victory by winning 20seats together in this election. In this election, SUCI won two seats and PTCA secured four seats in 1978 election.

Assam Assembly Election 1983 (Lapse of People's Mandate)

During this period from 1979 to 1985 an unprecedented socio, economic and political development took place in Assam and there were a six years long agitation against foreign national. Under these circumstances, 1983, the election for state legislative assembly in Assam was different from all the elections held so far. This election was a boycott by the organization associated with the movement. Only INC (I) INC(S) and left parties contested the election. The polling percentage was lowest ever 32.74 percent in the election history of the state. The entire election was conducted with the deployment of armed forces. Congress came out as the single largest party in the 1983 election securing 91 seats out of 110 assembly constituencies where elections were held. The government was formed with Hiteswar Saikia as the Chief Minister who later showed keen interest to make negotiation with the agitating organization and handle the foreigner issue.

Phase: 2(Rise of Regional Politics ; Challenge for Congress Hegemony)

Assam Assembly Election 1985(Emergence of AGP setback for Congress)

The 1985 election was a turning point in the politics of Assam. After six years long Assam Agitation an **Accord** was signed to dismiss the erstwhile Government of Assam and to make the announcement of the election immediately which led to the formation of a regional party by the leaders of the movement in the style and came to be known as Asom Gana Parisad (AGP) after this accord. Under these circumstances, the election for state legislative assembly was held on December 1985. In this election, nine political parties participated along with a large number of independent candidates supported by AGP. The national parties particularly INC who dominated the election result with a big majority in the last five General elections in the state was pushed to the second position in 1985 assembly election. The emergence of AGP as a regional party in 1985 was a

significant event not only for the politics of the state of Assam but also for the whole of Northeast India. In the 1985 election, AGP contested with 105 seats and won 63 seats with a 34.54 percent of vote share. Another major development that took place in this election was the rise of United Front of Assam (UMFA). The growth of AGP and UMFA was significant as a regional party stood as a tough challenge to Congress.

Assam Assembly Election 1991 (Resurgence of Congress and Setback for AGP)

In 1991 election, both State Legislative Assembly election and the Lok Sabha Election were held simultaneously in Assam. Towards the later parts of AGP rule in Assam, the law and order situation of the state became unmanageable and under these circumstances, the president's rule was imposed in the state from 27th November 1990 to June 1991. The major development in this election was the split of the regional party AGP into two factions namely AGP and NAGP. Both were contesting the election independently due to the hardcore supporters of the movement. INC took the advantage and captured most of the assembly seats. In this election, INC secured 67 seats among the 126 constituency seats in Assam. AGP and NAGP could retain only 19 and 5 seats respectively in this election.

Assam Assembly Election 1996 (Return Of AGP)

The 1996 election in Assam had several developments in the political scenario. Both AGP and NAGP reunited together and this again strengthened the regional political party. On the other hand, Congress had to face a difficult situation with uprisings, corruption, indiscriminate use of state machinery particularly the police, and armed forces to suppress different anti-state activities in the state. In this election, there were 8 national parties, 2 regional parties, 5 state parties from the other state, 3 registered but unrecognized parties and the other number of independent candidates who contested. AGP had a social alliance with other non-congress in the election. It saw that most of the major issues of regional importance could not find their place in the manifesto of AGP in this election. Another important development that was observed in the 1996 election was that many independent candidates contested in the election in the name of some community and organization.

In this election Congress (I) contested in all 122 seats but won only 34 seats with a vote share of 30.56 percent, AGP who contested in 96 constituencies secured 59 seats with a vote share 29.70 percent and remained in the first position. BJP contested in 117 seats and won with only 4 seats with a vote share of 10.41 percent. There were 657 independent candidates out of which only 11 could return with a vote share of 17.41 percent. CPI fought with 11 seats and secured 3 seats with a vote share of 1.96 percent. CPI (M) contested in 10 seats and secured 2 out of them with a vote share of 1.94 percent. UMF contested in 19 seats and won 2 seats with a vote share of 1.12 percent. ASDC contested in 5 seats and won all of them with a vote share of 1.98.

