

## 'Natun' Regionalist Parties and Assam Assembly Elections (2021)

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### Abstract

*The results of the Assam Legislative Assembly elections (2021) were undoubtedly a big blow for the anti-CAA movement and the new political outfits, namely Rajior Dal (RD) and the Axom Jatiya Parishad (AJP). The biggest takeaway from these elections was the inability of the 'natun' regionalist parties to carve out a political space for themselves. The anti-CAA movement provided a platform for the two new regionalist parties; however, they were besieged with organisational challenges and a limited agenda. They failed to mount any credible challenge to the ruling establishment. This article concludes that the agenda of citizenship and illegal migration will remain on the political horizon for most parties; it only brings about limited dividends for the new parties. While it may not be the 'end' of regionalist parties in Assam, winning the electorate's confidence will be a substantial challenge for these two new parties to succeed.*

### Introduction

*Central to any analysis of Indian parties and elections is one fundamental fact: the political necessity of coalition building often transcends programs, ideologies, and class interests (Weiner, 1982).*

The anti-CAA movement in Assam had gained momentum, and the clamour for a *natun* or alternative party that would have helped secure Assam from foreigners and protect the rights of the indigenous peoples has certainly ended in a whimper. The issues that led to the formation of a regionalist party in Assam in 1985 continue to be prevalent even today; however, the *natun* (new) party failed to capitalise on it. The Assam Assembly elections (2021) reflect that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led 'Mitrajot' or alliance of friends has only strengthened their position and has not yet ceded any political space to these 'natun' parties. Furthermore, the electoral results only question the continuing relevance of the 'foreigners issue' in Assam. Divided

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into three sections, this paper focuses on the growth, aspirations and the role of regional parties in Assam along with their agenda, and fault lines. Additionally, it focuses on the the anti-CAA movement and its impact on the Assembly elections in Assam (2021). Finally, supplemented by the findings of Post Poll Survey-Assam Assembly Election Study (2021) conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS, New Delhi), it critically evaluates the electoral performance of the *natun* regionalist parties of Assam. This paper also analyses the reasons for the poor electoral performance of the two new political parties, namely the Rajjor Dal (RD) and Axom Jatiya Parishad (AJP).

### **Regionalist Parties: Growth, Aspirations and Role**

The strength of a democratic country is reflected in the robustness of the political parties and the goals it espouses. Under the first past the post system, electoral compulsions ensure that political digressions would come to the forefront and most political parties would fail to meet the expectations of the electorate. Most parties would 'compromise' or shift the goals to suit their needs in their quest to cross the line. Effectively, in a first past the post system, the political party's agenda, functioning and 'constituency' would be based on several permutations and combinations, effectively negating the concept of an ideal political party. A democratic polity is procedurally a level playing field for entry of all kinds of actors. However, the survivability of those actors, in the long run, depends on numerous factors. Critically, it not only depends upon what role a political party wants to play in the electoral battle, but its fortunes also depend upon how the electorates see a particular party. While political parties are well entrenched in a democratic polity, the emergence and success of a new political party largely depend on how it offers itself as a viable alternative to the already dominant parties.

National parties have a political advantage when compared to regional parties. Besides being endowed with more incredible financial prowess, organizationally, they are strong, hierarchical in nature, and deeply entrenched with regional leaders in most states across the country. The national parties also have formed governments in many states in India, either alone or through a coalition. However, even national parties have started focusing on a particular constituency of the society, which is identified in terms of religion, caste, ethnicity or tribe. As Suhas Palshikar points out, 'Parties are now increasingly trying to focus on specific sections or interests rather than claiming to be 'catch-all' parties' (Palshikar, 2004). Indian federalism has come under strain from various forces. The regional actors have raised their voices against all Indian parties, who represent dominant interests at the cost of regional aspirations.

Since the 1960s, in many states, both the national parties have been supplanted by regional parties (Ziegfeld, 2012) and 'regionalist parties' (Kailash, 2014). The critical difference is that certain regional parties are spread across states (Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Janata Dal (United), Rashtriya Janata Dal etc.). In contrast, regionalist parties continue to be confined to few pockets only (All India Anna Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Shiromani Akali Dal, Asom Gana Parishad etc). As Kailash notes:

*'Regionalist parties essentially make three types of claims. One, the so-called national parties are not addressing the interests of particular states, and they can do it better. Two, regional or state pride, honour, culture and so on must be protected. Three, they make demands on the Centre to relinquish power on certain subjects and areas (Kailash, 2014).'*

The strength of a regionalist party will vary according to the political exigencies. In states with two major regionalist parties, the national parties play an 'outsider role', State's like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir are some states where national parties support the regionalist parties. However, there is a role reversal regarding the Lok Sabha election and forming the government at the Centre. The regionalist parties assume secondary roles and become 'outsiders' and support the national party.

