

## THE ROLE OF ASSAM GANGA PARISHAD AS AN OPPOSITION IN ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, ON THE ISSUE OF RIVER LINKAGE 2001-2006

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**Abstract:** *In 2001 Assam Legislative Assembly Elections the Congress (I) formed the government and the AGP was recognized officially as the Opposition in the Assembly. In this article it has examined the role of AGP as an Opposition in the Assam Legislative Assembly from 2001 to 2006 mainly on one specific issue that is river linkage in Assam. The River linkage is a project aimed at linking two or more rivers by creating a network of canals and covering land areas that otherwise does not have access to river water. By means of river linkage, the flow of water from river to sea can be reduced. It is based on the assumptions that surplus water in some rivers can be diverted to Deficit Rivers by creating a network of canals to interconnect various rivers. The AGP-led Opposition raised the issue of River Linkage where it was alleged that the water of Brahmaputra would be diverted by the Union Government to other states. On this issue, the Opposition tabled a proposal that implication for meeting the future challenge of water scarcity that included linking up Brahmaputra with major rivers and tributaries of the country to mitigate the problem of flood but at the same time drought should not be detrimental to the state. The execution of such project would be a complicated one because many unforeseen social, political and environmental aspect are involved with it apart from the technical intricacies whose acceptable solution are yet to emerge. It was also alleged that environmental impact related to the project has not been properly assessed. The study also revealed that the Opposition (AGP) was not clear on the entire issue either to support or to reject the project. At the end the project was not materialized.*

**Keywords:** Water, Assam Ganga Parishad, River Linkage, River Brahmaputra

### Introduction

The existence of Opposition is the most distinctive characteristic of parliamentary democracy; it is its life blood. Democracy admits of dissent and conflict which give rise to Opposition. Parliamentary democracy needs an Opposition most if it is to function effectively and successfully. No leader or party can overcome the temptation of becoming dictatorial, autocratic and arrogant in the absence of the watchful eye of a strong, viable, well-informed, vigilant Opposition. It is the Opposition that can expose the mistakes, the errors, the failures, the corruption, the lack of honesty and integrity, the readiness to resort to most unscrupulous methods and means to achieve the ends and objectives of the rulers. A healthy and strong opposition is capable of refusing to approve the policies of rulers and sanctioning funds to carry on its work. It is able to vote the rulers out of power which is not possible for anyone to do through any other medium. Through other means one may be able to criticize the rulers, create a strong public opinion, make the people conscious of the fault; and failures of the rulers and even ask people to revolt. But if it is a democracy, if there is more than one political party, if the opponent and dissidents have a voice, then it is the Opposition party that can bring the government down. The Assam Legislative Assembly had

its Opposition and the Opposition played its role from 2001-06. The Assam Legislative Assembly is the unicameral legislature of the Indian state of Assam. It is housed in Dispur, the capital of Assam, geographically situated in present Western Assam region. The legislative assembly comprises 126 members directly elected from single-seat constituencies. The term of the assembly is 5 years, unless sooner dissolved.

### Eleventh Elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly

In the Eleventh elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly held in 2001, Congress (I) was voted to power, and the AGP, ASDC (U), BJP, NCP, AITC, SAP, SP and 19 independent members were in Opposition.

**Table 1: Party Position in the Assam Legislative Assembly**

Sr. No.	Name of the party	Number of Member of Legislative Assembly	Total
1	Indian National Congress-I (INC-I)	70	70
	Name of the parties in Opposition		
1	Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	20	55
2	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	8	
3	Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC- U)	2	
4	Samata Party (SAP)	1	
5	Samajwadi Party (SP)	1	
6	National Congress Party NCP)	3	
7	All India Trinmool Congress (AITC)	1	
8	Independent	19	
	Total	125	125

Source: Election Department, Government of Assam 2001.

As shown in table, the ruling Congress (I) party had the strength of 70 members at the time of the formation of the government. The Congress (I) contested in 125 constituencies and had won 70 seats. The AGP won 20 seats, ASDC (U)-2, BJP-8, NCP-3, AITC-1, SAP-1, SP-1 and independent -19. The performance of the political parties in 2001 elections is shown in the Table. After the elections results were declared, the AGP was recognized officially as the Opposition in the Assembly. In this article it has examined the role of AGP as an Opposition in the Assam Legislative Assembly from 2001 to 2006 mainly on one specific issue that is river linkage in Assam. The role played by the Opposition on the issue was confined in the Assam Legislative Assembly only.

