

Left Political Parties of Assam: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract:

The left political parties of Assam are playing a vital role in the election politics which have participated in Parliamentary and Assembly elections since independence. During the long journey of election politics of India and Assam, the left parties are passing through a trajectory mode where their support base quite satisfactory up to 1978. Later, the support base is reduced tremendously with decline of vote sharing. Being the ideologically strong political parties, the left have lost its support from the electorates due to certain shortcomings. Thus, this paper is an academic exercise to identify the factors responsible for the chronic decline of left political parties in Assam's electoral politics. Further, this study is intended to identify the prospect of left political parties of Assam in future elections. The prospects leading to revival of left parties of Assam in the future are considered important because of the success of democracy. The conglomeration of different factors prominence to revitalize the Marxist ideology against capitalist system is still considered relevant today. Hence, to study the challenges and prospects of left political parties' in Assam, an analytical approach is used to verify the facts. It is hoped that an in-depth study on electoral politics of left political parties of Assam will certainly tap the research gap on the issue and will provoke further empirical study on the subject.

Keywords: Indian Politics, Election, Left political party, Democracy, Marxism

Introduction:

The election of 18th Lok Sabha is likely to be held in April 2024 and all the national and regional political parties are preparing their strategy to elect their candidates from 543 constituencies all over the country. The allies of NDA and INDIA started their movement by organizing road show/rally, preparing a manifesto, public meetings, social media platforms, party members meetings, news briefing, etc. The allies of the NDA and INDIA with the coordination of regional political parties try to reach the voters through different means. All national and regional parties have framed strategic plans to convince the voters to gather support for them. Like as BJP, Congress, and AGP, the left political parties of Assam have also formulated their strategic plans to reach the voters. It has applied different means. Considering the past performance of the left parties of Assam, their strategy this time might be different. Thus this paper is an attempt to evaluate the present endeavours with the analysis of the past experiences.

Objective of the study:

1. To discuss the present status of left political parties in Assam.

2. To understand the role played by the left parties in general and assembly elections in the past.
3. To examine the strategy adopted by the left parties of Assam to win the confidence of the people.
4. To deal with the drawbacks of left political parties in election politics.
5. To make a comparison between left and right political parties and their strategy in election politics.

Research Question:

1. Why the left parties have declined in Assam electoral politics?
2. Do they have any chance to survive?
3. Why the electors or voters are not casting their votes in favour of the left parties?

Methodology:

This study is an empirical study containing a mixture of historical and analytical approaches. The history of left parties of Assam and its role in election politics in the past will be evaluated by applying the historical method while the analytical method would be utilized to understand the strategy adopted by left parties in the past and present. The secondary sources of data are being used to justify the arguments. The secondary sources of data are collected through printed books, journals, newspapers, and websites. The primary sources constitute the interview of the office bearers of the left parties of Assam.

Theoretical frameworks:

The term left is a connotation to denote the ideology of the socialist parties. The political gamut of left and right was coined with the seating arrangement in the French Estate General during the period of the French Revolution. On the one hand, those who sat on the left opposed the ancient regime and Bourbon monarchy and supported the French Revolution, the creation of a democratic republic, and a secular society. On the other hand, those who were in the right supported the traditional institutions of the old regime. The term left was more familiar after the restoration of the French Monarchy in 1815 when it was applied to the independents. In Political Science, the term 'left' is generally used to describe an ideology that stands for social change to create a more egalitarian society. The ideologies of Karl Marx and his followers are described as left ideology.

The political parties that have followed the ideology of Marxism are called the left political parties. In the domain of the formation of political parties in the world, ideological dimensions are getting preference. The ideology of Marx and Engels is portrayed to establish an egalitarian society based on equality in economic terms. According to Marx the economic relationship between men determines the mode of production. In the capitalist society where the mode of production is in the hands of the capitalist exploits the labourers which are evidenced in history of the human civilization. By dint of assuring economic equality, the capitalist system will be replaced by a revolution of the labour class. According to Marx, the class struggle is inevitable between capitalists and laborers. The term used to describe capitalists is bourgeois and labourers as the proletariat. Thus the leftist parties follow the principles of Marx to address the issues of the proletariats, peasants, and workers.

