

# Regional Parties in Assam

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## **I. Introduction**

Assam is a good case study of the emergence of regional parties and the accompanying concept of sub nationalism. To look at regional parties as out of tune with national goals is an oversimplified view. Regional parties should not be seen as a threat to the broader concept of nationalism. This is because of two objective reasons- First there is no evidence that regional parties have a conflicting effect on national goals. Second, any political movement at a regional level is a key product of political organisation and not a separate spontaneous case of regional loyalty.

### **A. Overview of political landscape in Assam**

In Assam's political landscape, the election result points at a trend where regional parties are functional and strategically repositioning themselves but not necessarily rising or falling. Data suggests regional parties are adapting. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha Constituencies and 126 State Assembly constituencies.

### **B. Significance of regional parties**

In the case of Assam, the regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad have a national orientation. A common yet mistaken viewpoint is that regional parties are equated with parochialism. However, this view eliminates an important question ' Why is the case that national parties fail to appeal to masses in certain regions?' There is an interesting observation to it. At a regional level, certain issues may crop up and national parties are unable to voice and work at the grass root level, this is where the regional parties come into the broader picture. So, the parties which are emerging at regional level perform necessary functions in Indian democracy.

## **II. Historical context**

### **A. Emergence of regional consciousness**

The emergence of regional political parties in Assam since the 1980s shows the state's complex social dynamics and the inability of national parties in solving local issues. Historically, the state was dominated by the Indian National Congress (INC). However, Assam witnessed a shift with the Assam Accord and the subsequent rise of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). This was the beginning of a new political scenario where regional identity, immigration concerns, and ethnic representation became central to electoral politics.

One similarity that is common to the rise of all major regional parties in Assam like AGP, AIUDF and BPF is their focus on regional needs which were pushed aside by national parties. It's not easy for regional parties, is it? They face all sorts of challenging and complex situations. There are internal disagreements that can tear them apart, and then the national parties are constantly trying to grab their ideas. Still regional parties are the ones who really understand Assam's complex issues. They're the ones who have to try and find that delicate balance between protecting the rights of the indigenous people and showing national loyalty.

### **III. Major regional Parties**

#### **A. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)**

The rise of AGP is linked to Assam agitation which started in 1979. In the year 1971 Bangladesh was going through a civil war. Many people left the country and illegally migrated to nearby Indian states. The locals were concerned about the issue of illegal migrants entering the state and feared potential social and economic changes in the state. All Assam Student Union (AASU) started a non-violent campaign to raise the concerns of the state. Later these protests started getting violent and the Nellie massacre followed. The anti-immigration groups attacked immigrants. These protestors were demanding that the illegal migrants must be identified and deported from India. The violence ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in the presence of then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. It was a settlement and the Government agreed that immigrants who came after March 1971 will be deported.

The Golaghat national convention was held and Assam had its first regional party 'Asom Gana Parishad' on 14 October 1985. The AGP contested the State Assembly elections in December 1985 and won 67 of the 126 seats and seven of the 14 Lok Sabha (Parliament) seats, becoming the Government of Assam. In 1996, the party again formed a government.

In the 2010s, the popularity of AGP started reducing and it went from 67 seats in assembly elections in 1985 to just 14 in 2016 in state assembly elections.

#### **B. All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)**

It was formed on 30 October 2005 and its ideology revolves around Agrarianism, national inclusiveness and minority rights. Even though the AGP was already in existence, there were still issues at the regional level like minority rights which needed to be addressed. The emergence of the AIUDF also coincides with the repeal of the IMDT Act in 2005. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act was valid only in Assam, it dealt with rules to identify illegal migrants. However, it was removed as it created problems in identifying illegal migrants. Also the conviction rate was less than half per cent of the cases initiated<sup>1</sup>. It was also to the benefit of illegal migrants as the proceeding would end up in their favor and now they will have a document that states they are not illegal migrants. The repeal of the IMDT Act 2005 caused fear among muslim minorities and they needed a party that addresses their concerns. AGP's focus on the Assam identity did not include minority needs. Need of AIUDF can be traced to unmet minority social needs.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Indian Journal of Political Science.

