

Fragmentation of the Political Parties: A Study of Asom Gana Parishad in Assam

Dr. Ila Deka

Assistant Professor, PNGB Govt. Model College, Kakopathar

Email id: iladeka90@gmail.com

Abstract

A political party is a very important instrument of a democracy. A democratic country cannot just survive without the existence of political parties. Political parties are essentially some organized groups. They have a common purpose to contest elections and to capture the power of the state and its government so that it can direct the country's development process in line with their own ideological orientations and to formulate policies in accordance with their party manifestoes. It is natural to occur conflicts within political parties from time to time due to different perceptions or opinions on political issues, as well as due to personal rivalries for positions, power and influence. Conflicts are inevitable within political parties and they are also regarded as legitimate, but at the same time, they must be argued out in a correct manner. There is always a concurrence of power and influence within political parties which is a part of their everyday business. There are lots of sources or reasons which contribute towards creating conflicts among political parties. However, these conflicts must be resolved through democratic and transparent procedures.

The AGP is one of the most important regional political parties of the state of Assam. The party came to power in the state for two complete terms. It was also a part of the National Front Government from December 1989 to November 1990. The party was an important coalition partner of V.P Singh, H.D. Deve Gowda and Indar Kumar Gujral Coalition Government. The party faced splits for numerous times because of differences among its leaders. This paper has made an attempt to throw some light on the conflicts of political parties specially of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam.

Key words: political party, conflict, conflict resolution, AGP

Introduction

It is natural to occur conflicts within political parties from time to time due to different perceptions or opinions on political issues, as well as due to personal rivalries for positions, power and influence. In this regard Rubin et al defined conflicts as a prescribed divergence of interests or beliefs that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously. Conflict can manifest itself in many forms. Some of those may be violent and create pain and may lead to suffering of both parties in conflict and to other people who may be directly or indirectly involved in the conflict due to its spillover effects. Conflicts are inevitable within political parties and they are also regarded as legitimate, but at the same time, they must be argued out in a correct manner. There is always a concurrence of power and influence within political parties which is a part of everyday business. There are lots of sources or reasons

which contribute towards creating conflicts among political parties. However, these conflicts must be resolved through democratic and transparent procedures.

Objectives of the study

The proposed study deals with the following objectives-

- 1) To analyze the sources of conflicts of political parties
- 2) To study the internal conflicts that occurred in Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam

Methodology

The required information is obtained from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspaper and internet source and so on. The method of descriptive analysis is employed to find out the answers of the research objectives proposed in the paper.

Sources of conflicts in Political Parties

Though conflicts are known as inevitable in political parties, however, there are some sources which contribute to such conflicts. The following are the causes of conflicts in political parties-

- 1) Lack of information and misinformation, as well as differing views on data lead to conflict. The interpretation and assessment of that data is an important source of conflict among the members of a political party.
- 2) Relationships among the members of a political party are also a source of conflict among themselves. Strong emotion, stereotypes, miscommunication and recitative negative behavior always leads to conflict.
- 3) Ideological differences and differing standards on evaluation of idea or behavior, different value system among the party members is also a source of conflict among the members of a political party.
- 4) Unequal or unfair distribution of power resources is another source of conflict among the members of any political party.
- 5) Actual or perceived competition over interests such as resources also creates conflicts among the members of a party.
- 6) Favoritism is another source of conflict within a political party. Promoting one's kith and kin always creates differences.
- 7) Unequal sharing of resources is also a source of conflict. It is often seen that the leader's constituency often gets a lion's share from the total resources.
- 8) Lack of regular meetings or discussions within the party increases differences among the members.
- 9) A very centralized authority at the top also hampers in the maintenance of intra-party democracy of political parties.

Fragmentation of AGP

The AGP has been one of the important regional political parties in the state of Assam. The AGP was the result of the Assam movement which is also known as Anti-Foreigners Movement that was started in 1979 under the leadership of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sngam Parishad (AAGSP) and officially ended on 15th August, 1985. AGP as the new regional political party was formed on 14th October, 1985 immediately after the movement. The party came into power immediately after its formation in 1985 and remained in power till 1989. The party captured the power of the state politics for the second term in 1996 and remained in power till 2001.

