

# AGP and the 1985 Election: A Turning Point in Assam's Political History

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## **Abstract:**

The emergence of AGP dramatically altered the political landscape of Assam. The era of single-party dominance by the Congress was replaced by a multi-party system. This shift also marked a significant change in the state's electoral trends. In the 1985 Assembly election, the Congress party, which had hoped to reclaim power by aligning itself with Assamese aspirations, faced a substantial setback. The Politics of Assam is under the dominance of the Congress party till 1980s. The voters of the state had given the party majority support since 1952. The party was able to show its dominance compared to other political parties. But in 1985 with the emergence of regional political party Asom Ganna Parisad (AGP), the political scenery has changed in the state. It has created a challenge to the Congress hegemony. The AGP not only creates a strong support base in the state but also create a greater consensus amid the Assamese people regarding the issue of immigration. However, the party cannot hold the people base, inability to resolve the immigration issue. This paper draws a comprehensive outline of the AGP as a regional force in Assam in the late 1980s. The present study also made an attempt to analyse and highlight the rise and decline of AGP in the state politics of Assam and the current trend of its political base. This paper aims to explore the evolution of AGP as a regional political force in Assam during the late 1980s. It examines both the factors behind its dramatic rise.

**Keywords:** AGP, Regional, Political Party, Election, Assembly, Lok sabha.

## **Introduction:**

One of the most significant features of Assam's electoral politics has been the rise of regional political parties, particularly their challenge to the dominance of the Indian National Congress. While the 1978 Assam Legislative Assembly election marked a turning point, it was the General Election of 1985 that held far greater significance. This election followed the historic 'foreign nationals' movement in Assam, which was led predominantly by the Assamese middle class. This movement culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord and the subsequent formation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in November 1985. The establishment of AGP represented a major milestone in fulfilling the political aspirations of the Assamese people. The newly formed AGP party was welcomed by the fourth conference of the regional parties of the North East region which was held at Dimapur on 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1985 (The Assam Tribune, 17th November 1985).

The emergence of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1985 brought a transformative shift in Assam's political landscape. It marked the end of the Congress party's prolonged dominance and ushered in an era of multi-party competition. Prior to this, Assam's political scene had been largely controlled by the

Congress since the first general elections in 1952. Voters consistently supported the party, allowing it to maintain an unchallenged position in the state's governance.

However, the political tide began to change with the rise of AGP, a regional party born out of the six-year-long Assam Movement led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and other civil society groups. The party was officially formed following the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985—a landmark agreement aimed at resolving the issue of illegal immigration, a deeply contentious topic in Assam's socio-political discourse.

The 1985 Assembly elections proved to be a turning point. AGP secured a historic majority, becoming the first regional party in Assam's history to form the government independently. Led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, a key figure from the student movement, AGP's victory signaled a strong assertion of regional identity and aspirations. The Assam Accord was the central issue during the campaign, and it served as both a unifying and divisive factor among political parties. While parties such as the Congress (I), Janata Party, BJP, AGP itself, and CPI supported the Accord, others—including CPI (ML), SUCI, and Janata Ulema-Hind—voiced opposition.

One notable feature of the 1985 elections was the absence of major electoral alliances, unlike previous elections in 1977 and 1983, which had seen various coalitions such as the Janata Party alliance and the Left-Congress (S) partnership. The voter turnout in 1985 was exceptionally high, reflecting the people's desire for political change and their support for the promises made under the Assam Accord. While AGP's initial electoral success significantly challenged the Congress hegemony, the party soon encountered internal and external challenges. A major factor contributing to its declining support in subsequent years was its inability to effectively address the immigration issue—the very issue that had propelled it to power. Public dissatisfaction grew as the expectations of meaningful action remained largely unfulfilled.

### **Objectives:**

The main objectives of the present study are -

1. To study the evolution of AGP as a regional political force in Assam
2. To analyse the features of 1985 election in Assam

### **Methodology:**

The study is descriptive and analytical based on secondary sources. The data are collected from reports of the Election Commission of India, Assam election handbooks, relevant books, journals, magazines, government and non-governmental reports, website and news papers. Internet resources also have been accessed extensively.

### **The AGP Manifesto and the 1985 Electoral Dynamics in Assam**

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), in its 1985 election manifesto, presented 29 pledges aimed at addressing Assam's regional challenges. The party committed itself to building a free and progressive society founded on secularism, democracy, and socialism. Central to its agenda was the full and immediate implementation of the Assam Accord, and it promised to work toward establishing a "Sonar Asom" (Golden Assam).

A major priority was the permanent resolution of the foreign national problem, which had long been a critical concern in Assam. The AGP also pledged to protect the cultural identity, language, and heritage of the Assamese people, which were perceived to be under threat. It strongly opposed the "step-motherly

treatment” by the central government and promised to demand greater state autonomy to ensure a "true federal structure."