Theoretically what Karl Marx said about society, state, class struggle, and revolution practically first applied in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the Chinese Revolution in 1949 under

Mao in the next. The socio-economic and political conditions of Russia and China were something different as pre-conditioned by Marx but still, the communist regime was established in these two states. Both Russia and China was agrarian country and peasants played a dominant role in overthrowing the capitalist regime through armed conflict by disintegrating the original Marx principle. Lenin and Mao reshaped Marxism to suit the conditions of their countries. Later, some other Latin American countries established communist regimes by following not only Marx but also Lenin and Mao. Furthermore, the Asian and African countries that were under the rule of colonial masters utilized the Marxian principles to liberate their countries from colonialism.

During the freedom movement, Indian leaders like J.P. Narayan and Bhagat Singh searched the alternatives not only to liberate India from British colonialism but also to release the peasants, workers, and tillers from the exploitation of the Britishers. Later J. P. Narayan and other socialist leaders tried to organize the communist party at the ground zero level and demanded the improvement of the conditions of the workers and peasants. After the independence, in ideological lineup, the communist leaders raised the issues of the peasants, workers, and tillers and fought for the improvement of their conditions within the purview of the constitution. The letter and spirit of the communists were not wholeheartedly seeking a revolution like Russia and China but wanted to establish democratic socialism and work within the banner of the constitution. The intention was to address the issues of the marginalized sections of people within the limit of the constitution and democratic set-up. As such, the communists formed the political parties and contested the elections to send their representatives to raise the issues. Their party organization is not only limited to the central level but also to the state level. Since then, the communist party contested elections for representation in Lok Sabha but also in Vidhan Sabhas (State Legislative Assemblies).

The Assam unit of the Communist Party of India was formed during the pre-independence period in 1943 and initiated different strategies to address the issues of the peasants and workers through agitations, protests and persuasions. The legacy of the pre-independence period continued to the post-independence periods as a unit of the All India Communist Party. The Assam unit has contested the elections for Vidhan Sabha from 1952 to the present day. During this period the left continued to decline not only in the sharing of votes but also in supporters and followers. The horizontal downfall of the graph depicts the decline of the left parties.

Figure 1: All India Left party's vote share in percentage in the parliamentary elections.

Year	Left vote share in %	Year	Left vote share in %
1952	23.2	1991	9.6
1957	21.9	1996	11.3
1962	20.6	1998	9.9
1967	18.5	1999	8.1
1971	14.6	2004	8.3
1977	8.2	2009	7.7
1980	10.1	2014	4.8
1984	9.8	2019	2.5
1989	10.7		

Source: Krishnamachary, Shrikanth. A Historical Survey of the Left in Indian Politics, Monday, June 10. <https://swarajyamag.com/politics/a-historical-survey-of-the-left-in-indian-politics>.

The left political parties of Assam from 1952 to 2021 won an insignificant number of seats in them Bidhan Sobha elections.

Figure 2; Assam Legislative Assembly election seat share by left political parties

Year	Seat won by Left parties	Year	Seat won by Left parties
1952	6	1991	6
1957	13	1996	5
1962	7	2001	0
1967	16	2006	3
1972	3	2011	0
1978	20	2016	0
1983	3	2021	1
1985	2		

Source: Election Commission of India: CEO, Assam.

In these elections, CPI, CPI (M), CPI (ML), and other left parties were unable to stand in a dominant position to fulfill the expectations of the workers and peasants. As per the report of the Assam State Election Commission the left parties particularly CPI and CPI (M) had won only 4 seats out of a total of 126 seats of the Assam Legislative Assembly in five elections from 2001 to 2021. So far as vote sharing is concerned, in the 2001 election, only 0.14% of votes were received by CPI and CPI (M) each. In the 2021 election, it has increased to 0.22% and 0.55% votes by CPI and CPI (M) respectively. During the 2006, 2011, and 2016 elections less than 2% per cent of votes were received by both the parties. Thus, it appears that the left parties were in a miserable position in regard to the election politics of Assam.

The chronic decline of left political parties in Assam’s electoral politics can be attributed to several factors. These factors are the synoptic view of the different factors responsible for declining which might be contradicted by other researchers. They are-

1. Demographic change: From 1952 to 2021 Assam witnessed significant demographic changes which include population growth, urbanization, and most importantly an influx of migrants. Left parties have often found it challenging to adapt to the changes and are unable to connect with the people. Ideologically, being the supporter of labourers and working-class people, the left parties have supported the immigration of Bangladeshi nationals in Assam. This perspective of left parties of Assam has detached from the indigenous people and isolated them in elections.

