

# ASSAM IN POST ASSAM MOVEMENT PERIOD: GROWTH OF OFFENSIVE MUSLIM POLITICS

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## ABSTRACT

*Muslims in Assam, consisting more than one third of total population of the state, are considered as the king maker in electoral politics of the state. Since independence, the community remained a vote bank of the Congress party in the state. However, after the Assam movement (1979-1985), the community declined to remain a vote bank of any political party. During this period, the community has tried to emerge as an autonomous political unit and has started to be offensive in politics of Assam. This paper is an attempt to understand how Muslims in Assam have tried to become autonomous political unit and offensive in politics of Assam during last three decades after Assam movement.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Vote bank, Communal Politics, Jamiat, UMF, AIUDF*

## MUSLIMS IN ASSAM

The Muslims of Assam are broadly divided into indigenous Muslims and neo Assamese Muslims. The indigenous Muslims have a long history in Assam and have very close socio-cultural relationship with indigenous non-Muslims population of the state. They migrated to Assam since the 13<sup>th</sup> century till the took-over of Assam by British. Among these Muslims who live in Brahmaputra valley, are culturally Assamese and their mother tongue is Assamese. They have remained an integral part of Assamese nationality formation since the days of Ahoms. On the other hand, the Neo-Assamese Muslims migrated to Assam under British colonialism and during 1951-1971 after independence. A large section of this community lives in Brahmaputra valley and takes education in Assamese medium. Large number of Muslims from this section living in Brahmaputra valley identifies Assamese as mother tongue during census enumerations. Till now, they have also become an important component of Assamese nationality. However, when we talk about the Muslim politics in Assam, it is mainly shaped and determined by the neo-Assamese Muslims. It is because the community has a large population and lives in contingent areas unlike the indigenous Muslims. They live mainly in lower and middle Assam districts of Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley. Also, growth rate among the community is very high.

Muslims constitute 34.22 per cent of total population in Assam (2011 census). Muslim population has been increasing significantly in comparison to the Hindu

population during last seventy years after independence. According to 2011 census reports, among total 27 districts in the state, nine districts are Muslim majority and three other districts have Muslim population more than 35 per cent. Another seven districts have Muslim population between 10 and 35 per cent. However, there is no government source to know the numbers of indigenous and neo-Assamese Muslims separately.

## MUSLIM POLITICS DURING POST ASSAM MOVEMENT PERIOD

The signing of Assam Accord on August 15, 1985 after six years of Assam movement brought about several significant changes to the politics of Assam which had ever lasting effects. First, the Muslim vote Bank of the Congress was broken down. Mainly immigrant Muslims formed Muslim vote Bank of the Congress. These Muslims were totally dissatisfied with the Congress that its central government signed the Assam Accord. The community felt betrayed by the party. Second, Jamiat-UI-Ulema-E-Hind (Jamiat) began to play a political role among the Muslims of Assam. The religious organization has been influencing the electoral behavior of immigrant Muslims in Assam since the days of Assam movement. The role of Jamiyat has also contributed to the breakdown of Muslim vote bank for Congress. Third, because of dissatisfaction with the Congress and role of the Jamiat, new political formation of Muslims have emerged in Assam during post-Assam movement period which have greatly contributed to assert and establish Muslim political identity in Assam. And finally, active role of Jamiat

and success of Muslim based political parties have turned Muslim politics in Assam into communal which has, in turn, helping the religious polarization in politics of Assam.

### **FORMATION OF MUSLIM BASED POLITICAL PARTIES**

During post Assam movement period, Assam witnessed formation and success of minority and Muslim based political parties which helped the Muslims in Assam to emerge as an autonomous and communal political force in the state.

#### **UNITED MINORITY FRONT (UMF)**

Several Muslim and linguistic minority groups opposed the Assam movement. After three months of the Assam Accord was signed, a new regional political party United Minority Front (UMF) emerged to fight against the atrocities might be done under the auspices of the Assam Agreement. Representatives of All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), All Assam Minority Front, Citizens Right Prevention Committee (which was formed to oppose the Assam movement), All Assam Minority Yuva Parishad, Assam unit of Jamiat etc. participated in the convention where the party was formed. The most important commitments of the party were the well-being of the minorities in the state and their protection in the atmosphere created by the Assam Accord. (Ahmed 1999: 174)

Though Jamiyat was involved in the formation of UMF, its role was very limited. In the Assembly Election (1985) held just after its formation, the party received support from large section of linguistic minority and the immigrant Muslims of the state. In this election, the party won 17 Assembly seats from among 126 seats and got 10.85 per cent of the total votes polled. However, after the 1985 election, several prominent members of the party defected to other political parties and during two decades after its formation, it disintegrated several times into several sections. After 1985 Assembly elections, UMF could win only two seats in 1996 Assembly election. The party got only 0.41 per cent vote of the total vote polled in the 2001 Assembly election. In 2005, a section of UMF merged into AUDF when the later was formed.