The cases of conflict among the members can be seen in case of AGP in many instances. The party faced three major splits along with many other small instances of conflict which was created due to the differences among its leaders. A thorough study in this context reveals how the party faced such conflicts which led to its splits and finally how the party sought to resolve such conflicts. The differences among the members of AGP started as early as from 1991. A conflict was seen within the party from March 1991 which was eventually about the leadership issue of AGP. It was found that confusions started growing among the members of the party over the leadership issue. The party had never been the same since the February 16, 1991 Central Executive Committee meeting of the party when seven top ranking leaders of the party demanded a change in the party leadership of Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta who was the party president of that time. Sri Mahanta was asked to step down as the AGP Chief and the whole incident took a new turn when a number of senior party functionaries and Rajya Sabha members called up on party president Sri Mahanta to step down as the party chief. The senior party leaders in an open letter to Sri Mahanta demanded his resignation because of his betrayal of trust, weak leadership and corruption which according to them adversely affected the party image among the people of Assam. These senior party leaders accused him not only for betraying the party but also the people of Assam at large. The leaders accused Mahanta of shedding crocodile tears at the suffering of the people of Assam under the mercy of draconian Armed Forces and Disturbed Areas Acts. According to them it was Sri Mahanta who prior to the imposition of President's Rule in Assam in a meeting accepted the proposal of Delhi lobby to impose the Armed Forces Act by declaring the entire upper Assam area as a disturbed area. They condemned Mahanta for joining hands with the Delhi lobby showing anti Assam and anti people attitude and also for taking decision of his own by keeping the party in the dark and for showing a kind of false sympathy for the oppressed people of the state. Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta denied all the allegations against him and maintained that there was no basis in the allegations levelled against him. Mahanta contended that the charges levelled against him on the basis of Governor's report smacks of 'personal enmity' and 'political motivation'.

All these incidents created a kind of chaos within the party of AGP and eventually a stage was set to take a concrete decision on the leadership issue in the party and the Central executive Committee of the party decided to held the general body meeting of the party on the matter. Accordingly, the General Body meet of the party was held on March 25th, 1991. In the meeting, the party's supreme General Body reposed their full faith on the party

president Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta by branding the charges levelled against him as “revengeful, conspiratorial and false”. The General Body considered the action of the dissidents as a violation of party discipline and advised the Central Executive Committee to take necessary disciplinary actions against them immediately. The General Body meeting condemned their action as “anti-party” and also gave an opportunity to clarify their charges against Sri Mahanta.

The AGP headed for a split after an emergent Central Executive Committee expelled two members and suspended other six members of the dissident group. It expelled the former speaker Pulakesh Baruah and former minister Ramendra Narayan Kalita from the primary membership of the party and put under temporary suspension of Bhriku Kumar Phukan, Brindaban Goswami, Dinesh Goswami, Dinabandhu Choudhury, David Ledger and Bijoya Chakroborty for their anti-party activities. This unfortunate decision was taken by the Central Executive Committee of the party with the rejection of the dissident group to accept the compromise formula to withdraw their allegations against Mahanta since they were not present in the Central Executive Body meet and the General Body meet to prove their charges.

The party which had been going through a turbulent chapter finally experienced a major split on April 5, 1991 when the dissident group formed a parallel party with a new executive headed by the speaker, Pulakesh Baruah, in a representative meeting of the dissident group at the Gauri Sadan, Guwahati, attended by 300 delegates from all districts of the state. This parallel party ‘removed’ Mahanta from the post of party president and ‘suspended’ him from the primary membership of the party. This parallel party with 27 member new executive headed by Pulakesh Baruah claimed itself to be the ‘real’ AGP. The parallel party leader, Sri Pulakesh Baruah decided to fan out to the districts to mobilize the people behind them. The newly formed executive also decided to set up a legal and a medical aid cell to provide relief to the victims created by the atrocities of the security forces. The new party was named as AGP (Reconstituted). The AGP (R) in its central executive committee held on April 18, 1991, adopted a resolution where the party demanded full autonomy for the state including complete control over its natural resources. The Election Commission of India allowed AGP belonging to former Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta to contest elections with the symbol ‘Elephant’ and rejected the petition of AGP (R) to recognize them as the real AGP. However, the AGP (R) was given ad-hoc recognition by the Commission for the limited purpose of contesting Assembly and Parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, after the ‘Elephant’ symbol was allotted to the AGP, the AGP (R) requested the Commission to allot them the symbol of ‘two leaves’. Hence, after the Election Commission’s direction to the AGP (R), the breakaway faction of the former ruling party of Assam, AGP, had renamed its name as ‘Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP) and had chosen their symbol of ‘two leaves’ to contest the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. The party leaders Pulakesh Baruah and Dinesh Goswami announced it and also announced their decision to adopt a new red-white-sky blue striped flag with the two leaves imprinted on the white horizontal stripe in the middle. Thus the first witnessed its first ever split which later came back to the main party fold in 1992.