Table – 1: Decadal growth of population

Year	% of variation	
	Assam	India
1901-1911	16.99	5.75
1911-1921	20.48	-0.31
1921-1931	19.91	11.00

1931-1941	20.40	14.22
1941-1951	19.93	13.31
1951-1961	34.98	21.51
1961-1971	34.95	24.80
1971-1981	23.36	24.66
1981-1991	24.24	23.50
1991-2001	18.92	21.34
2001-2011	16.93	17.64

Source: Census Report for respective years.

Table-1: shows the growth of population of Assam rapidly which was more than India in 1901-1971 periods. The expectation of the growing population is high but the left parties were not become compatible to address their issues and problems. Thus, the support of these populations was not in favour of left parties.

Table: 2: Growth rate of urbanization in Assam

Year	Percentage of urban population to total population		Growth rate of urban population %	
	Assam	India	Assam	India
1901	2.34	10.84		
1911	2.41	10.29	20.5	0.35
1921	2.74	11.18	36.80	8.27
1931	2.92	11.99	27.58	19.12
1941	3.11	13.86	28.30	31.97
1951	4.29	17.29	65.73	41.42
1961	7.21	17.91	126.57	26.41
1971	8.82	19.91	65.01	38.23
1981	---	28.34	---	46.14
1991	11.10	23.34	92.97*	36.47
2001	12.72	27.70	36.24	31.30

Source: Census of India, Various issues

*The figure shows the growth rate from 1971 to 1991, as there was no census in Assam during 1981.

Table 2: shows the urbanization of population of Assam is high during the years and it indicates that more people are moving toward urban areas in search of job or employment. Along with overpopulating urban counterparts, some new problems are also cropped up in urban areas that need to be addressed by the government. Contrary to this, the political parties also need to take care of the issues for election purpose. But the left parties are not given any priority to the problems and hence, they lost the support of these electorates.

So far as immigration is concerned, in 2001, out of the total population in Assam about 0.71 percent is international migrants, particularly from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Bangladesh constitutes 86.14% of the total immigration to Assam. The district which has the highest number of immigrants is

Cachar (1.63%) followed by Karimganj (1.61%), Bongaigan (1.40%), Nagaon (1.13%), Goalpara (0.95%), etc. The district which has the lowest number of immigrants is Sibsagar (0.11%) followed by Jorhat (0.14%), Golaghat (0.18%), Dibrugarh (0.33%), etc. (Dibya Kalita, 2015).

2. Ethnic diversity and regional politics: The politics of Assam is comprehensively influenced by ethnic and regional factors. There are 15 numbers of ethnic groups who seek to protect their identity through political participation. Furthermore, religions also play an important role as a determinant of election politics. In Assam out of 3.12 crores of the total population as per the 2001 census, 61.47% are Hindus, 34.12% are Muslims, 3.74% are Christians, 0.42% belongs to Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and other religion, and 0.16% are not stated their religion. So far as SC, ST, OBC, and General Categories are concerned, 7.15%, 12.45%, and 25% and 54% of people respectively live in Assam. As a result, the ethnic groups, religious groups, and caste groups have either formed regional political parties or supported the national or other regional parties intended to accomplish their issues. However, the left parties which have traditionally focused on class-based issues unable to navigate the diversified issues related to ethnicity, religion, and caste categories in their activities and politics.

3. Failure to address local issues: There are certain specific local issues and challenges in Assam and the Assamese people are well acquainted with these issues. The people of Assam expected that the political parties either national or regional should effectively address them and a solution should come out. Voters often prioritize issues such as immigration, land rights, protection of identity, NRC, flood, inter-state border disputes, tea garden labourers issues, ethnic and religious conflict, legal and constitutional safeguards, cultural preservation, price rise, etc. But facts remain that the left parties are primarily focused on economic and class-based issues rather than local issues.

