



Different paradigm on factional politics with special reference to Asom Gana Parishad

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Abstract

The paper is a theoretical exploration to the field of factional politics. It is a discussion on definitional issues of factionalism along with practical references to the scenario throughout the world. References have been made to factional politics in India, especially that in Assam in order to discover new paradigm in that area. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) a regional political party in Assam has been taken as a case study. The study is based on secondary data sources and historical approach is applied to analyze the facts of factional politics in Assam.

In a nutshell, factional politics differs according to geographical, demographic and historical conditions. Factionalism in developing nations is more intense than that of in the developed ones. The societies with diverse ethnic groups like that in Assam, nurture more contentious politics which results in loose political organization building is a fertile ground for factional politics.

Keywords: Factionalism, political mobilization and articulation, ethnicity and identity politics, leadership crisis.

1. Introduction

After the 2nd World War many colonies of Asia and Africa got independence. These aspiring new members of the world community had many issues to address immediately viz., socio-economic development, political and national consolidation etc. People of the respective countries began to look at the State as Mai-Baap (all encompassing state). New constitutions were promulgated with novel objectives of welfare state, socio-economic equality, liberty and freedom for amelioration of the teeming millions. But only a few countries have succeeded to achieve these aims partially. Most of the Constitutions vowed to build up Democratic Republic through free and fair election process. But substantive democracy remained a day dream and procedural democracy hijacked the

noble objectives of true democracy. The reason might be; the colonial legacies, education, administration continued and state failed to bring sustainable change. Corruption was reaching the pick point and 'social capital' curve took down-ward direction. In many countries, military ruler took over the administration and natural political process was halted. Pakistan, Myanmar, Libya, Indonesia and many African nations fall to the evil of military dictatorship. The 'dependency theory' of Egyptian economist Samir Amin may help to understand this dilemma of reverse development. Amin propounded the view that 'resources flow from a "periphery" of poor and underdeveloped states to a "core" of wealthy states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former', is the main reason behind the economic and socio-political instability in the developing countries. The fact that

many developed countries patronized the military rule in the natural resource rich developing countries to continue the plunder is enough to suffice the argument of dependency theory.

All the developing countries had to fight hard to cope with the transition process after independence in 20th century. The process of nationality formation in these geographically and ethnically diverse countries was full of antagonism. For example in India, nationalism and national interest failed to unite different ethnic and language communities. Regionalism came to the fore as a political force against nationalism. It was at the same time a bane and a boon.

2. Assam, Assamese and Regional Polity

Assam is small state in the North Eastern part of India (78438 km²), home for many ethnic communities having different culture, language and community organizations. The ethnic identity and culture run through the vein of people of Assam. The ethnic mosaic of the state is supplanted by rich natural resources, river system and scenic beauty. Yet Assam is a poor state. The reason-some might attribute to the negligence of the Centre, some to the geographical condition and other to the crisis of leadership in political arena. Whatever it is, people of Assam have suffered. This has resulted in people's movements against the state authority for better development, e.g., the refinery movement, language movement, and movement for food and finally the Assam Movement of 1979 to 1985. The Assam Movement, most prominent one brought the state to standstill for six long years. The motto of the movement was to drive out the foreigners from Assam, i. e., the Bangladeshi immigrants. The All Assam Student Union (ASSU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), Asom Jatiyotabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Purbanchaliyo Loka Parishad (PLP), Assam Sahitya Sabha held the steering wheel of the movement, backed by many intellectual of Assam. The incessant influx from across the border and the lack of political will to check it made the people revolutionary. All the ethnic communities supported the movement by heart. As fallout of the movement the Assam Accord was signed in 1985 and a new regional political party, namely; Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed under the stewardship of Prafulla Mahanta as the President and Bhriku kumar Phukan as the General Secretary. AGP won the Assembly election in 1983 and formed the government in Assam. After then AGP has been split thrice. Factional rivalry and crisis has ridden the political party to the core. So AGP provides a scope for study on the factional aspect of political parties in modern democracy, the reason behind factional split and the modus-operandi of factional politics.