There are several instances where there is only one regionalist party in a state, e.g. Assam (Asom Gana Parishad), West Bengal (Trinamool Congress), Punjab (Shiramoni Akali Dal), Maharashtra (Shiv Sena), Orissa (Biju Janata Dal). The rise of such parties is often linked with opposition to the party at the Centre. In most cases, the rise of such regionalist parties is associated with opposition to the Congress dominant system at the centre and state level during the 1960s and 70s. At times, the emergence of such regionalist parties can be linked to voter apathy towards national parties at the state level. Often regionalist parties can be 'free-riders and will bandwagon along with the party that controls the purse. While there is no way to generalise the behaviour of regionalist parties in terms of alliance formation or their support for some agenda, what is clear is that in politics, the emergence of BJP as the major party has ruffled even regionalist parties under its camp. Ideally, no regionalist party would like to cede space to a national party at the cost of its political existence.

### **Regionalist Parties in Assam: Agenda, Fault Lines and Balkanisation**

To state that Assam is an 'ethnic garden' is an understatement because this garden has become a turf-war wherein different groups compete for limited resources, each constructing its own identity and history while limiting the claims of others. Assam was never linguistically or ethnically monolithic. Instead, different groups have come to this region and have amalgamated to compose what we know as Assamese society. Beneath the composite Assamese identity lies several fault lines – Assamese language versus Bengali language, Upper Assam versus Lower Assam, tribals versus non-tribals, Indians versus foreigners, *axomiya* versus *na-axomiya* (neo-Assamese), indigenous versus outsiders etc. Such fault lines are subtle, but in times of electoral politics, scarce resources and the emergence of new elites, its ramifications can be felt in different aspects of society. Scholars like Sanjib Baruah (1994) have stressed the 'micro-nationalistic' politics that seems to dominate the political discourse in Assam.

The issue of illegal influx and language politics became the dominant themes in the 1970s. The stage was set for a new phase of politics in Assam wherein regional voices became louder, and sections of the society silently hailed resistance to 'New Delhi'. In 1979, the AASU staged the first state-wide strike for deleting the names of 'foreigners' from electoral rolls. The issue of 3Ds- *i.e.* 'detection' of foreigners, 'deletion' of names of foreigners from electoral rolls and 'deportation' of foreigners received widespread support from various quarters in Assam. The formation of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, a conglomerate of youth organisations, AASU and Asom Sahitya Sabha led the demand for the 1951 National Register for Citizens to determine the issue of citizenship and detection of foreigners. Mass agitations became a norm for the next six years. The anti-foreigners movement or 'Asom Andolan' was supported by different ethnic and tribal groups, social organisations and student unions from across the state. On December 12, 1983, the controversial IMDT Act was introduced and passed in Parliament, and this created a major furore in Assam. The 1983 Assam Assembly elections that followed were violent and farcical as the masses boycotted it. Incidentally, the "anti-foreigner" movement also gained momentum in other states of Northeast India where 'non-Bengali migrants, including Biharis, Punjabis, and Nepalis, were targeted (Roy & Singh, 2009).'

After years of protests and agitations by students unions, intelligentsia, cultural and tribal groups, it culminated in the signing of the historic Assam Accord in 1985. This accord was a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed between representatives of the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement in New Delhi on 15 August 1985, which sought to bring Assam agitation to an end soon paved the way for state elections in Assam. The 1985 Assam assembly elections saw the emergence of the AGP as the party that was supposed to represent indigenous interests. While the AGP did perform reasonably well in tribal and Muslim dominated constituencies (Baruah, 1986; 1994), its support base continued to be somewhat limited; even at the height of its appeal, in the wake of the signing of the Assam accord and the formation of Assam's own regional party, the AGP could not work on its own win a majority of seats in the Assam assembly. Even in the Brahmaputra valley, its appeal was confined only to those areas where the Assam agitation had drawn support (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 25, No. 5 (Feb. 3, 1990)).' Much to the dismay of the electorates, 'when the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came to power, they appeared to be in no hurry to secure those safeguards, and the centre fell into a profound slumber as far as the demand for 'constitutional safeguards for the Assamese' was concerned (Gohain, 2008). The AGP failed to perform its key task, *i.e.* detect and deport foreigners. With the Assam Accord, voices of the tribal communities which were simmering, began to grow louder; the 'balkanisation of the state' had entered a rich phase wherein tribal groups had become increasingly militant in their demands for an autonomous homeland, especially Bodoland (Misra, 2000). The Lok Sabha Elections of 1996 and 1998 reveal that smaller ethnic parties could carve a support base for themselves. In the decade since 1991, Muslim alienation and tribal fragmentation have meant that