The manifesto also outlined plans to:

- Develop agriculture, industry, and commerce
- End exploitation of weaker sections
- Promote local dialects, languages, and cultural preservation
- Ensure peace, unity, and security for all citizens
- Establish a corruption-free administration
- Eradicate poverty
- Emphasize economic development
- Protect minority and tribal rights

The Congress party in its manifesto laid emphasis on the implementation of Assam Accord. It also gave assurances to the minorities that their rights and interests would be safe and secure only under Congress rule. It gave importance on economic development. On the other hand the UMF viewed that if it voted to power, the party would form the government committed to the national ideals in collaboration with other likeminded representatives who are opposed to Assam Accord and those who are secular, progressive and democratic in their practice. It would also fight against racial prejudices, linguistic chauvinism and religious fundamentalism. According to the party the cut off dates for detection of migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal would be 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 and 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1976 respectively. The IMDT Act 1983 would decide about all cases of alleged foreigners. It also demanded that the persons, who entered and settled in Assam between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966 and 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 must be given citizenship rights. The party also gave importance on implementation of anti- poverty measures in right earnest and also on implementation of agrarian reforms and payment of fair prices to the growers of cash crops. It promised for equitable representation of communities in all government services, protection and promotion of all languages and cultures.

As regards the participation of political parties in 1985 election, the Congress party contested all seats except Lakhimpur seat. From 1952 to 1977, the Congress party occupied a dominant position in electoral politics of Assam whereas the Leftist and Rightist had either very marginal or did not take any position in Lok Sabha election in Assam. The Assam movement became a significant ingredient for the victory of AGP party and defeat of Congress (I). The people of Assam thought that they have been neglected by the Congress led Central government which induced the electorates to transfer their support from national to regional parties. They felt that only the regional party AGP could solve their problem of foreign nationals, which had been a burning issue, confronted by the people of the state. So they accepted the AGP as their alternative, who could preserve and protect their interest and identity. The party virtually could not complete its full term of five years. More significantly during its rule, law and order situation turned so worse for which the President's rule had to be imposed before its completion of the term. In 1985 election, the AGP showed an astounding performance. Table-1 displays the position of AGP and other political parties in the General election, 1985. It put up 107 candidates for Assembly election and obtained 64 seats with 35 percent valid votes polled. It received support from 7 independent candidates which raised its strength to 71. The party also saw a wonderful performance in Lok Sabha election. Significantly, it contested 10 seats and secured 7 seats with 33.55percent of votes. The Congress party, AGP's rival, captured only 25 seats and its voting percentage was 24.47. Thus it appears that the party was worse affected in Assembly election. In Lok Sabha election, the Congress put up its candidates on 13 seats and

won only 4 seats, securing 23.43 percent of votes polled. Most interestingly, it was the lowest poll percentage of the party in its political career since 1952. Another new born regional party UMF contested 56 seats and got 17 seats and voting percentage was 10.85. It got one seat (13.01%) in Lok Sabha election. CPM and PTCA secured 2 seats and 3 seats respectively in Assembly election. Table 1 presents the position of various parties along with AGP in 1985 General election. The BJP and CPI did not win a single seat either in Lok Sabha or in Assembly election.

**Table 1**  
**Position of AGP and other political parties in the General Election, 1985**

Name of party	Assembly Election, 1985			Lok sabha Election, 1985		
	Contested seats	Won	Vote percentage (%)	Contested seats	Won	Vote percentage (%)
AGP	107	63	34.54	10	7	33.55
INC	125	25	23.47	13	4	23.43
JNP	87	-	1.45	9	-	3.55
ICS	73	4	3.20	8	1	6.13
UMF	56	17	10.85	4	1	13.01
LKD	19	-	0.23	3	-	0.75
PTC	27	3	3.64	3	1	4.15
SUCI	6	-	-	3	-	-
CPI (M)	39	2	4.34	2	-	3.43
CPI	20	-	0.99	2	-	1.38
BJP	37	-	1.07	2	-	0.37
RCPI	13	-	-	2	-	-
UTNLF	13	1	-	1	-	-
IND	484	10	16.22	44	-	10.25

Source : Election Result, 1985, Government of Assam, Dispur.

**Main features of 1985 election :**

**Domination of regional parties :** In the 1985 election, a defining feature was the emergence of regional politics in Assam an unprecedented development in the state's political landscape. Although regional parties had participated in earlier elections, they had failed to gain significant support, particularly among the population in the plains districts of Assam. However, for the first time in Assam's political history, the electorate decisively voted in favor of a regional party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), marking a historic shift in political preferences. In addition to AGP, another regional party the United Minorities Front (UMF), which emerged as a counter-response to the Assam Movement also performed notably well, securing 17 seats with 10.85% of the vote share. This signaled a broader acceptance and rise of regional political forces in Assam's electoral politics.