3. Defining Factionalism

Factionalism is hard to define. Many political thinkers like Samuel Johnson, James Madison used the term 'faction' more or less as a synonym to political party. Oxford English Dictionary defines factions "with opprobrious sense, conveying the imputation of selfish or mischievous ends or turbulent or unscrupulous methods". Madison in his 'Tenth Instalment of the Federalist Papers' defines a faction as "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a minority or majority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." In plain English this is a group that pursues self interest at the expense of the common good. However, this definition lacks a holistic view. Political parties in modern democracies are formed in order to articulate the people's interest; otherwise they won't be able to win elections. And even a faction within the political party may have appeal of the general interest. Therefore, we cannot define political faction only in opprobrious sense. As we talk about intra-party democracy, healthy faction also may strengthen the political party indirectly. One glaring example is the Vallabhbhai Patel faction in Congress in India during the days of Jawaharlal Nehru.

4. Philosophical Dimensions of Factionalism

It is even impossible for every human being to be essentially 'non-political' since we are, according to Aristotle, 'political animals'. Many political philosophers; right from the days of the 'Greek City State' have dealt with the problems of governance and revolution in the state. Examples may be cited of Kautilya, Aristotle and Machiavelli and others who discussed at length the causes of internal dissention or revolution and the measures to pacify it. According to liberal tradition of thought factionalism is inevitable within the democratic political party, because the parties provide a platform to the diverse and contradictory groups in the civil society to ventilate their causes. Therefore, factional rivalry and contradictions are the necessary evils to strengthen democracy. On the other hand, the Marxist school of thought denounce the factional element in political parties. There is no place for factionalism within the vanguard party. The vanguard political party representing the proletariats do not tolerate factional conflict. According to Marxism, the Socialist revolutions would ensue in classless society eliminating the capitalists and there would be no need for political party either. As such factionalism occurs only in the Bourgeoisie democracy and bourgeoisie party system which promotes the vested interests of the capitalists.

There is another dimension of factionalism. The Civil War of England in the 17th century and that of the USA in the 18th century was an outcome of factionalism on national scale. Even during the Indian freedom struggle, factional ideology emerged and dominated the political scenario. The ideological differences of B R Ambedkar and M K Gandhi, M A Jinnah and J Nehru, Subhash Basu and Gandhi are some evidences. As such factionalism may occur on national scale irrespective of a political party system. The mushrooming of the political parties in India in post independence period is a development resulted on the superstructure, whereas the factional issue and factional politics operates quietly in the infrastructure.

5. Factional Politics in Different parts of the World

“Our own beloved country..... is now afflicted with faction and civil war”(Abraham Lincoln). Lincoln while addressing his fellow citizens of USA indicates that faction is internal dissention within a nation. All nations have faced factional war in one or other time in history. But in modern developed nations; in mature democracies like UK, USA, Russia, France etc there are hardly any instances of factional politics. (e.g., Hillary Clinton was a political contender to Barack Obama. But after the presidential election Obama invited Clinton to head the most prestigious portfolio, Secretary of States. In Russia, former President Vladimir Putin agreed to be the Prime Minister under new President Dmitry Medvedev). Factionalism is more intense in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. Because, the political system is immature and political socialization and articulation does not happens in rational terms. Muslim League, the oldest political party in Pakistan is reeling under factional conflict. After all, story the failure of Pakistani democracy begins and ends with factional politics. In Iran, the post Khomeini period, especially after the landslide victory of President Mohammad Khatami and the ensuing struggle between reformers and the entrenched conservative religionists is factional politics. Competing ideologies and practical issues versus a sometimes dangerous conflict have been a day to day course in Iran now a day. Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya and many African nations are also feeling the heat of factional politics.