non-Ahomiya has begun to declare their native language, rather than Assamese, as their mother tongue (Borooah, 2013). Furthermore, the emergence of autonomous councils and non-territorial councils as a tool to placate tribal groups has further crystallised communities in Assam. Nearly every region in Assam is now witnessing some form of contention between communities that wield power and communities that are challenging the status quo.

The 2009 Lok Sabha elections was a turning point for the Congress in Assam, as it lost a major support base. Studies reveal that 'the Congress lost virtually all its immigrant Muslim voters; 78 per cent of them voted for the AUDF'<sup>3</sup> (Goswami, 2009). In the 2014 general elections, the BJP managed to make major inroads to constituencies in upper Assam, considered the Congress bastion. Tea garden community dominated Lok Sabha seats such as Tezpur, and Jorhat was wrestled from away the Congress by the BJP (Mahanta, 2014). The 'bandwagon effect' is now well deep-rooted amongst the regionalist parties in Assam. The AGP has always been part of the anti-congress coalition because of the historical baggage. Likewise, the AUDF is part of the Anti-BJP coalition because of 'ideological differences'. However, other regionalist parties like the BPF, which in 2011 supported the Congress party in Assam, now stands with the BJP at the the state level. Likewise, the Ganashakti Party, which had previously supported the policies and Congress government in Assam, now is aligned with the BJP. It is not surprising because smaller parties will invariably support that party that controls the purse at the state level in Assam. The BJP has now replaced Congress as the 'fulcrum party'<sup>4</sup>(Konwer, 2019), wherein regionalist parties have aligned with it.<sup>5</sup>

In the formation of the government at the Centre, regionalist parties' performance in Assam has gradually reduced to being that of an 'outside party' of a larger alliance. The outsider party performs three essential functions: First, as a pre-poll alliance partner, it indulges in a seat-sharing arrangement; secondly, through negotiations, it seeks to make its presence felt in the Upper House of the Parliament; thirdly, it seeks to give legitimacy to the policies of the government at the state level. The AGP and the BPF have been reduced to an 'outsider party' in the NDA alliance system. Likewise, the AUDF, too, has attained that status in the UPA alliance system.

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<sup>3</sup> AUDF was founded by Maulana Baduruddin Ajmal in 2005. However, the party was re-launched and got its current name i.e. All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) on 2nd February, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections (LSE), seats for the Congress party was reduced from seven to three; in contrast, BJP's seats increased from three to seven in the same. Besides, the vote share of Congress reduced from 34.9 per cent to 29.6 per cent in 2014. On the contrary, there was a significant rise (20.18 per cent) in the vote share of the BJP. The party which got 16.62 per cent of votes in 2009 LSE got 36.8 percent in 2014 LSE.

<sup>5</sup> The formation of UPPL under the leadership of Promod Boro and its alliance with the BJP brought about major electoral dividends for this new party. For more than 15 years, Bodoland was dominated by the BPF; the anti-incumbency factor was clearly visible as the number of seats for the BPF was reduced from 12 to four seats in 2021 Assembly election.

**Table 1: Performance of Political Parties- Lok-Sabha Elections**

Political Parties	1991		1996		1998		1999		2004		2009		2014		2019	
	Seats	% Votes														
INC	8	28.5	5	31.6	10	38.97	10	38.42	9	35.07	7	34.9	3	29.6	3	35.79
AGP	1	17.6	5	27.2	0	12.7	0	11.92	2	19.55	1	14.6	0	3.8	0	8.31
BJP	2	9.6	1	15.9	1	24.47	2	29.84	2	22.94	4	16.62	7	36.8	9	36.41
AIUDF											1	16.1	3	14.9	1	7.87