**Poor performance of Nationals parties :** It is perceived that the general election of 1985 marked a significant low point for all the nationals parties such as Congress (I), BJP and Janata .

**Support base :** The AGP's rise to power with 64 seats witnessed that its support base had extended beyond the ethnic people of Assam. They sought to cast their votes on ethnic consideration. The AGP got positive response in the Assamese dominated constituencies like Kamrup, Nalbari, Sivsagar in Brahmaputra valley. Table -2 shows the districts wise overview of the response of voters to the regional party, AGP in Brahmaputra valley in 1985 election.

**Historic Victory for a Regional Party:** AGP won 67 out of 126 Assembly seats, forming the government—marking the first time a regional party had secured such a mandate in Assam. It also won 8 out of 14 Lok Sabha seats in the simultaneous parliamentary elections.

**High Voter Turnout :** The election witnessed an unprecedented voter turnout, reflecting the public’s eagerness for change and the political momentum following the Assam Accord.

**Table – 2 District-wise overview of the response of voters to the regional party AGP, in Brahmaputra valley.**

District	No. of seat	Votes (%) in favour of AGP	Votes (%) in favour of Congress	Votes (%) in favour of National parties including INC
Kamrup	10	56.85	15.89	27.26
Nalbari	6	68.75	14.02	17.23
Jorhat	10	64.17	29.47	6.35
Sibsagar	6	58.57	34.06	30.33
Sonitpur	8	34.52	28.06	37.42
Dibrugarh	12	39.08	39.95	20.97
Lakhimpur	6	49.32	20.34	30.33
Mongaldoi	7	33.48	13.56	52.96
Dhubri	7	15.92	23.18	60.89
Nagaon	14	38.96	16.38	44.67
Barpeta	8	42.88	3.48	52.78
Kokrajhar	5	7.17	24.37	68.45
Goalpara	7	41.43	24.37	45.11

Source : Election Report, 1985, Government of Assam, Dispur.

**Youthful Leadership :** Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, just 33 years old, became the youngest Chief Minister in India at the time. The AGP leadership mainly consisted of former student leaders and activists from the Assam Movement.

**Assam Accord as Central Issue :** The Assam Accord (1985), signed between the Government of India and leaders of the Assam Movement, was the key election issue. Political parties were broadly divided into two camps:

1. Supporters of the Accord: AGP, Congress (I), BJP, CPI, Janata Party
2. Opponents: CPI (ML), SUCI, Janata Ulema-Hind

**Expression of Regional Sentiment :** The election was viewed as a mandate for regional pride and identity, with voters supporting a party that promised to address local issues like illegal immigration, cultural protection, and autonomy.

The 1985 election further highlighted the growing support for regional parties across various demographic and geographic segments of Assam. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) received strong responses even in Muslim-dominated areas of Jorhat. Notably, AGP captured several traditional Congress strongholds such as Barpeta, Nagaon, Mangaldoi, and Kaliabor. These constituencies had consistently supported Congress in previous elections, but in 1985, the electorate decisively shifted their support to AGP, reflecting a significant transformation in political loyalties.

Meanwhile, the United Minorities Front (UMF) found substantial backing in areas dominated by religious and linguistic minorities. For example, in Dhubri district, which has the largest concentration of religious minorities and comprises seven Assembly constituencies (with elections held in six), UMF candidates won three seats. In Nagaon, another Muslim-majority district, the party performed remarkably well, winning six out of 14 Assembly segments. Similarly, in Goalpara district, UMF secured five out of seven seats, demonstrating its solid base among minority communities. In Kokrajhar, a Bodo-majority district, candidates from the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) emerged victorious, reflecting the ethnic and regional aspirations of the Bodo people.

However, in the tea garden areas such as Dibrugarh and Sonitpur, the Congress Party performed comparatively better. In Dibrugarh, AGP and Congress were evenly matched, each winning six out of 12 seats. Despite the broader regional wave, Congress managed to retain its foothold, showcasing Dibrugarh's continued support for the party since the 1952 general elections. In Sonitpur district, which comprises eight Assembly segments, the Congress retained three seats and won the Lok Sabha seat. But in the constituencies of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, the AGP emerged as the preferred choice. In Lakhimpur, which has six Assembly segments, AGP won all six seats, as well as the Lok Sabha seat. A similar trend was seen in Sibsagar, where AGP swept all six Assembly segments and claimed the Sibsagar Lok Sabha seat, further affirming its grassroots popularity.

This analysis reveals that in tea garden-dominated regions, the electorate was evenly divided between AGP and Congress, with both parties managing to sustain their respective support bases. Broadly, however, the Assamese electorate embraced the AGP as a relevant and powerful regional force capable of protecting their identity and interests. The 1985 election marked a clear rejection of national parties in favor of regional alternatives, signaling a profound shift in the political consciousness of the people of Assam.

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