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### **C. Bodoland People's Front (BPF)**

It was formed in 2005 and its ideas are centered around secularism and democratic socialism. The BPF surfaced as a distinct political force with a central focus on the socio-political demands of the Bodo community. Bodos are a tribal community in Assam and have sought autonomy to preserve their cultural identity. BPF addresses the issue of socio-economic marginalization of Bodos. The AGP didn't have a plan for tribal communities and AIUDF did not highlight Bodo's territorial demand. The BPF's main objective was to safeguard the political and economic rights of Bodos. BPF focused on protecting the language and culture of the Bodos. The issues of the Bodo community were overlooked by other regional parties like AGP and AIUDF

## IV. Electoral Trends

### A. Vidhan Sabha Elections

The 2001 Assam Legislative Election was held in two phases on May 10 and May 14, 2001, to elect representatives for the 126-seat Assam Legislative Assembly. The Indian National Congress (INC) emerged victorious, securing a majority and forming the government under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, who began his first term.

Party	Seats Won
Indian National Congress (INC)	71
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	20
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	8
Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)	3
Communist Party of India (CPI)	2
Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM)	2
Samajwadi Party (SP)	1
Independents (IND)	19
Total	126

**Table 1: Seats won in 2001 Assam Vidhan Sabha elections**

### Voting Preferences

**INC's Dominance:** The Congress victory was attributed to strong support in rural areas, tea garden constituencies, and among minority communities, particularly Muslims, who form a significant voting bloc in Assam (around 30-34% of the population as per the 2001 Census).

**AGP's Decline:** The AGP, a regional party that had previously ruled Assam, saw a decline due to anti-incumbency from its 1996-2001 term and internal factionalism.

**BJP's Limited Appeal:** The BJP, still emerging in Assam at the time, had a smaller foothold, primarily among urban voters and certain Hindu-majority areas.

**Independents:** The significant number of independent wins (19 seats) reflects localized issues and the influence of community leaders in Assam's diverse electoral landscape.

## 2006 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections: Overview

The 2006 Assam Legislative Assembly election was held in two phases on April 3 and April 10 to elect 126 MLAs. The Indian National Congress (INC) emerged as the single largest party and formed the government under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, marking his second consecutive term. The election saw a voter turnout of approximately 75.8%, reflecting significant public participation.

Party (YEAR-2006)	Seats Won	Difference from INC (53)
Indian National Congress (INC)	53	nil
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	24	-29
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	10	-43
Bodoland People's Front (BPF)	11	-42
Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M))	2	-51
All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)	10	-43
Independents	6	-47
Others (smaller parties)	0	-53
Total	126	

**Table 2: Seats won in 2006 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections**

INC: Secured 53 seats, falling short of a majority (64 seats required) but formed the government with support from allies like the BPF.

AGP: Won 24 seats, making it the second-largest party but a significant drop from its past dominance.

BJP: Gained 10 seats, showing a modest presence compared to its later rise in 2016.

BPF: Won 11 seats and later allied with INC.

AIUDF: A newly emerging force led by Badruddin Ajmal, won 10 seats, reflecting support from Muslim-majority areas.

Independents: 6 candidates won, indicating localized influence.

## **Voting preferences**

Voting preferences in the 2006 election were influenced by caste, community, and regional issues like illegal immigration, development.

INC: Draw broad support across castes and communities, particularly from upper-caste Hindus and OBCs (e.g. Ahoms, Koch Rajbongshi) due to its secular appeal and development promises. SCs (e.g. Kaibarta fishermen) in rural constituencies and some Muslim voters in areas where AIUDF wasn't strong yet. Its alliance with BPF ensured ST (Bodo) support in Bodoland districts.

AGP: Retained a base among -indigenous Assamese hindus (especially Ahoms and other STs outside Bodoland) due to its regionalist stance against illegal immigration and lost ground to INC and BJP due to internal splits and governance failures in the 1990s.

