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Regional Aspirations in North East India: the Experience of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Regionalism, as a political ideology is gaining ground in India. If we go back to history, we will find that, after the regional movements in the South and in Punjab, the movement in Assam can be counted as one of the oldest regional movements in the country. The paradigm shift that the regional movements have brought about is to change the mindset of the people so as to facilitate a localized, pin-pointed outlook to political problem-solving. At this juncture, when most states have felt the need for regional parties to raise their respective problems, Assam has reduced the regionalists into almost non-entities, with less than one-twelfth of the total seats in the legislature. AGP is now the fourth largest party, after the Congress, AIUDF and the BPF. The Assam Movement was instrumental in bringing about a surge of regional ambitions in the eyes of the common man. That it instilled in an ordinary man ability to dream about regional prosperity is the biggest contribution of the movement. The inability to follow up the dreams that were created, and a failure of the political class who were entrusted to convert those dreams and idealism into reality has really dashed hopes and lofty dreams. The society in Assam seems to settle down, and seems content for much lesser. Regionalism cannot only be confined to formation of a political party and its existence, it has to be a broader, a more widespread phenomenon. The problem arises when certain groups assert their authority over it, when the actual authority should lie with the people. The soul of Assam lies in a regional ideology, where people come out of their differences in customs and celebrate their diversity. The concept 'Son of Soil' plays an important role in the process of growing the sense of regionalism in North Eastern states particularly Assam. As a result of growing regionalism, various movements occurred for the separate autonomy within Assam in different times.

KEYWORDS Regionalism, Agitations, Political Party, Son of Soil, Autonomy.

Introduction:
1980s may be seen as a period of rising regional aspirations for autonomy, often outside the framework of the Indian Union. These movements frequently involved armed assertions by the people, their repression by the government, and a collapse of the political and electoral processes. It is also not surprising that most of these struggles were long drawn and concluded in negotiated settlements or accords between the central government and the groups leading the movement for autonomy. The accords were reached after a process of dialogue that aimed to settle contentious issues within the constitutional framework. Yet the journey to the accord was always tumultuous and often violent.

Objectives:
1. This article made an attempt to analyze the history of Assamese regional, growing sense of Assamese regional and its consequences.
2. An attempt has been made to evaluate the contribution of sense of Assamese regionalism to the socio-political scenario of Assam.

Conceptual Framework of Regionalism:
To understand regionalism, we need to know various dimensions of the region. Region as a geographical unit, is delimited form each other. Region as a social system, reflects the relation between different human beings and groups. Regions are an organized cooperation in cultural, economic, political or military fields. Regionalism is an ideology and political movement that seeks to advance the causes of regions. As a process it plays role within the nation as well as outside the nation i.e. at international level. Both types of regionalism have different meaning and have positive as well as negative impact on society, polity, diplomacy, economy, security, culture, development, negotiations, etc. At the international level, regionalism refers to transnational cooperation to meet a common goal or to resolve a shared problem or it refers to a group of countries such as-Western Europe, or Southeast Asia, linked by geography, history or economic features. Used in this sense, regionalism refers to attempts to reinforce the links between these countries economic features. The second meaning of the term is regionalism at national level refers to a process in which sub-state actors become increasingly powerful; power devolves from central level to regional governments. These are the regions within country, distinguished in culture, language and other socio-cultural factors.

In politics regionalism is a political ideology that focuses on the notional or normative interests of a particular region, group of regions or another sub national entity. These may be delineated by political divisions, administrative divisions, cultural boundaries, linguistics regions, and religious geography among others. Regionalists aim at increasing the political power and influence available to all or some residents of a region. Regionalist demands occur in "strong" forms, such as sovereignty, separatism, secession, and independence, as well as more moderate campaigns for greater autonomy (such as states' rights, decentralization or devotion). Proponents of regionalism usually claim that strengthening the governing bodies and political powers within a region, at the expense of a central, national government, will benefit local populations by improving regional or local economies, in terms of better fiscal responsibility, regional development, allocation of resources, implementation of local policies and plans, competitiveness among regions and, ultimately, the whole country. For some of its opponents regionalism is associated with particularism or anti -universalism, while for others it is a rival form of nationalism.