4. Electoral alliances: In present electoral politics the alliances with other parties is indispensable. In Assam, BJP, Congress (I), AIUDF and AGP are major players of the election games. The other parties like CPI, CPI (M), Forward Block, Rajjar Dal, Assam Jatiyo Parishad, JD(U), Lok Jana Sakti Party, Trinomol Congress are played insignificant role in last Parliamentary and Assembly elections. The BPF and UPPL is present only in BTC area. In fact, the BJP and AGP are in alliance from 2014 onwards. However, the AIUDF is a communal party representing Muslims of Assam has no scope for an alliance. Thus, realizing the ground fact the left parties of Assam agreed to make an alliance with eight parties including Congress (I) specifically for 2024 Lok Sabha election on 10th March, 2023.

5. Lack of strong leadership: As like as the national level, the state-level left parties are also lagging behind in the leadership issue. The Assam unit of left parties is suffering from a lack of charismatic leadership who can effortlessly connect with the voters and convey their messages effectively. It is to be noted that there were some leaders of left parties like Hemen Das, Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya, Hareswar Goswami, Jiten Das, Lilaram Kakoti, Madhusudan Das, Promode Gogoi, etc., who imprinted a remarkable position in pre and post independent periods. But later years, the leaders of left parties were less impressive and are unable to contribute a lot to the rise of left parties in Assam.

6. Adaptation problem: The left parties represent a distinct political ideology as established by Marx, Lenin, and Mao. The parties assume that the ideology of Marx, Lenin, and Mao would

effectively be implemented at any cost. But the socio-economic and political condition of Assam is something different from Russia and China. So, the question of adaptation arising and transforming according to the ground situation needs to be realized. The policies and strategies should be changed as per situation prevails, but the left parties are not aware of the ground realities and stick with their traditional ideologies. The socio-economic dynamics and political preferences of the Assamese electorate are something different which is not similar to the left parties. Ultimately the left parties are distancing from the electorates and performance in elections is not good.

7. Challenges from other parties: In the political arena of Assam the Congress (I) stood dominant position in Assam till 2014 and later on the BJP replaced the Congress (I) and established its rule. The rule of AGP for two terms in 1985 and 1990 was an emotional upshot after the Assam Agitation which did not last for long. The existence of left parties is seen from the very beginning of our constitution and the first general election after independence, but their performance is not up to the mark with very small representation in the State Assembly. This is assumed that the strong position of the other political parties and their presence is responsible for the decline of left political parties. Whatever the strategy and stronghold of the party organization of other political parties are responsible for the decline of left parties of Assam.

8. Economic reforms: like in another part of India, the economic reforms and liberalization also have impacted Assam. The economic policy adopted by India is, i.e. market-oriented and liberal economy, and is not similar to the economic policy of the left. The left parties are focused on a state-controlled economy and socialist principles rather than a liberal economy. The electors preferred a liberal economy rather than left left-oriented state-control economy. It is interesting to note that the Congress and BJP supported the liberal democracy and principles of liberalism and therefore, they tried to attract the people to their principle and ideology. The general masses that are barely literate about this principle accepted it and reacted accordingly. The left parties failed to spread their ideology and literate with the socialist principle to the masses is the cause of losing support from the people and electorates.

9. Historical legacy: Historically Assam was a princely state of the Ahom dynasty which was later merged by British colonial rulers in 1826 and became an Indian state. During the freedom movement, it followed the principles of INC and participated in the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. British legislation introduced the parliamentary system of government in Assam as in other parts of India. Although the Communist Party was formed in 1943 in Assam as a unit of the All India Communist Party of India during that time their primary objective was to protect the rights of the laborers and peasants and address the problems faced by them. After independence, the left parties adopted the democratic socialist principle in their thought and activities, but still their intention was primarily focused on the protection and preservation of downtrodden classes of Assam. Although the left parties participated in the election process still they concentrated on the labor and peasant classes only.

10. Communication and campaigning techniques: The political parties naturally use traditional and modern means to communicate with the masses to disseminate their ideology and plan of action to

create confidence among the people that the political party will ensure their welfare and development if they cast their votes in favor of them. All political parties are trying to reach the people as much as possible through effective communication. In this regard, they used the means of campaigning. The campaigning might be either through public meetings, road shows, door-to-door visits, press or electronic media, etc. However, the left parties are given less importance to communication and campaigning methods to convey their policies and ideologies to the masses. Eventually, the left parties used less persuasive means to communicate their ideology to the masses. As a result, the policies and ideas of left parties have not reached the masses.