6. Factional Politics in India

The problem of factionalism in Congress party can be traced back to 1948, after the death of Gandhi, when dissenting parties within Congress (such as the Congress Socialist Party) was banned by Patel's constitutional amendment. The Congress became more like a streamlined political party in its operation-dissent was driven underground. This position

remains stable in the first decade of independence, as political success often came about as a proven loyalty to the charismatic ‘tall men’ and party leaders such as Nehru . However, in the absence of well-developed opposition, and before parliament itself provided effective instrument for the ventilation of grievances and the crystallisation of dissident opinion, the Congress party had to perform these functions after the independence. The Freedom Movement too inevitably produced factional divisions in Indian society. The defeat of Congress in 1967 election is attributed to factionalism. Many of the opposition leaders who formed government in the states were dissident leaders of the Congress themselves. There had been an ongoing conflict between the ‘ministerial’ and ‘organizational’ wing of Congress party as well. At a local level, congressmen aimed to seek popular support not only to win election but also to strengthen their positions viz. a viz. other factions within Congress. On some issues Chief Ministers had to fight hard against the centre-regardless of party loyalty-in order to shore up local support . In the 1980s factionalism in Congress had become all-pervasive. Indira Gandhi's centralising and authoritarian tendencies had caused strain on federal consensus and factions have developed around social class, regional diversity, modern and traditional values and simple personal ambition-described by Banfield as ‘amoral familism’ . The Congress experience has shown that ‘one dominant party system’ with no major threat from other parties is a breeding ground for factional rivalry in politics.

Among the other national political parties Communist party of India (CPI) have tasted factionalism. A serious rift within the party surfaced in 1962. One reason was the Sino-Indian War, where a faction of the Indian communists backed the position of the Indian Government, while other sections of the party claimed that it was a conflict between a socialist and a capitalist state, and thus took a pro-Chinese position. There were three factions in the party - "internationalists", "centrists", and "nationalists". Ideological differences lead to the split in the party in 1964 when two different party conferences were held, one of CPI and one of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). There is a common misconception that the rifts during Sino-Indian war lead to the 1962 split. In fact, the split was leftists vs. rightists, rather than internationalists vs. nationalists . After this the communist bloc was again divided during the time of the Naxalbari Movement in the 1970s when the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) was formed. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(DMK), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(AIADMK) of Tamil Nadu are other notable examples of factional politics.

7. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP): The trajectory of Factional politics in Assam

Why AGP have failed as a regional political party? The primary reason to my mind is factionalism. Since its advent AGP has been split thrice. Even within the party in normal condition, there are splinter groups operating on personal and parochial agenda. Each leader along with a handful of supporters acts as a faction. General public interests hardly surface as the leitmotif of these factions. Therefore it is a matter of research, why a regional political party with such a vibrant popular support is ridden with factionalism. Is it the lack of ideological strength or political organization; visionary leader or destiny? The AGP was formally constituted on 14th October in 1985 at Golaghat, in the aftermath of the signing of Assam Accord to end the six year long Assam Movement to drive out the foreigners from Assam. After the independence, Indian State due to its engagement with the consolidation process could not pay sufficient attention towards the peripheral states like Assam. This is one of the main reasons of the regional disparity in economic development in India after the independence. Infrastructure development in North Eastern States was further lessened after the Sino-Indian War. After the Bangladesh war in 1971 large number of refugees came to Assam at the auspices of Central government and after the conclusion of the war Central Government did not do enough to return those illegal refugees. In fact, illegal influx to Assam continued unabated backed by political interests. These people threatened to change the demographic profile and there was a tension among the indigenous people in Assam that one day they might lose the political power to the numerically growing immigrants. Along with these factors, the language movement, the movement for food and the refinery movements made the ground fertile for the grand Assam Movement in 1979. Moreover, during this period the left ideology and activities was going on in Assam in full swing in the cultural and political arena. Some observers try to see the Assam Movement as a conspiracy of the 'rightists' to avert a possible social revolution. This is partially evident from the fact that the trade union leaders and intellectuals, who were critical about the Assam Movement, were attacked and even killed in the name of being communist. As such the ground for the new political party in Assam i.e. the AGP was filled with contradictions in the 1980s. Whatsoever, the party won the Assembly election in 1985 with handsome figures and formed the Government in Assam. But the symptoms of factionalism surfaced even before the election. The leaders were quite young and they hardly valued the wisdom of the veteran leaders and political observers. Personal clash and groupism became inevitable within