Discussion:
India is an inhabiting place of various class, caste, linguistics and religious people and it contains both hilly and plain areas. Indian nation shall not deny the rights of different regions and linguistics groups to retain their culture. We decided to live a

united social life without losing the distinctiveness of the numerous cultures that constituted it. Indian nationalism sought to balance the principles of unity and diversity. But in some parts of the country, sometimes the regional aspirations and demands of separate statehood have been trying to challenge the principle of '**Unity among Diversity'**. Along with the other parts of the country, regional aspirations in the North-East reached a turning point in1980s. This region now consists of seven States, also referred to as the **'Seven Sisters'**. The region has only 4 per cent of the country's population but about twice as much share of its area. A small corridor of about 22 kilometers connects the region to the rest of the country. Otherwise the region shares boundaries with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and serves as India's gateway to South East Asia. The region has witnessed a lot of change since 1947. Tripura, Manipur and Khasi Hills of Meghalaya were erstwhile Princely States which merged with India after Independence. The entire region of North-East has undergone considerable political reorganization. Nagaland State was created in 1960; Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura in 1972 while Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became separate States only in 1986. The Partition of India in 1947 had reduced the North-East to a land locked region and affected its economy. Cut off from the rest of India, the region suffered neglect in developmental terms. Its politics too remained insulated. At the same time, most States in this region underwent major demographic changes due to influx of migrants from neighboring States and countries.

The isolation of the region, its complex social character and its backwardness compared to other parts of the country have all resulted in the complicated set of demands from different states of the North-East. The vast international border and weak communication between the North-East and the rest of India have further added to the delicate nature of politics there. Three issues dominate the politics of North-East: **demands for autonomy, movements for secession,** and **opposition to 'outsiders'**. Major initiatives on the first issue in the 1970s set the stage for some dramatic developments on the second and the third in the 1980s. **Regionalism in Assam** Regionalism has been playing an influential role in the political process of India. As India is a **'diverse'** society of heterogeneous regional specialties, so the regional urges are bound to be reflected in the political process. However, it emanates, essentially from the socio-cultural, economic and political dimension. Assamese regionalism since the British rule has been pioneering the interests of the Assamese middle class. But in the post-independence period, the Central Government's policies of economic disparity made the Assamese elite much disappointed. Importantly, illegal foreign national issue gave the Assamese regionalism a popular and emotive dimension. The Assamese middle class could successfully project the sentiment of the Assamese people and run the foreign national movement for long six years. The movement ended after the signing of the historical **'Assam Accord'**. Thus after the Accord, the leaders of the Movement gave birth to a regional party named **'Asom Gana Parishad'**. After the emergence of this party, the popularity and dominance of the national parties experienced a heavy blow during the Assembly elections held in 1985 and 1996 in the State. On the contrary, the Assamese people rejected the regional parties and favoured the Indian National Congress (INC) as alternative in the 1991 and 2001 Assembly elections. However, regional party governments in the state have witnessed fulfillment of personal interests of the leaders in power, rather than the common regional interests. The regional party (AGP) consequently split down. Secondly, Assamese regionalism created a new type of ethnic awakening among different ethnic groups. Regional party governments in the state had failed to influence the Central Government to implement the **'Assam Accord'** in letter and spirit. **Movements against Outsiders** The large scale migration into the North-East gave rise to a special kind of problem that pitted the 'local' communities against people who were seen as 'outsiders' or migrants. These latecomers, either from India or abroad are seen as encroachers on scarce resources like land and potential competitors to employment opportunities and political power. This issue has taken political and sometimes violent form in many States of the North-East. The Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985 is the best example of such movements against **'outsiders'**. The Assamese suspected that there were huge numbers of illegal Bengali Muslim settlers from Bangladesh. They felt that unless these foreign nationals are detected and deported they would reduce the indigenous Assamese into a minority. There were other economic issues too. There was widespread poverty and unemployment in Assam despite the existence of natural resources like oil, tea and coal. It was felt that these were drained out of the State without any commensurate benefit to the people. In 1979, the **All Assam Students' Union (AASU)**, a student's 'group not affiliated to any party, led an anti-foreigner movement. The movement was against illegal migrations, against domination of Bengalis and other outsiders, and against faulty voters' register that included the names of lakhs of immigrants. The movement demanded that all outsiders who had entered the State after 1951should be sent back. The agitation followed many novel methods and mobilized all sections of Assamese people, drawing support across the State. It also involved many tragic and violent incidents leading to loss of property and human lives. The movement also tried to blockade the movement of trains and the supply of oil from Assam to refineries in Bihar. Eventually after six years of turmoil, the Rajiv Gandhi-led government entered into negotiations with the **AASU** leaders, leading to the signing of an accord in 1985. According to this agreement those foreigners who migrated into Assam during and after Bangladesh war and since, were to be identified and deported. With the successful completion of the movement, the **AASU** and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad organized themselves as a regional Political party called Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). It came to power in 1985 with the promise of resolving the foreign national problem as well as to build a '**Golden Assam'**. Assam accord brought peace and changed the face of politics in Assam, but it did not solve the problem of immigration. The issue of the **'outsiders'** continues to be alive issue in the politics of Assam and many other places in the North-East. This problem is particularly acute, for example, in Tripura as the original inhabitants have been reduced to being minority in their own land. The same feeling informs the hostility of the local population to Chakma refugees in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. **The Concept of 'Son of Soil' 'Son of Soil'** doctrine explains a form of regionalism, which is discussion since 1950.According to it, a state specifically, belongs to the main linguistic group inhabiting it or that the states constitutes the exclusive homeland of its main language speakers who are the son of the soil or local residence. The concept **'Son of Soil'** plays an important role in the process of growing the sense of regionalism in North Eastern states particularly Assam. **Demands for Autonomy**