*Source: Election Commission of India*

**Table 2: Performance of Political Parties-Assam Assembly Election**

Party	2006		2011		2016		2021	
	Seats	Vote Share (%)						
AGP	24	20.39	10	16.29	14	8.14	9	7.91
AIUDF	10	9.03	18	12.57	13	13.05	16	9.29
BPF	-	-	12	6.13	12	3.94	4	3.39%
BJP	10	11.98	5	11.47	60	29.51	60	33.21
INC	53	31.08	78	39.39	26	30.96	29	29.67
IND. and others	7	8.23	2	9.17	1	11.51	8	19.89

*Source: Election Commission of India*

Lack of vision, poor administrative capacity, and corruption issues have stalked the AGP for quite some time now. There has been a steady erosion of its support base, and the BJP emerged as a powerful alternative to the Congress party. The emergence of tribal parties too did not help the cause of the AGP; the AGP has become not only the 'outsider party' of the NDA alliance at the Centre, and worryingly, it has assumed this role at the state level too.<sup>6</sup>

For the state of Assam, 2020 started tumultuously. The introduction of the CAA in 2019 in the Parliament and the vociferous support given to it by the Assam BJP unit had led to major heart burn amongst the vast sections of the people of Assam. It renewed the debate amongst the section of the society on the need for a new political party in the state of Assam that would protect the rights and culture of indigenous people. With state assembly elections in 2021, the decision had come for the anti CAA protestors to take the call- to start a new political party or to support those parties which support the anti CAA agenda. While 'spontaneity' had come to be associated with most of the anti-CAA protestors, political commentators, student community as well as other ethnic groups had stressed the need for an alternative political party that could genuinely challenge the imposition of CAA in the state of Assam and pursue the implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord in a more upfront manner. In general, the public in general, upper Assam in particular had accused the existing mainstream parties such as the BJP, Congress, and the AGP of betraying the cause of the '*khilonjiyas*' (as known as indigenous). The subsequent events on the ground led to the formation of two new parties; the anti-CAA movement was on shaky grounds.

### **Anti-CAA and Assembly Elections in Assam (March –April 2021)**

The importance of Duverger's law- "the simple majority, single ballot system favours the two-party system" (Riker, 1976) may hold in many parts of the world. However, in India, the emergence of parties is linked to certain socio-political circumstances. Even after 35 years of the historic Assam Accord, the vexed issue of '*bideshi*' (foreigners) in Assam continues to shape the state's political agenda. Indeed, as Goswami (2011) notes, the structural reasons that have produced regional parties in Assam have not disappeared. Rather these may be present in some areas even more tensely but in a dormant state. In the 2019 Lok-Sabha Elections, despite vociferous opposition from civil society groups and student union groups like the AASU and the NESO, the BJP-NDA alliance won 9 parliamentary seats in Assam. While there was little unison between the different groups that led the anti-CAB opposition, this greatly benefitted the BJP led NDA alliance. The transformation of CAB to CAA has renewed protests in many parts of Assam. While numbers continue to be debated and discussed across political and academic circles, the introduction of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019, has given a new impetus to the anti-foreigners movement in Assam.

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<sup>6</sup> Though there has not been significant reduction in the vote share of AGP, its seat share has reduced from 14 seats in 2016 to nine seats in 2021 Assam assembly election.

Opposition to the CAA comes from different quarters- students and youth bodies (AASU & AJYCP, KMSS), the *xilpis* (artists) of Assam- who consists of artists, members of the Assamese film industry singers and litterateurs, the political parties like Congress and the AUIF. Incidentally, even as it continues to consort the BJP, the AGP has filed a petition against the CAA in the Supreme Court of India. In the first two months of 2020, Assam has been gripped between two types of rallies-anti CAA rallies and pro-peace rallies led by BJP and the AGP. So, the ambivalent position of AGP on the issue of CAA has not only hurt its credibility, but it was subject to ridicule from all walks of life. Even its party members have raised slogans against CAA and party higher-ups in front of the headquarters in Ambari, Guwahati. Pressure groups like the AASU, AJYCP and the KMSS have criticised the Modi-Shah led government at the Centre and Sarba-Himanta combination at the state level. Though the AASU and the AGP have had very cordial relations in the past, 'AASU leaders have, time and again, been asserting the independent status of their organisation and have cautioned the AGP government not to take AASU's support for granted (Misra,1987).