BJP: Early growth among upper-caste hindus and urban voters and anti-immigration rhetoric. It received limited ST/SC support at this stage, as it hadn't yet allied with regional tribal parties.

BPF: Dominated the bodo ST voters in the Bodoland Territorial Council areas, reflecting ethnic consolidation.

AIUDF: Emerged as a key player among muslim voters, especially in immigrant-heavy districts like Dhubri, Barpeta, and Nagaon, capitalize on minority identity politics.

Independents: Won in pockets with strong local caste/community leaders, often from ST or SC groups.

## **2011 Assam Vidhan Sabha elections**

The 2011 Assam Legislative Assembly election saw the Indian National Congress (INC) secure a decisive victory, winning 78 out of 126 seats and forming the government for a third consecutive term under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi. The election featured participation from national, regional, and smaller parties, with distinct voting patterns across caste and community lines.

### **Election Results**

The INC dominated in Upper Assam (e.g., Jorhat, Dibrugarh) and Barak Valley (e.g., Silchar), while the AIUDF consolidated Muslim-majority areas like Dhubri and Barpeta. The BPF swept Bodoland's tribal seats.

### **Voting Preferences by Caste/Community**

Muslim voters: Bengali-speaking Muslims overwhelmingly backed AIUDF (e.g., 64.6% in Baghbor) and Assamese muslims split between INC and AGP.

Hindu voters: Assamese Hindus supported INC (39%) and AGP (16%) and Bengali Hindus leaned toward INC in Barak Valley.

Tribal groups: BPF secured Bodo votes (e.g., 66% in Kokrajhar East), while INC won Karbi and Dimasa seats.

Scheduled Castes/Tribes: INC received 42% of SC/ST votes, per Lokniti data.

Key Trends- INC's welfare schemes and Gogoi's leadership neutralized anti-incumbency. AIUDF emerged as the primary opposition by mobilizing Bengali-Muslim migrants. BJP was limited to 5 seats despite polarizing campaigns on immigration. The election underscored INC's pan-Assam coalition-building and AIUDF's consolidation of marginalized Muslim voters.

### **2016 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections**

The total seats contested for were 126. BJP overthrew the Congress government led by Tarun Gogoi and ended the 15-year rule of the Congress government. The BJP alone clinched 60 seats, while Congress managed only 26. Sarbananda Sonowal became the 14<sup>th</sup> Chief Minister of Assam.

<b>Alliance (Year-2016)</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats Won</b>
NDA	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	60
NDA	Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	14
NDA	Bodoland People's Front (BPF)	12
UPA	Indian National Congress (INC)	26
None	All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)	13
None	Independents	1

**Table 3- Seats won in 2016 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections**

Voting patterns reflected caste and community dynamics. The BJP successfully consolidated votes among upper-caste Hindus, tea garden workers, and indigenous Assamese communities, leveraging promises of development and curbing illegal immigration. The AIUDF retained influence among Bengali-speaking Muslims, particularly in Lower Assam, while Congress struggled to maintain its diverse voter base, including Ahoms, OBCs, and Scheduled Tribes. A notable trend was the BJP's strategic outreach to non-Congress voters, including former AGP supporters, signaling a shift toward identity-based politics over Congress's traditional secular appeal. The elections also highlighted growing voter preference for regional issues like flood management and employment,



with the BJP's campaign emphasizing "parivartan" (change). This election underscores a changing political landscape in Assam, with the BJP establishing a strong foothold in the Northeast, reshaping regional power dynamics.

### **2021 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections**

The 2021 Assam elections were important because it was the first time that a non Congress alliance won back to back. BJP got strong support from upper-caste Assamese, tea garden workers, and OBCs (Ahoms, Koch-Rajbongshi) due to welfare schemes and nationalist appeals. Congress was backed by Muslims (34% of the population) and some indigenous groups. AIUDF held sway in Muslim-majority areas. BJP's welfare schemes, such as Orunodoi (cash transfers to women), were particularly effective among rural and OBC voters. BJP also made inroads in some minority areas (e.g., Barpeta). High voter turnout of 79.93% reflected strong public engagement, driven by identity politics and local issues like tea garden worker rights. Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) among young voters.