At independence the entire region except Manipur and Tripura comprised the State of Assam. Demands for political autonomy arose when the non-Assamese felt that the Assam government was imposing Assamese language on them. There were opposition and protest riots throughout the State. Leaders of the major tribal communities wanted to separate from Assam. They formed the Eastern India Tribal Union which later transformed into a more comprehensive All Party Hill Leaders Conference in 1960. They demanded a tribal State to be carved out of Assam. Finally instead of one tribal State, several States got carved out of Assam. At different points of time the Central Government had to create Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh out of Assam. Tripura and Manipur were upgraded into States too. The reorganization of the North-East was completed by 1972 which upgraded the union territories of Manipur and Tripura, and the Sub-State of Meghalaya to full statehood, and Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (then Tribal Districts) to Union Territories. The later became states in 1986.Goa (based on Konkani language, 8th Schedule), which became a state in 1987, was the sole exception. But this was not the end of autonomy demands in this region. In Assam, for example, communities like the **Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas** wanted separate States. They worked

for this demand by mobilizing public opinion and popular movement as well as through insurgency. Often the same area was claimed by more than one community. It was not possible to go on making smaller and yet smaller States. Therefore, some other provisions of our federal set up were used to satisfy their autonomy demands while remaining in Assam. Karbis and Dimasas have been granted autonomy under District Councils while Bodos were recently granted Autonomous Council. **Demand of Bodoland within Assam** The Bodo agitation is led by the Assam Bodo Students' Union which is demanding a separate state and has restored to wide scale violence and series of crippling bands to pursue their demands. One of the basic reasons Assam agitation is because of the expansion of education particularly higher education but not industrialization and other job creating institutions is increasing the army of educated youths in the backward regions. These frustrated young men are allured by the movement against the inflow of people from other countries and states. On the other hand these unemployed youths are also attracted by the caste, communal and sectional agitations fighting for the protection of rights of sectarian lines. So from the above discussions and descriptions we can receive a general perception on the status and impact of regionalism in Assam. Regionalism in North-East India particularly cannot only be confined to formation of a political party and its existence, it has to be a broader, a more widespread phenomenon. The problem arises when certain groups assert their authority over it, when the actual authority should lie with the people. Demand of separate autonomy and separate statehood are at the result of regionalism in Assam. The soul of Assam lies in a regional ideology, where people come out of their differences in customs and celebrate their diversity. A few unsuccessful leaders may definitely diminish the movement, but the ideology cannot be destroyed. It might take time, but it will assert itself in some form or the other in the future. If the AGP is wiser now, it might still be relevant, and if it is not, the aspirations may manifest themselves in some form or the other. It is just a matter of how much longer one has to wait for that to happen.

Conclusion:

Regional aspiration in North Eastern states of Indian Union is not a new phenomenon. Historical facts, agitations provide us adequate prove of the validity of the sense of regionalism in North Eastern part of India. From discussions and descriptions on the historical background and regional aspiration in North East India with special reference to the state of Assam, we may say that along with the other parts of Indian union sense of regionalism as well as demands for separation from the India influence the socio-political scenario of mainstream administration in different times and situations. Assamese regionalism deeply influences its socio-political scenario. AGP, a regional political party emerged in 1985 only because of the sense of regionalism among the Assamese people which was committed to fulfill the regional interests of Assam. However, regional party governments in the state have witnessed fulfillment of personal interests of the leaders in power, rather than the common regional interests. The regional party (AGP) consequently split down. Assamese regionalism created a new type of ethnic awakening among different ethnic groups. Regional party governments in the state had failed to influence the Central Government to implement the **'Assam Accord'** in letter and spirit. Apart from Assamese regionalism, some groups have been demanding separate statehood from Assam whereas some are demanding autonomous status within Assam and for which a number of agitations, bandhs, Strikes, hunger strikes are occurred by these groups to fulfill their demands. These types of movements and strikes always influence the socio-economic as well as political environment of Assam.

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