Like in the past, the AASU saw itself as 'the custodian of Assamese civil society' (Baruah,1994); AASU has been at the forefront of this Anti-CAA movement. The violent anti-CAA protests in Guwahati soon paved for peaceful protests across the state. Famous figures like Zubeen Garg led them, and people in large numbers from all walks of life did join these protests across different parts of the state. Under these circumstances, the talk for the need for a new political party gained momentum; a party that would implement the Assam Accord and whose key agenda would be to prevent entry, detect and deport all foreigners. AASU General Secretary Lurinjoyoti Gogoi said, "We sense that there is a strong desire of the people to have a new political party. We will discuss this in our state executive and delegate-level meetings. We will form a new political party if people want. The rise of an alternative political force in Assam is inevitable if people want us to do so (The Times of India, 2020)."

Meanwhile, ahead of the 2021 Assam Assembly elections, Akhil Gogoi led KMSS announced a new political party, Rajjor Dal. The formation of these two parties came at a time when the Congress and AIUDF, along with the Communist Party of India, CPI (Marxist), the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) and the Anchalik Gana Morcha, announced the formation of the '*Mahajot*' or grand alliance. With less than two months for the assembly elections, an alliance between RD and the AJP was announced as events on the ground unfolded.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See the Sentinel digital desk (February 4, 2021), "Assam Polls 2021: AJP-Rajjor Dal Alliance Finalised: AJP President Lurinjoyoti Gogoi", <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-polls-2021-ajp-rajjor-dal-alliance-finalised-ajp-president-lurinjoyoti-gogoi-523400>, accessed on 05/05/2021.

### Mapping the Electoral Performance of the New Parties in Assam

When compared to the BJP<sup>8</sup>, the two new parties are in a nascent stage. For Palshikar, the BJP has emerged as the 'second dominant party system'. It has successfully woven the ideas of Hindutva, nationalism, and development (Palshikar, 2017); this formula has worked in its favour in most elections. The BJP is forever in an election mode; it never rests on its electoral laurels. At the ground level, its senior leaders and 'pannamukhs' are equally connected with the voters. Based on demography and voter composition, the leadership scrutinises the list of candidates and the seat-sharing arrangement well in advance.

In contrast to the BJP, with elections in the last week of March 2021, the decision of the RD and the AJP to form a 'united regional front' came in rather late. It indeed led to significant problems of seat-sharing arrangement, a limited manifesto and 'friendly' contests in many electoral constituencies. Again, the foundation of these two parties was based on shaky ground. The anti-CAA protests, which saw days of protests in Guwahati, were seen as imperative strides in protecting the rights of indigenous Assamese people. Musicians, actors, poets and essential members of the civil society came forward to highlight the dangers of CAA. It was expected that such groups would continue to play an essential role in supporting the new parties electorally. The urban middle class broadly welcomed the birth of not one but two new regionalist parties in Assam; however, in the political circles, the murmurs of a power struggle between the different leaders became louder with time.

However, the dearth of planning was further reflected in the inability of the R.D. to register itself as a party with the Election Commission; as such, all their candidates contested the elections as independent candidates. Lacking a common election symbol and with a limited agenda, the voters of Assam could not identify with RD or its vision. Moreover, the inability to fight elections under a standard banner and the incapability to produce a joint manifesto only reflects the state of poor coordination between the leaders of two parties. Both parties were organizationally undercooked and lacked the financial clout to challenge the BJP and its allies effectively.

Furthermore, the poor organizational network, and lack of leadership at the grassroots level also attributed to the poor performance of both the parties. However, so far as RD is concerned, the concentration of leadership in the hands of Akhil Gogoi who was in jail throughout the campaign period, did not help its cause. It became increasingly difficult for supporters of Akhil Gogoi and party personnel of RD to coordinate its plans and programmes with the AJP. As a result, substantial number of 'friendly contests' was witnessed in several Assembly seats. Assam which was all set for a triangular contest in the 2021 Assembly elections, but as results trickled (3 May 2021), it only

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<sup>8</sup> There has been no change in the BJP's seats share; importantly, when compared to 2016 assembly elections, their vote share has increased by three per cent in 2021 elections.