the party.

Factional politics within AGP surface more prominently at the time of contesting the Assembly election and for the Lok Sabha in 1985 when the elders were fielded in the Lok Sabha seats and the young and inexperienced were given tickets to contest from the Assembly constituencies. Muhikanta Saikia, Paragdhara Chaliha, Dinesh Goswami, Dr. Nagen Saikia were such veteran leaders who were not allowed to contest in Assembly election. These leaders were capable of good administration in the State.

In 1991 just before the Assembly election, dissident AGP leader Dinesh Goswami formed a new political party Natun Asom Gana Parishad (NAGP). Bhriku kumar Phookan and Pulakesh Baruah were the other prominent AGP Leader who joined the party. The reason of the split was personal rift between the leaders. These two parties contested elections separately resulting in the defeat of AGP. Congress again came to power. However this faction came to the party fold in 1992. AGP as a political party failed to fulfil the aspirations of the Assamese people, it was corruption ridden. The failure in governance also had some impact upon the split of 1991. It is interesting to see that all the three leaders forming the NAGP belonged to upper caste brahmine. So, one can presume that caste factor and caste rivalry might have occurred within AGP.

In 1996, due to the anti-incumbency factor against the Hiteswar Saikia government paved the way for AGP. People voted the party again to the power. But intra-party conflict and rift continued in AGP. In 2000, Atul Borah one of the prominent founder leader frayed another political party-Trinamul Gana Parishad (TGP). During this period the ULFA increased its activity of extortion and the so called War against the Indian State. The public life was in disarray. The allegations of Secret Killing and corruption against Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta made the factional clash an open drama. AGP lost the 2001 election. The factional conflicts in AGP further increased. Mahanta's overall inactive leadership led to his demotion from being the president of AGP. He was expelled from the party on July 3 2005 after being accused in anti-party activity. Mahanta then formed his own party with handful of supporters-Asom Gana Parishad-Progressive (AGP-P). Both AGP and AGP (P) frayed in the 2006 election separately and faced defeat. In 2008, a process started to reconcile the differences among all the breakaway fractions and to bring back everybody under the mother party umbrella to strengthen the regional party movement in Assam. Finally on 14 October 2008, all breakaway groups reconciled in one umbrella at the historic town Golaghat. Prafulla Mahanta merged his AGP(P) with

it. Atul Bora and Pulakesh Barua merged their TGP with the AGP and farmer leader and former legislator of Patacharkuchi, Pabindra Deka, too merged the PLP with it. But clash of leadership continued. Brindaban Goswami and Pulakesh Baruah were isolated deliberately to deny them leadership status. Rivalry between Prafulla Mahanta and Chandramohan Patowary for chief ministerial berth became Page 3 news. On many occasions, AGP's seat adjustments before the election did not improve its tally, as its allies were influential only in small pockets in Assam. For example, its alliance with the left parties in the past not looked by the hardcore supporters as beneficial election strategy. Even the overt and covert alliance with the national political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and seat sharing has been proved unproductive which further impacted the factional conflict. This had given an edge to the Congress party indirectly. This shows that AGP failed to contain factional rivalry tactfully by appealing to the dormant political desire of hitherto unrepresented social forces to come under a large federal political umbrella. In 2011 election AGP could get only 10 seats and had to leave the place of main opposition party to AIUDF which have 18 MLAs in Assam Assembly.