<b>Alliance (Year 2021)</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats Won</b>
NDA	BJP	60
NDA	AGP	9
NDA	UPPL	6
<b>NDA Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>
Mahajot	INC	29
Mahajot	AIUDF	16
Mahajot	BPF	4
<b>Mahajot Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

**Table 4- Seats won in 2021 Assam Vidhan Sabha Elections**

Source-<https://prsindia.org/legislatures/state/vital-stats/profile-of-the-15th-assam-legislative-assembly>

## **B.Assam Lok Sabha Elections.**

### **2004 Lok Sabha Elections:**

In 2004, Assam's political landscape was characterized by the continued dominance of the Indian National Congress (INC). This election reflected the party's established base and its ability to maintain its influence in the region. However, it was not a complete sweep, as regional forces, most notably the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), still held a significant base in certain constituencies. The political discourse of the time was heavily influenced by issues of regional identity, particularly concerns surrounding immigration and the preservation of Assamese culture. These factors played a crucial role in shaping voter sentiment, allowing regional parties to retain pockets of strength. Additionally, developmental issues, such as infrastructure and economic progress, were also prominent in the electoral campaigns. The 2004 election, therefore, presented a picture of a state where national party dominance was tempered by the persistent influence of regionalism, creating a complex and nuanced political environment.

### **2009 Lok Sabha Elections:**

The 2009 Lok Sabha elections in Assam signaled a period of shifting political dynamics. While the INC remained a significant player, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began to make notable gains, indicating a gradual increase in its support base. This election also marked the emergence of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) as a political force, highlighting the growing importance of minority politics in the state. The AIUDF's success underscored the changing demographics of Assam and the increasing political mobilization of minority communities. Furthermore, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) winning a seat, reinforced the regional ethnic political power that exists in Assam. This election demonstrated a fragmentation of the political landscape, with regional and community-based parties playing increasingly influential roles. The issues that dominated the campaigns included immigration, ethnic tensions, and the need for balanced development across the state's diverse regions. The 2009 results foreshadowed the significant political transformations that would occur in subsequent elections.

### **2014 Lok Sabha Elections:**

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections marked a watershed moment in Assam's political history, with the BJP emerging as the dominant force. The BJP's campaign focused on promises of development, good governance, and addressing the long-standing issue of illegal immigration. The INC, which had historically held a strong position in the state, experienced a significant decline in its seat share, reflecting a clear shift in voter preferences. The AIUDF maintained its presence, continuing to represent the interests of minority communities. This election fundamentally altered the political landscape of Assam, setting the stage for the BJP's continued ascendancy in the years to come.

## 2019 Lok Sabha Election

The 2019 Lok Sabha elections in Assam showcased a significant political landscape shift, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) solidifying its dominance in the state. The BJP secured a notable victory, winning 9 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats. This outcome underscored the party's growing influence in the region.

Conversely, the Indian National Congress (INC), which had historically held a strong presence in Assam, saw its seat count reduced to 3. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) maintained its presence by winning 1 seat, reflecting its continued support base in certain areas of the state. Additionally, an independent candidate also secured a seat.

### Voting Preference and Vote Share

The 2019 elections in Assam showcased a strong performance by the NDA, driven by the BJP's appeal under Narendra Modi's leadership and its state governance under Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal.

BJP: Secured 36.05% of the vote share, contesting 10 seats and winning 9. This reflected its growing influence in Assam, capitalizing on issues like development, national security, and the NRC (National Register of Citizens) debate.

INC: Garnered 35.44% of the vote share, contesting 14 seats but winning only 3. Despite a high vote percentage, Congress struggled to convert votes into seats due to fragmentation and BJP's dominance in key areas.