revealed the electoral dominance of the saffron party and the deficiencies of the *natum* parties. The BJP led 'Mitrajot' secured 75 out of 126 seats and it reflected the extensive reach of the saffron party. The electoral success of the BJP can also be attributed to the success of its 'rainbow coalition' and 'hyper-populist' welfare schemes (Sultana, 2021). The rise of 'beneficiary politics' coupled with the BJP war cries to protect '*jati, mati, bheti*' (community, land, and hearth) was enough to secure a second term in the State Assembly. The growth in the number of 'beneficiaries' is a prominent political coup for the BJP, for it enabled the government to masquerade its failures. Additionally, the narrative of 'threat to Assamese language, culture and identity from Bangladeshis' found resonance in most election rallies of the BJP. Polarising issues such as the NRC and the uncontrolled population growth of East-Bengal origin Muslims further reinforced this threat. With the AIUDF increasingly being identified by the BJP as a 'party for the immigrants', the 2021 Assembly elections in Assam was communally charged. Of course, during the election campaign, the dynamism and leadership skills of Himanta Biswa Sarmah were all too visible, who ran a highly polarized election campaign. The result was fruitful for the BJP; it consolidated the Hindu votes in upper Assam, northern belt, and the Barak Valley and the BJP secured a landslide victory. Subsequently, Sarmah went on to occupy the top seat of the Assam Government.

In contrast, the abysmal electoral performance of the two new regionalist parties, the AJP and RD, can be attributed to a combination of factors that could have been avoided through planning or a little cajoling. Protests movements led by the civil society groups against state policies do not necessarily bring an electoral windfall for the opposition parties. While it did shake the confidence of the ruling party, it was not enough for the voters of Assam to lose faith in the government. With a sample size of 3473 respondents, the "Assam Assembly Election Study - 2021 Post Poll Survey", conducted by the Centre for the Developing Societies ( CSDS, New Delhi), reveals that though it seemed that anti-CAA protests did spread to many districts across Assam, it remained a rather oblivious issue for the majority of the electorate. Furthermore, some of the key points that have emerged from this survey are:

- The anti-CAA movement was confined mainly to urban areas of the state, and most tribal Assam continued to remain unaffected by its cacophony. The Post Poll Survey reflects that only 47.6 per cent of the urban voters and 43.7 per cent of rural voters 'fully' opposed the CAA. The anti-CAA movement never became an electoral concern for most of the voters in Assam. The poor performance of the two new parties was its over-reliance on the anti-CAA.
- Despite all challenges, the BJP's support base in rural and urban areas is high compared to Congress and other political parties. The study shows that while 14.1 per cent of rural voters voted for Congress, 17.5 per cent voted for BJP. Likewise, when compared to Congress and other parties in urban areas, the BJP enjoyed a very comfortable support base; 16.3 per cent voted for BJP while only 5.3 per cent voted for Congress.

- In the post-poll study, it has been found that out of the total respondent, 26.6 per cent of CAA supporters voted for BJP. The study also reveals that for those who opposed the controversial legislation, 16.9 per cent voted for Congress, and 16.1 per cent voted for the BJP. Effectively the anti-CAA supporters were split, some supporting even the BJP. Essentially for some of the electorate, while they supported the anti-CAA movement, they voted for the BJP because factors beyond the CAA influenced their voting behaviour. The anti-CAA movement had no impact on the ruling party's vote share; instead, BJP's vote share increased further by 3.71 per cent when compared to the 2016 Assembly elections (29.50 per cent). Electorally, the two new regionalist parties did not benefit from the anti-CAA protests.
- While the anti CAA agitations might have affected BJP's image briefly, the onset of the Covid19 pandemic (March 2020) gave enough time to the saffron party to regroup and subsequently embark on a slew of schemes to woo the voters in Assam. The [Atal Amrit Abhiyan Health Insurance Scheme](#), wherein 85,717 people had received treatment, was broadly welcomed by the people of Assam. Additionally, schemes like the [Assam Orunodoi Scheme](#), [Arundhati Gold Scheme](#), Swanirbhar Nari-Atmanirbhar Assam Scheme generated enough goodwill, relegating the issue CAA to the background (Singh, 2020). In the past, the BJP was perceived as unpopular amongst the women (Deshpande, 2009); this party has now slowly revamped its policies towards women. The study also shows that the success rate of women-specific schemes is very high compared to other schemes. According to CSDS data, 16.8 per cent of the respondents benefitted from the scholarship scheme, while another 23 per cent benefitted from the Orunodoi scheme, and 18.5 per cent benefitted from the widow pension scheme. The survey also reflects the same and shows that women supported the BJP more than the Congress party.
- Organisationally and strategically, the performance of the new regionalist parties was poor. The Assembly Elections (2021), held in three phases, saw the RD and AJP contest in numerous seats, some of which were 'friendly contests'. The lack of coordination between the two parties is well evident to all. The AJP and RD fought a total of 120 seats in the assembly elections (2021), out of which 26 witnessed 'friendly' contests; considering the limited number of seats, it is an unusually high number. The seat-sharing formula, if any, was a dismal failure. The latter did not win a single seat and was second in 1 seat (Palasbari); the former won only one seat (Sibsagar) and was second in 3 seats (Bilasipara West, Dhing, Noiboicha).
- Backed by the KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti (KMSS), the 'RD' with the slogan 'think globally, act locally' was launched on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 151<sup>st</sup> birthday. Importantly Akhil Gogoi, during the launch of this party, was still behind bars on the grounds of 'sedition'. Gogoi's popularity can be gauged by the fact that he later won the Sibsagar assembly seat without ever hitting the