The primary factors within the party for this erosion of public support and factionalism can be summarized as follows –

(I) Poor fund (II) Urban centric mobilization (III) Crisis of leadership (IV) Poor campaign (V) Absence of strategies and think tank (VI) Lack of strong organization and (VII) The political upsurge of the ethnic groups among others.

8. The AGP Model of Factional Politics

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was not formed as cohesive political party though the background was provided by Assamese National sentiment for self-determination. It was a conglomeration of different socio-political organizations who took active part in the Assam Movement. The founders of the party had their root in All Assam Student Union (AASU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), and Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) among others. Though these organizations had unanimous working agenda of Assamese Nationalism, yet they differed in ideology and political support base. As such during the first Assembly election, AGP could enjoy support all over Assam. AGP had to give vent to the aspirations of all local leaders. This coalition nature of political articulation debarred AGP from having a High-command structure or leadership. In India, all regional parties having long success e.g. DMK, AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and

Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, Trinamul Congress in West Bengal have charismatic leadership. But the diverse and ethnicity based society of Assam have not allowed AGP to build a leadership on consensus.

As such the 'cosmetic political organization', 'lack of high-command' and 'contentious political culture', these three factors have made AGP fragile for factional rift and split. The political organization of AGP was cosmetic because it was not well knit in to the political ground and highly urban centric. The leaders who participated in the formation of AGP in 1985 belonged to different organizations that had separate constitutions and agenda. These organizations continued to operate as before as power groups. This factor had loosened the organization of AGP leading to factionalism. Contentious politics 'encompasses a range of movement outcomes, from small scale protest demonstration to large scale violent rebellion. Ethnic rebellion is also a version of contentious politics'. The march of ethnic and identity politics has made the regional appeal of AGP on the basis of Assamese nationalism irrelevant. Thus the political splits in AGP cannot be simply termed as personal clash of interests as Paul Brass have theorized in his reference to Congress factions in Uttar Pradesh in the 1960s. An analysis of factionalism in AGP, without the reference of ethnic politics and identity issue is incomplete. The ethnic antagonism on the other hand is embedded in the British period, in the colonial process of administration. The terminology 'tribal' itself is a colonial construction rather than based on primordial ethnic sentiments in India. Dwindling support base and organizational failure had also impacted upon fund raising which is an important factor of poor political campaign and strategy building. Thus AGP has failed to woo the young people. Even student body like All Assam Student Union have opposed AGP leaders openly. The joining of Sarbananda Sonowal in BJP, one of the young leaders of AGP was apparently a result of factional rivalry within the top strata of leaders.

9. Conclusion

Though the leaders of AGP admit that the factional rivalry has cut their root in the political land of Assam, yet they seem to be unable to sacrifice their ego and self interests among other things. In place of soul searching and self rectification, the latest trend indicates sign of further internal factionalism. While the Congress party appears to have benefitted by tactful management of internal factionalism in their favour, the emergence of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) did cost the Congress a portion of immigrant Muslim votes, but the Congress regained its lost strength reasonably well by wooing

Assamese-speaking Muslims and some Assamese-speaking Hindus who had earlier allied with the AGP and the BJP respectively. Thus the gains of the Congress were across all sections, making it a catch-all party in Assam. AGP has failed to play its role of strengthening democracy by being a strong

opposition political party; because of which the trend in Assam is such that democratic polity may turn into cult of majoritarianism. The vicious cycle of factional politics has made the political future of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) bleak.

Endnotes and References

The term 'Social capital', coined by Robert Putnam, refers to features of social organization that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits. Social capitals may be the trusts, norms, and traditions etc. which 'provide the basis for 'generalized trust' throughout the society, building a basis for civic engagement, public spiritedness and effective government'. (Cited in '*Civil Society and Democracy*' by Carolyn M. Elliot, 2007. p 13)

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