Phase 3: 2001-2011 (Mandate for Congress, Decline of AGP, Consolidation of BJP)

Some special features characterized the 2001 assembly election in Assam, for the first time Asom Gana Parishad and BJP had an alliance for which AGP had to lose three of each earlier allies the CPI, CPM, and United Peoples Party (UPP). Congress for the first time felt the need for electoral adjustment with minor groups as AGP and BJP alliance presented a tough equation before the party. INC contested in the entire constituency and won 71 seats with a vote share of 39.75 percent followed by AGP, which secured 20 seats out of 77 constituencies it contested with a vote share of 20.02 percent. BJP, which contested in 46 seats won only eight seats with a vote share of 9.35 percent, remained in the third position.

In 2006, 997 candidates contested State Assembly Election in Assam. INC, which contested in 120 seats, won 53 with a vote share of 32 percent followed by AGP the regional party who put up their candidates in 100 constituencies, won in 24 seats with a vote share of 20.39 percent. On the other hand, both BJP and AIUDF won 10 seats each.

Congress fought this on the issue of peace and development. During the Congress regime, the economy of the state was restored to a normal standard, which was otherwise destroyed by the misgovernance of the AGP in the second tenure. The government employees and the people who did not get their monthly salaries for months and years started getting regular salaries under Congress's Pro-employee's policies.

In 2011 Assembly Election, Congress contested in 126 constituencies won 78 seats with a vote share of 39.39 percent that was followed by AIUDF, which secured 18 seats out of 78 constituencies it contested with a vote share of 12.57 percent. AGP, which contested in 104 constituencies, could return in 10 seats. Congress could win this election because of a lack of viable opposition.

The mandates in the 2011 election were clear and decisive as Congress was the largest single party. The Congress Party win for the third term in Assam was a rare achievement in a state in India where anti-incumbency was more often. In an election that registered a 76.03 percent, voters turn out. The congress managed a facile victory with the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi managing three consecutive terms emulating erstwhile Congress leaders.

Phase: 4 (BJP's Alliance with Regional forces, Anti- Incumbency, Wave for Change led to debacle of Congress)

Assam Assembly Election 2016

The 2016 assembly election held with a total number of 1990755 electorates, which is an increase of around 18 Lakh from the 2011 election. BJP, which contested in 89 seats for the first time, secured 60 with a vote share of 29.51 percent and became the largest party which was followed by Congress which contested in 122 constituencies won only 26 seats with a vote share of 30.96 percent. AGP contested in 30 seats secured 14 with a vote share of 8.14 percent, AIUDF contested in 74 seats won 13 with a vote share of 13.05 percent, BPF, which contested in 13 Constituencies, secured 12 seats with a vote share of 3.94 percent.

II. CONCLUSION

The political journey of the Congress Party in the state of Assam had been very smooth after independence as the euphoria freedom movement was there to a certain period. This was a phase of limited democracy when political privileges and participation were confined to elite sections of the society. In this period congress tried to reach out a particular section of the society for political promotion. Gradually participation of the people in the political process increased and the electoral process has become more competitive. With the emergence of different socio-political forces, the monopoly of Congress in state politics gradually declined. This trend became more visible in 1985 when for the first time a regional party government was formed by AGP. In spite of all competition, congress could manage to remain in power three consecutive terms from 2001 to 2016. But during this period congress miserably failed to take on different socio-political issues in the right direction. Towards the last part of the 3rd term, the government led by the party became almost nonfunctional. On the other hand, BJP undertook all its efforts to mobilize the people from the grass root levels by making alliances with potential socio-political forces of the state. It was further augmented by the formation of a government by the party in the Centre in 2014 under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The supporters started losing confidence Congress party because of the conflict among the party leaders. Now it would be interesting to see how the party recovers its earlier position in the days to come.

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