#### **ASSAM UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT (AUDF)**

In July 2005, the Supreme Court of India declared the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) [IM(DT)] Act as 'illegal' and 'undemocratic' and the Act was repealed. The IM(DT) Act was imposed on Assam in 1983 by the then Congress led central government to show its solidarity

towards the minorities in Assam, which in turn made the process of identification and deportation of illegal nationals in Assam very complex. The IM(DT) was an immigration Act and was not at all involved with the interests of minorities. However, after IM(DT) was enacted and imposed on Assam, Congress began to publish that the Act was to safeguard the minorities from the Assam movement.

The repeal of IM(DT) Act created fear among the neo Assamese Muslims in Assam. The minority organizations led by this section of Muslims began to blame the Congress governments at the centre and in Assam for their inactivity in the Supreme Court to stop the repeal of the Act. The Jamiyat came forward to address the fear of the Muslims in post-IMDT situation. The president of state unit Jamiyat, Badaruddin Ajmal, took the lead to form a new political outfit against the Congress which, according to him, betrayed the Muslims of Assam. In October, 2005, 13 Muslim minority organizations came together and formed a new regional political party Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF). State president of Jamiyat, Badaruddin Ajmal, became the president of AUDF.

In the formation of AUDF, Jamiat took the lead. For the first time in politics of India, Jamiat actively involved itself in formation of a political party. The Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari announced in 2000 that he would play a direct role to set up a political party for Muslims to ensure that the 'lost rights of the minorities' are regained (Engineer 2003: 172-174). In the formation of the AUDF, Badaruddin Ajmal was blessed by Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid. In this context, the AUDF can be said a fresh experiment by Indian Muslim leaders to form a political party for Muslims (Bhaumik 2009:218). After three years of formation, AUDF relaunched itself as a national party under the name of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in February 2009. However, AIUDF could not show any progress to be a nationwide political party and during last one decade, its activities remained confined to Assam only. The Election Commission of India also recognizes the AIUDF only as a state party in Assam.

In 2006 Assam Assembly elections, AUDF won 10 Assembly constituencies by securing 9.03 per cent of total vote. AIUDF continued its success in 2011 Assembly Election also and won 18 Assembly seats by securing 12 per cent of total vote polled in the election. AIUDF became the main opposition party in Assam Legislative Assembly after 2011 Assembly election. In 2016 Assam Assembly election, AIUDF got 13 seats securing 13 per cent of total vote polled.

## **ROLE OF JAMIAT IN MUSLIM POLITICS OF ASSAM**

Assam Jamiyat actively took part in the formation of UMF prior to 1985 Assembly election. Jamiyat also campaigned for the party and UMF got 17 seats in 1985 Assembly election. In 1985 election, for the first time, immigrant Muslim voters deserted Congress and the party showed worst ever performance in the Assembly elections of Assam. However in 1991 Assembly election, Jamiyat lent its support to the Congress again and Congress returned to power in the state with comfortable majority. In 1996 election, Jamiyat supported AGP led coalition and the coalition came to power after the election by defeating Congress (Nath 2016, 92). Again in 2001 election, Jamiyat supported Congress and the party returned back to power in the state. In 2005, Jamiyat led the formation of AIUDF. Jamiyat leaders openly campaigned for AIUDF in 2006, 2011 and 2016 Assembly elections.

In the post Assam Movement period, it has been observed, the Jamiyat has significant influence over the immigrant Muslim voters. In Assam Assembly elections 1991, 1996 and 2001, the party or coalition came to power to which Jamiyat lent its electoral support. In 1985 election, UMF showed surprising success only because of the support of the Jamiyat. In 2006, 2011 and 2016 elections, Jamiyat played a vital role in the success of AIUDF.

## **MUSLIM POLITICS IN ASSAM: FROM VOTE BANK TO REGIONAL POLITICAL FORCE**

Muslims in Assam is no longer a vote bank of any political party. During last three decades after the Assam movement, the community has tried to assert and establish its separate political existence in politics of Assam. However, Jamiyat's political role and its influence over a large section of Muslim population has made this political existence communal. The survival of AIUDF since 2005 and its continuous electoral success in the politics of Assam prove that Muslim communal regionalism is a reality in contemporary politics of Assam. It also signifies that Muslim community of Assam has declined to remain a vote bank of Congress and tried to become a regional political unit under AIUDF.