AIUDF: Achieved 7.8% of the vote share, winning 1 seat (Dhubri). Its influence remained confined to Muslim-majority pockets.

Independent (Naba Kumar Sarania): Took 3.5% of the vote share in Kokrajhar, enough to win as an Independent, leveraging local tribal support.

AGP: Managed 8.2% of the vote share but won no seats, a decline from its historical regional strength.

Others: Smaller parties and Independents collectively accounted for the rest, with no significant wins beyond Sarania.

The NDA's combined vote share was around 39%, giving it an edge over the opposition. The BJP led in 69 of Assam's 126 assembly segments, a strong indicator of its grassroots penetration at the time.

## 2024 Lok Sabha Elections:

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Assam solidified the BJP's continued political dominance within the state. The BJP, in alliance with regional partners like the AGP and UPPL, achieved a strong showing, reinforcing the power of the NDA alliance within Assam. One of the most significant shifts was the AIUDF's failure to secure any seats,

marking a notable change in the state's political balance. The AGP making a return to winning seats also shows the changing dynamic of regional party power. The election campaigns were heavily influenced by issues such as the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), regional development, and the maintenance of cultural identities. The results indicated a consolidation of the BJP's political strategies, including its ability to form effective alliances with regional parties. The INC maintained a presence, showing that they are still a viable political force. The election also demonstrated the continuing importance of regional political alliances in the state.

## **A.Coalition Politics**

In 2016, the AGP won 14 seats in the Legislative Assembly and joined a coalition with the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The AGP is part of the North-East Regional Political Front, which supports the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In 2019, AGP briefly broke its alliance with the BJP over the Citizenship Amendment Bill but saw a resurgence after aligning with the BJP.

The BJP also formed a coalition with the Bodoland People's Front (BPF). However, by 2021, the BPF had shifted to the Congress-led Mahajot alliance.

Key reasons for this shift include:

1)Worsening Relations: The relationship between the BPF and the BJP soured significantly because of the Bodoland Territorial Council elections. The BJP formed a government with the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and Gana Suraksha Party (GSP) and BPF was sidelined. The BTR is an autonomous region created to protect the rights and interests of the Bodo people and other communities residing in the area. This led to feelings of betrayal within the BPF, as they were previously allies.

2)Strategy Differences: Given the evolving political situation, BPF positioned itself carefully and joined the Congress-led coalition. BPF thought it could capitalize on Congress influence in the Bodoland Territorial Region and hence increase its prospects of winning in the region.

## **B. Shifting Political Alliances**

The shifting political landscape of Assam, as seen in the 2011, 2016, and 2021 legislative assembly elections, showcases the changing nature of political alliances. The transition from a Congress-dominated government in 2011 to the BJP-led NDA's consecutive victories in 2016 and 2021 points at realignments. The shift of the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) from the NDA to the Congress-led Mahajot highlights that these alliances are not static, but rather driven by immediate political calculations as seen in the BTC ( Bodoland Territorial Council) election fallout. Furthermore, the Asom Gana Parishad's (AGP) fluctuating relationship with the BJP, including a brief break and then re-alignment, underscores the practical nature of coalition politics in Assam. The emergence of

new political groups like the United Regional Front (URF), born out of social movements, further hints at the altering dynamics of political alliances in the state.