The AGP witnessed another internal disturbance in 2000 when Sri Atul Bora (senior), the former PWD Minister at CM Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta's cabinet became dissatisfied with the working of Sri Mahanta. Atul Bora who was also one of the founders of AGP was of the view that the Mahanta led AGP government has failed in all fronts. Sri Bora vowed to dethrone the AGP led four party alliance government in the coming Assembly elections and also said that he had always raised his voice against the 'wrong doings' and finally he paid the price. Sri Bora also decided to formally launch a party of his own whose name will be the Trinamul Gana Parishad (TGP). Through the new party, he had the aim to bring the sincere AGP workers who had been neglected over the years together. To remove Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta from power, about 2000 grassroot level workers of AGP floated to the new front under the leadership of dissident leader Atul Bora, the former PWD Minister and Pulakesh Baruah, the former state Assembly speaker. This faction of AGP revolted against party leadership, showed their dissatisfaction on the ruling of their leader Sri Mahanta and floated to a new front- TGP. At a state level workers' convention held on Feb 8, 2000 at the Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati, the TGP was constituted and it was attended by all the rebels from different districts of the state. The party also constituted a committee of their own consisting 19 members with Sri Atul Bora as the General Secretary and Sri Pulakesh Baruah as the President. The leaders of the party were of the view that this new 'platform' was created to mobilize the public against the 'autocratic ruling' of Sri Prafulla Mahanta. The leaders also revealed that their primary objective was to remove Sri Mahanta from the position of Chief Minister and also from the position of head of the party. The leaders also alleged Sri Mahanta with the charge of rampant corruption, because of which developmental activities almost stopped in the state. In the convention, the issue of 'secret killing' was also discussed and they blamed Sri Mahanta for not being to do anything in this regard. Sri Mahanta was also blamed for his lack of initiative to create an atmosphere to hold talks with insurgent groups. The AGP, on the other hand, in its party steering meeting took the decision to suspend who along with 2000 grass root level workers joined hands to the already suspended MLA Sri Atul Bora to create the new platform, called- the TGP by revolting against the party leader Sri Mahanta.

The party had to face another major split in 2005 when Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the founder President and the former Chief Minister of the party was expelled from the party, who further created another faction of AGP, called the AGP (Progressive). Sri Mahanta was sent a show cause notice by the party for openly criticizing the party leadership during that time. Sri Mahanta with some of his associates also attended a seminar organized by a non-governmental organization by violating party's order not to attend it. The seminar was also attended by NCP leader and former Lok Sabha Speaker P.A. Sangma which gave rise to speculation about Mahanta's join in NCP. However, Mahanta strongly denied such speculations and maintained that he always wanted to strengthen regional forces. He also gave reply to the show cause notice sent to him by the party on which a serious discussion was held in the central executive meet of AGP on July 3, 2005. The Steering Committee of AGP, on the other hand, in its crucial meet expelled Sri Mahanta, the ex-Chief Minister of Assam from the party for six years with four more MLAs of AGP who attended the seminar along with Mahanta including Gunin Hazarika, Bunul Das, Utpal Dutta and Sahidul Alam

Choudhury who were also served with show cause notices. Following the removal of Sri Mahanta from the party, the pro-Mahanta leaders such as Dewaz Akbar, Lonit Sarma, Atul Bora and Moni Gogoi has also left the party and also the followers of Sri Mahanta in his constituency has burnt the effigy of AGP President Sri Brindaban Goswami in front of Nagaon AGP Office and also burnt the office signboard. They also banned the entry of AGP leaders to Sri Mahanta's constituency.

Sri Mahanta who had been expelled from AGP went for a politically significant tour to Delhi to garner support in his favour from old friends and renew the old ties. In this regard he had met the then NCP chief and Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, former Lok Sabha Speaker P.A. Sangma, former Prime Minister I. K. Gujral and most importantly Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari. His meeting with the former PM I.K Gujral was also important as he enjoyed close rapport from many regional political parties which were non-Congress and non-BJP. However, Mahanta tried to give an official look to his unexpected visit to the capital city by meeting the then Union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil to draw his attention to the prevailing situation of the state and urged the minister to take sincere action to hold dialogues with the militant groups of Assam including the ULFA, NDFB and other small underground outfits to bring about a peaceful settlement and to put an end to the killings that was happening in the state. Sri Mahanta also claimed that they were the real AGP as majority of the workers were with them and the voters would vote for the right leader.

Thus Sri Mahanta and his supporters were all gearing up for the formation of a new political party after their two-day political convention which they were planning to held on 14th and 15th September of 2005. Mahanta was of the view that the opinions of the cross sections of people including representatives of all districts and special invitees would be taken into consideration before the announcement of the new party. He also said that the main goals of his party would be to strengthen regionalism and to bring about the socio-economic development to the state. He also said that the new party would highlight the hopes and aspirations of all sections of people and also would identify the problems of all ethnic groups. He criticized the then AGP leaders as they failed to expose the misrule of the Congress Government and to play the art of a strong regional force. He criticized the then AGP party President Sri Brindaban Goswami for running the party at the orders on outsiders and also for trying to stop the mouths of the party workers with the threatening of expulsion instead of trying to strengthen regionalism. Mahanta also said the present AGP leaders did not have the right the use the symbol of AGP as the executive and the steering committee of the party were constituted illegally in a very unusual way at the whims of the party president. He also alleged Sri Brindaban Goswami for using some of the AASU leaders and members to oppose the meetings of his supporters at different places of the state.