campaign trail. However, the electoral performance was far from commendable. The RD secured 6.4 per cent of the total vote share. However, there are three constituencies where RD stood second. In Bilashipara West, the party secured 19.09 per cent of the total votes; in Dhing 20.71 and Naoboicha, the party secured 25.47 per cent of the total votes. Besides, in nine constituencies, namely Karimganj North, Dhubri, Goalpara West, Jania, Jalukbari, Kamalpur, Chapaguri, Jamunamukh and Teok, the party came to occupy the third position.

- Given the history, the AJP, backed by two powerful student bodies- AASU and the AJYCP- should have performed well; it performed even worse than RD. The AJP secured 3.66 per cent of the total vote share. Out of the 26 seats where the RD and AJP had friendly contests in as many as 12 seats, AJP stood third position. However, it is worth mentioning that the combined vote share RD and AJP is less than the margin of the winning candidates.

The problem for this alliance was that it was focused driven by the anti-CAA agenda. While issues of citizenship and illegal migration continue to be emotive for the people of Assam, the electorates have become more demanding. As Ignazi (1996) notes, 'Voters no longer sign a blank cheque.' Beneficiaries of several schemes too voted in favour of the BJP. In a significant blow to the anti-CAA movement, before the elections, crooners like Simanata Shekhar and others joined the saffron brigade (27 August 2020).<sup>9</sup> This seriously hurt the credibility of the anti-CAA protests in Assam. It must be highlighted that after the elections, several artists, including Zubeen Garg, who had supported the anti-CAA protests, have been appointed brand ambassador for Assam in 'agriculture and allied sectors' by the BJP government (Taskin, 2020). Jatin Bora, who had left the BJP during the anti-CAA protests, rejoined the same<sup>10</sup>. Essentially, what the BJP has achieved is making a wedge amongst the cultural community. Notably, the results of this Assembly elections also revealed the declining importance of civil society groups who claim to represent indigenous interests. Lacking a towering personality, the opposition parties could hardly stand a chance against the might of the BJP. The anti-CAA movement, which was later abandoned by the cultural icons, received lukewarm electoral support from a member of civil society. While other mainstream political parties continued to adopt an ambivalent position on the issue of citizenship, it only strengthened the position of the BJP. So, when Assembly Elections approached, the anti-incumbency factor was largely absent.

<sup>9</sup> See the Sentinel digital desk (August 25, 2020), "Assam: Singer SimantaShekhar& 26 others join BJP ahead of polls", <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-singer-simanta-shekhar-26-other-entertainers-join-bjp-ahead-of-polls-497350>, accessed on 12/12/2021.

<sup>10</sup> See the Sentinel digital desk (August 12, 2020), "Assam actor Jatin Bora likely to rejoin BJP months after quitting over CAA", <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-actor-jatin-bora-likely-to-rejoin-bjp-months-after-quitting-over-caa-494787>, accessed on 12/12/2021

## Conclusion

After performing abysmally in the assembly elections, the leadership of both these parties should have introspected and chalked out an electoral strategy; instead, in July 2021, ahead of the by-polls, RD announced the termination of its alliance with the AJP.<sup>11</sup> In October 2021, by-elections were held in five seats- Gossaigaon, Tamulpur, Bhabanipur, Thowra and Mariani; once again, the opposition failed to make up for the lost ground. The combined electoral failure of Rajjor Dal and AJP and their 'unwritten' partnership with the Congress in the recently concluded by-election in the five assembly seats marks a new low for the opposition parties in Assam. The Congress which had controlled the Thowra and Mariani seats, the AIUDF which controlled the seat of Bhabanipur, were left annihilated in the by-polls; the new parties fared worse. The by-polls results reveal that despite the prevalence of challenging issues, the BJP continues to be electorally dominant.