## **NEW OFFENSIVE OF MUSLIM**

The neo-Assamese Muslims have become sizeable in number who can significantly influence and determine the electoral equations in the state. The electoral outcome of at least 30 Assembly constituency is determined by neo Assamese Muslims and their portion in every constituency in

the state are increasing very fast. In this situation, some recent incidents indicate new offensives of the community in society and politics of Assam.

The provision of autonomy is meant only for the tribal people under the Indian constitution. Assam has both plain and hill tribal groups. The hill tribes of Assam enjoy the autonomous self rule under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution and the plain tribes have the provisions of autonomous council, a mechanism of self rule under government of Assam. The Muslims of Assam are not tribals and do not qualify to enjoy self rule. But Rashul Hoque Bahadur, a Muslim MLA from AUDF, in 2007, demanded that the Muslims of Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon and Darrang should be provided autonomous rule under the constitution on the basis of their numerical strength (The Assam Tribune, June 20, 2007).

Indigenous Assamese people have always been demanding the upgradation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) which could help to solve the illegal migration problem of Assam. They believe, as the governments at the centre and in Assam have never shown interest to identify the illegal migrants staying in Assam, at least the legal citizens living in Assam could be identified through the upgradation of NRC which will in turn make the illegal migrants staying in the state visible. However, the leaders of the neo-Assamese Muslim community and the organizations representing the community strongly opposed it. The government of India started the upgradation of NRC 1951 as a pilot project in two revenue circles of Brahmaputra valley in 2010, Barpeta revenue circle of Barpeta district and Chaygaon revenue circle of Kamrup district. Although upgradation of NRC was peacefully completed in Chaygaon, a violent protest in Barpeta under AAMSU on July 11, 2010, which claimed several lives of protesters, compelled the government to abandon whole process of NRC upgradation (Nath 2015, 287). At last, the NRC upgradation in entire Assam could be started in 2015 under direct supervision of Supreme Court of India.

In April 2013, Rashul Hoque Bahadur, the same leader demanded reservation for Muslims, though no more with AIUDF, asserted that there were about 12 million Muslims in Assam and no one could stop a Muslim leader from becoming chief minister of Assam after 2016 Assembly election. AIUDF leader Sirajuddin Ajmal, in the same month, claimed that Badaruddin Ajmal, the AIUDF supremo would become the chief minister of Assam in 2016 (Sharma 2016, 100). Indigenous Assamese consider AIUDF as a Muslim based party safeguarding the interests of immigrant Muslims

only. In this situation, claiming the power of Assam for AIUDF or for Muslims on the basis of numerical strength is sufficient enough to threaten the indigenous Assamese.

On March 31, 2015 speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Mr. Pranab Gogoi, proposed a definition of the 'Assamese People' for the implementation of the clause 6 of Assam Accord. The definition of Assamese people as proposed by the speaker was based on 1951 NRC. AIUDF along with the Congress party strongly opposed the definition of the speaker and demanded for its withdrawal. AAMSU also opposed the definition. On the other hand, all the student organizations and political parties representing the indigenous Assamese population supported the definition.

Before 2014 Lok Sabha election, AIUDF chief campaigned that Almighty won't forgive him if BJP could win for the mistakes of his party (Nath 2014, 87). Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a public gathering on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2016 in Guwahati where he did not make any communal comment. Badaruddin Ajmal, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2016 in a public meeting held in Muslim dominated Baghbor in Barpeta district made communal comment by appealing all Muslims to unite against the Hindus. He stated that all the Hindus have united after the January 19 visit of Narendra Modi, and so Muslim should unite against the Hindus (Asomiya Pratidin, January 22, 2016). These communal comments and appeals have made the politics and society of Assam communally divided and the ethnic Assamese communities began to believe that political leaders of neo-Assamese Muslims have started a communal politics which can lead Assam to pre-partition situation when Muslim League dictated the fate of Assamese people.

## CONCLUSION

After independence, the Muslims of Assam remained leaderless as most of their leaders left to Pakistan.

The community joined the Congress and became a vote bank of the party to remain secured in a predominantly Hindu majority country. However, after acquiring significant numerical strength, the community has declined to remain a vote bank of any political party and started to become an autonomous political unit in politics of Assam. And, the communal and offensive politics of Muslims has started to communally polarize the society and politics of Assam.

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