Thus, after a lot of differences between the leadership of the party and expulsion of Sri Mahanta with the allegations of anti-party activities, the AGP witnessed another major split in September 14, 2005 when Sri Mahanta and his supporters formally floated to a new party- AGP (Progressive). The formation of the new party was formally announced in the evening 14th September after the conclusion of the first day of the two-day political convention

organized by the supporters of Sri Mahanta. Sri Mahanta, himself was appointed as the head of the new party while the executive committee included four legislators and several former MLAs. All the members of the committee were known as very close loyalists of Sri Mahanta for years. Another committee with 79 members including 48 executive members was also constituted to prepare the party for the coming Assembly polls and to 'achieve victory for regionalism in the coming state Assembly polls'. The convention was attended by more than 3000 delegates from different parts of the state which was held at the Pragjyoti ITA Centre for Performing Arts, Guwahati. After forming the new party namely the AGP (P), Sri Mahanta, the head of the new party revealed that the new party stated the process of forming district and block level committees all over the state. He also said that they had the planning to hold rallies at different parts of the state to garner the support of the people and to strengthen the party at the grass root level.

Conclusion

The party though got split for many times decided to reunite on its formation day on 14th October, 2008 and appealed all the sections of the population, particularly, the public and the organizations with a nationalist trait to support and guide them to strengthen the regional forces to work with new strength and commitment. The unification process of regional party was formally completed on 14th October, 2008 which was the foundation day of AGP on the same Golaghat playground where before 23 years ago the AGP was formed. The breakaway factions of AGP including the AGP (P) headed by Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Trinamul Gana Parishad headed by Sri Pulakesh Baruah and Pabindra Deka faction of Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad formally merged with the AGP at the Bhriku Kumar Phukan Khetra in Golaghat town in the presence of a large number of workers and supporters of the party. The unification was termed as Golaghat Declaration and all the members of the AGP and other regional parties which merged with the regional party took the oath to translate the vision with which the party as formed in 1985 following the signing the Assam Accord into reality.

References

1. Bhuyan, B.C(ed) "Politics and Reorganization of North-East India" (ed), Omsons Publications, Ansari Road, New Delhi
2. Deka, K.M (ed), "Nationalism and Regionalism in North-East India", Dibrugarh University, 1985
3. Deka,Basanta, "The Design The Betrayal The Assam Movement", Orchid Publication, Guwahati, 2015
4. Gohain, Dr. Hiren /Bora,Dr. Hiren (ed), "Asom Andolan: Pratisruti aru Phalashruti", Banalata Publications, Panbazar, Guwahati-1, 2001
5. Hazarika, Bolin(ed) "Migration and Politics", 10th Annual Neipsa Proceedings, North East India Political Science Association, December, 2001
6. Hussain, Monirul, "The Assam Movement : Class, Ideology and Identity", Manak Pub., New Delhi, 1993
7. Kalita, Haren Ch. "Regional Politics: The Role of Assam Gana Parishad", EBH Publishers (India)

8. Bergstrom, Lars, "What is a Conflict of Interest", Journal of Peace Research, Vol-7, No.3 (1970), Sage Publications Ltd
9. Brouwer, Wytze, "Perspectives on Conflict Resolution in Selected Peace Education Curricula", Peace Research, Canadian Mennonite University, Vol. 22, No.1
10. Goswami, Sandhya, "Assam: Multiple Realignments and Fragmentation of Party System", Journal of Indian School of Political Economy, Jan-June, 2003
11. Guha, Amalendu, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-1980", Economic and Political Weekly, Special number, 1980
12. Laue, James H. / Acland, Andrew Floyer, "A Brief Overview of Conflict Resolution Principles", Building Peace: Conflict Resolution and its Global Applications, Principia College, 47th Annual Public Affairs Conference, April 11-13, 1996
13. Murray, Edward J./ North, Robert C./ Coser, Lewis A./ Nadar, Laura, "Confidence Intervals and Regions (Conflict)", Volume-3, The Macmillian Company & the Free Press, Newyork, Collier-Macmillian Publishers, 1968, London
14. Sweeney Brian. / Carruthers, William L., "Conflict Resolution: History, Philosophy, Theory and Educational Application", American School Counselor Association, Vol. 43, No.5, May 1996
15. Toyin, Olorungbemi Simeon, "Party Conflicts and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria (1999 - 2007)", International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 4, No. 11; September 2014