The victory for the BJP in the 2021 Assembly election and the bypolls (October 2021) in the state of Assam can be attributed to many factors- the flaky nature of alliances and dismal seat-sharing arrangement among the *natun* as well as other opposition parties, which undoubtedly helped BJP's cause. In general, while the AIUDF has managed to retain its electoral base, the Congress had fallen to a new low- in the number of assembly seats and vote percentage. The demographic pattern and the first past the post system has greatly benefitted the BJP in Assam. Assam has a population of 61 percent Hindus; while the BJP got only 33.21 percent of the votes and went on to form the government, of the 31 Muslim MLAs elected to Assam Assembly, none belonged to the BJP and its allies (Karmakar, 2021). The politics of demography and the increase in the number of 'beneficiaries' brought about electoral dividends to the BJP and its allies. The construction of infrastructural projects- hospitals, roads and bridges, has generated enough goodwill for the BJP and its allies. The failure of the opposition parties to catch the ruling government on substantial issues such as inflation, the failure of the government to grant S.T. status for six communities of Assam, the growing interstate border tensions along with Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, issues of corruption and construction of mega-dams in Assam reflects their growing disconnect with the voters of Assam. Data from the CSDS reveals that the voters who have benefitted from government flagship policies, while continuing to raise concerns about 'substantive issues', have voted for the BJP; the anti-incumbency factor has not yet materialised. The failure to mark a dent in the assembly elections and bye-elections in Assam reflects that the CAA honestly ceases to be an electoral concern but continues as an emotive issue.

Despite the claim of being backed by 70 indigenous groups, organisationally, the

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<sup>11</sup> See the Hindu (July 4, 2021), "No more in alliance with Assam Jatiya Parishad :Rajjor Dal chief Akhil Gogoi", <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/no-more-in-alliance-with-assam-jatiya-parishad-rajjor-dal-chief-akhil-gogoi/article35131415.ece>, accessed on 04/07/2021.

support base for the RD was wafer-thin. When the moment of truth came, the numerous student organisations that had backed the AJP remained relatively silent while questioning the CAA. The student community did receive considerable support from the incumbent government-scooters for first division holders, complete fee rebates for higher education, scholarships, etc.

The new parties faced challenges from the incumbent ruling party, but other parties too would be highly unwilling to cede any political space to it. The fact is that any political party driven by only the 'anti-CAA' agenda in Assam is bound to have severe electoral limitations. Besides, the anti-CAA movement has been relatively weak in the Hill districts and virtually insignificant in the BTAD. The political future of these 'natun' parties will now depend upon their ability to reach out to constituencies beyond their comfort zone. If the issue of alliances with different tribal groups and the numerous tea growing communities are sorted out, the resurrection of regionalist parties in Assam does seem possible. Essentially, the new parties' long-term challenge will not only be to represent different sections of the society; its economic agenda and the political programme should also be broad-based, which can well appeal to the vast majority of the electorates in Assam. While the BJP may have been able to hide its failures, it has successfully projected its image as the only party capable of delivering public goods and protecting *axomia* identity.

In the future, any kind of electoral success for the new parties in Assam will largely depend on their ability to reconcile differences and spin out a narrative reflecting on the ruling establishment's shortcomings. Opposition parties will have to look at issues beyond the CAA and the NRC. Additionally, the voters today have become more demanding. The anti-CAA protests led by artists, singers, litterateurs, intellectuals and numerous other civil society groups did make the same more attractive. However, they ran out of steam rather quickly. Some joined the BJP, too, just prior to the 2021 Assembly elections. Therefore, in future, the participation of artists and cultural icons in any such movement will always be looked upon with suspicion by the larger community.

The anti-CAA movement in Assam is at crossroads; while it is yet to bring about electoral dividends for any party that has supported it, the irony is that it continues to be emotionally appealing for most of the people. With a limited agenda, parties such as RD and AJP are yet to catch the imagination of the ordinary voters. Based on the electoral performance of the 2021 Assembly elections, it may be too premature to predict the 'end' of regionalist parties in Assam. The AGP has become a secondary partner to the BJP<sup>12</sup>; the two new parties have yet to make a significant dent in votes and are far from setting the electoral agenda in the coming months. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections will be a fresh challenge for all the parties, especially for the new regionalist parties. Promptly, parties such as the RD and the AJP must overcome the

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<sup>12</sup> The AGP's vote share has further declined from 8.1 per cent (2016) to 7.9 per cent (2021) in Assembly elections.

coordination problems and create a common platform that seeks to represent different communities and have a solid political agenda; indeed, they cannot leave it too late.

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