## **V. Challenges**

1. Lack of internal democracy and meaningful choice- Sometimes the decision making process can leave out certain individuals. Hence not every member gets an equal say. Political parties face a significant challenge as the traditional left-right divide, even in its most basic form, is losing its coherence. Weakening of this basic division makes it more difficult for parties to define their identities, differentiate themselves from competitors, and maintain stable coalitions. Parties may find it difficult to structure political competition and appeal to voters based on traditional ideological position.
2. Fragmentation of Opposition- The opposition to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is highly fragmented, with regional parties often divided into multiple factions. For instance, the Congress party's association with the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) has raised issues of voter perception, as AIUDF is viewed as a community-based party by some people which could potentially alienate broader voter bases. This fragmented nature hinders efforts to present a united front against the ruling party.
3. Rise of New Political Entities- The emergence of new political entities like AJP (Assam Jatiya Parishad) and Rajbor Dal has made the landscape more complex for established regional parties. The newer ones are capitalizing on sentiments related to Assamese identity and rights. This poses a challenge to traditional players like AGP.
4. Influence of National Politics- National parties tend to have an upper hand. This may cause an atmosphere of dominance where a local party can get overlooked. National parties have a strong organizational structure. They also have greater financial resources. This helps them further to dominate the political discourse.
5. Decline in Voter Support- AGP was popular in the beginning. But over time, things changed for this party. Voter confidence began to shake and this trend could be observed during the electoral performance since the late 1990s.
6. Unstable alliance- Certain regional parties like the BPF have political alliances which are fluid in nature. This raises concern of stability. BPF quit the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and joined the Congress-led coalition before the Assam assembly election. This was after relations with the BJP turned sour during the Bodoland Territorial Council elections when the BJP formed a government with the UPPL and Gana Suraksha Party (GSP), sidelining the BPF. These shifts point at underlying instability and strategic realignments that can confuse voters and weaken the party's long-term prospects.
7. Public Disillusionment- This happens when a political party due to governance issues, loses confidence of the public and there is a feeling of distrust. The masses have an expectation that the local parties will be proactive and

work on pressing challenges in the region. Failure to work on these issues or unsatisfactory performance by the party can result in declining support as voters seek alternatives that promise better governance.

## **VI. Recommendations**

1. To tackle the challenge of internal democracy, internal committees can be formed within parties. These committees will have members from various levels of the party. There could be regular membership surveys and polls on important decisions.
2. Lack of meaningful choice can be overcome by redefining party identity. Developing innovative policy proposals that address contemporary issues beyond the traditional left-right spectrum. The party's unique vision has to be put forth clearly and it has been differentiated from competitors through targeted branding.
3. Fragmentation of opposition can be overcome by initiating dialogues with other opposition parties to find common goals and values. Develop a shared agenda that addresses key issues of concern.
4. The challenge of the rise of new political parties can be overcome by adopting and innovating. Identifying and analysing the factors driving the success of new political entities- it could be their focus on specific identity issues or grievances. Develop counter-narratives or policy proposals that resonate with the same target groups. Use innovative communication strategies, such as social media campaigns or grassroots mobilization.
5. The challenge of influence of national parties can be overcome if parties focus on local issues. Developing policy proposals that work on local challenges, boosting the party's grassroots network and engaging with local communities to build trust can be certain measures.
6. To tackle the challenge of decline in voter support, the parties can build trust through performance. Past policies can be reviewed and areas of improvement can be looked into.
7. Unstable Alliances-Laying down a transparent framework for assessing potential alliance partners. The framework can be based on compatibility of values and policies. Periodically evaluating the performance of the alliance and addressing any emerging issues proactively.
8. To tackle disillusionment, focus should be on key local concerns and making investments in capacity building for party members.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Regional parties play a vital role in representation and working on local issues but the need for stronger internal party democracy remains a challenge. Regional parties have bridged the gaps left by national parties when it comes to solving local issues. They raise local concerns and act as checks against policies which are homogeneous in nature and overlook local needs. The shifting nature of coalition politics can be seen in the electoral trends. Parties align and then realign to maximize their winning chances. This fluidity as can be seen in BPF's departure from the NDA to join the Congress-led Mahajot and the AGP's fluctuating alliance with the BJP, underscores the practical nature of political alliances.

Regional parties come with a set of challenges like lack of internal democracy, less meaningful choices, fragmented opposition, entry of new political competitors. Addressing the challenges will help in better governance.

The relevance of regional parties in Assam lies in their ability to address the state's unique challenges and balance regional aspirations with national unity. The 2026 elections will be held soon and regional parties will play a crucial part. If the regional parties try to innovate and embrace a reformed approach, they may continue to be relevant.

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