11. Do they have any possibilities to revive in the future?

There is a pertinent question that arises of whether the left parties of India and Assam will be able to revive. The prospects of left parties in India and Assam are uncertain and depend on several factors. In recent years the left parties have faced significant challenges and declines, but still, there is every possibility of regaining. So to regain their position following measures may be considered.

Whatever experience earned by the left parties at all Indian levels during the early independent period should be utilized for the effective transformation of mass support. In this regard, the left parties should try to make initiatives to strengthen at the regional level. The Kolkata, Kerala, and Tripura should be projected as success stories of the left and it should try to apply in other states too. It should also be considered as a base to articulate a plan of action for the resurrection of left political parties.

In the politics of India, the coalition or alliance with other parties is considered as important as strategic plan, mass mobilization, and communication. Likewise, the other political parties the left parties should also try to build up alliances with like-minded parties for revival. Historically the left parties are the coalition partner of UPA at the national level and AGP in Assam, so the left parties should initiate an effort to build an alliance with other national and regional parties by considering the political dynamics and electoral arithmetic.

In politics adaptation and rebranding of ideology and strategy from time to time is mandatory due to the changing nature of voter dynamics. The left parties should also choose to adapt their ideologies and messaging to resonate with the changing aspirations of the Indian electorate. They should shift towards more inclusive and identity-based politics rather than retaining their focus on issues of class. Further, the left parties need to re-evaluate their core ideologies and policies to make them more relevant to contemporary India. They should focus on issues such as social justice, healthcare, education, employment, and environmental sustainability.

The youth plays an important role in politics. All political parties give importance to the younger generation and address their issues in elections. Therefore, the political parties have formed youth organizations like ABVP by BJP and, NSUI by Congress to attract the youth. The left parties should also form a youth wing to attract them and mobilize them for the revival of their position. Engaging with youth issues and concerns, as well as tapping into the energy of youth activists and leaders, can rejuvenate their grassroots support.

The left parties should find a charismatic leader who can effectively connect with the electorate and inspire the confidence of the masses. As a result of which the prospects of left parties will be bright. The left should primarily focus on the local issues more than national issues. The left parties should continue to work on addressing the concerns of the specific communities and their problems. It will help to build a dedicated support base for them.

The left parties should try to improve their communication and messaging techniques so that they can effectively convey their policies, vision, and achievements to the electorate by using modern and innovative communication channels.

The left parties should rethink their party organization. The internal factionalism and maintaining party unity should be made strong.

Conclusion:

The left parties of India and Assam face challenges and have experienced decline but still, it cannot be wiped out entirely. The survival and resurgence of the left parties will depend on their ability to adapt to the changing circumstances, connect with voters, and form strategic alliances. Politics is always a dynamic process and the fortunes of political parties can change over time, so left parties can regain relevance in days to come. If the left parties can effectively navigate the evolving political landscape of India and Assam, there are possibilities of regaining.

The future survival and success of left parties depend upon different factors but a proper understanding of the political dynamics of the nation and state is more important. Primarily the left needs to change its ability to adapt to the political dynamics, build alliances, effectively communicate its policies, and resonate with the electorate on contemporary issues.

The reversing electoral decline of left parties is a long-term process and a persistent strategy needs to be articulated. The left parties will need to invest in organizational capacity, effective leadership, and grassroots mobilization to regain relevance in Indian and Assam politics. Additionally, they should continuously assess their strategies and try to address contemporary issues beyond traditional party ideology. In Assam, the left parties should consider identity politics, dynamics of ethnic diversity and conflict, religion, caste, community, etc. to revive. Local issues like flood, NRC, inter-state disputes, tea garden labourers' problems, immigration, unemployment, price rise, etc. should also be given preference. The Communities like Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimas, Mising, Deori, Kachari, Tai Ahom, Mech, Hajong, Rabha, and other general caste people like Brahmins, Kayatha, Kalita, Muslims should also be considered while contesting Parliamentary and Assembly elections by the left parties.

It is important to note that the decline of left parties in India is not uniform across the country, and they still maintain a significant presence in some states and localities. Their presence can be traced through different activities like trade unions, and social movements. Therefore, it is very much pertinent to understand the relevance of the left parties at the national and state level. If they want to revive they need to undergo significant ideological and strategic transformation according to the changing circumstances of India's electoral politics with a broader perspective.

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