### River Linkage

River linkage is a project aimed at linking two or more rivers by creating a network of canals and covering land areas that otherwise does not have access to river water. By means of river linkage, the flow of water from river to sea can be reduced. It is based on the assumptions that surplus water in some rivers can be diverted to Deficit Rivers by creating a network of canals to interconnect various rivers. In fact, the proposal to create a network of rivers and canals was made in detail way back in 1881 by Arthur Cotton during the British rule, which the Indian Government had approved with some modifications. A note on the National Water Grid was earlier prepared by the then Central Water and Power Commission of India (1972), and the possible alignments for the Ganga-Cauvery link along with other links were brought out. Further studies were made by Dr. K. L. Rao who advocated one of the alignments for the Ganga-Cauvery link along with a few other links including the Brahmaputra and Ganga to transfer 1800 to 3000 cubic meters water per second. According to the proposal, Central Government wanted to divert 173 Billion Cubic

Meters (BCM) per year from the Brahmaputra to the other parts of India. On August 14, 2002, the President of India proclaimed the Central Government's policy initiative on network of rivers for eliminating the scourges of the cycle of drought and flood that would promote the economic advancement of India. The AGP-led Opposition raised the issue of River Linkage which was reported in the local daily newspaper, *The Asomiya Pratidin*, on November 9, 2002 with the caption as "National Water Development Agency and Assam" where it was alleged that the water of Brahmaputra would be diverted by the Union Government to other states. The Union Government had formed a high level commission chaired by Suresh Prabhu, former Water Resources Minister, Government of India, for further studies on the project. On this issue, the Opposition tabled a proposal that implication for meeting the future challenge of water scarcity that included linking up Brahmaputra with major rivers and tributaries of the country to mitigate the problem of flood but at the same time drought should not be detrimental to the state. In this connection, the Opposition alleged that apparently such a move of the Union Government of India appeared to mitigate the problem of drought in some states of India and hardly there was any intention of solving the perennial flood and erosion problem of Assam. There were reasons to apprehend that in the event of linking the Brahmaputra with major rivers and tributaries of the country, the potentialities of generating hydroelectric power from the Brahmaputra and its major tributaries would be greatly reduced. Therefore, before any official agreement on the proposal, the Government of Assam should carry out a thorough scientific study with active support from the Government of India to understand implicitly the pros and cons of the proposal. The Opposition demanded the opinion of government on the river linkage scheme of the Union Government.

On the demand of the Opposition, the Minister of Flood Control, Government of Assam, stated that the Central Water Development Agency did not inform the state government to divert water from River Brahmaputra by connecting with River Ganges. Secondly, the Central Water Development Council had adopted a water policy for the whole country and the circular was issued to the Government of Assam. The Council had formed the task force to prepare a draft policy to connect the River Brahmaputra with River Ganges. However, the progress and the new development were not informed. At the same time, the Minister of Flood Control, stated that as per the Constitution of India, water development is within the state list. So, to prepare any policy, the consent of the state government would be essential. The Minister concerned informed the House that the government would decide the issue in consultation with all the political parties, associations and the scientist of the state. One of the prominent members of Opposition, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, supported the scheme of river linkage citing the reason that if after irrigation, power generation and development of fisheries, there would still be surplus of water in River Brahmaputra, and then there was no point of objecting the proposal. It was observed that the Opposition member stated that the source of water starts from China which had already started the river linkage in their country. The state government required to take the help of the Central Government to create pressure on China not to take the water from River Brahmaputra. The Opposition stated that if China would not stop the river linkage scheme then it would be a big problem for Assam.

The Opposition raised questions on the proposed River Linkage scheme of the Central Government such as whether steps were be taken in the direction of connecting the River Brahmaputra with the rivers of the other parts of India, whether the river linkage scheme would create problems for Assam in future, whether the state government had made an effort to study the river linkage scheme, and if state government had studied the scheme and if

so, whether the scheme would be acceptable by the state government. The Minister of Flood Control informed the House that the Government of India had given the responsibility to National Water Development Agency to prepare the draft proposal for the river linkage. Government of Assam was not in a position to inform the House as the proposal was not finalized as yet by Government of India. The interview with the prominent leaders of the then ruling party (Congress-I) and the Opposition (AGP) revealed that the Opposition as well as the then ruling party had the same opinion that the interest of the state must not be compromised while accepting and implementing the scheme. The study found that right from the early part of 2003 the issue of mega river linkage project mooted by the central government became a heated topic of discussion. The mega project was estimated to cost about Rs. 5600000 crores. It was proposed to materialize the project by the year 2016. The execution of such project would be a complicated one because many unforeseen social, political and environmental aspect are involved with it apart from the technical intricacies whose acceptable solution are yet to emerge. It was also alleged that environmental impact related to the project has not been properly assessed. The study also revealed that the Opposition (AGP) was not clear on the entire issue either to support or to reject the project. To finalise its decision as reported in the local daily, *The Assam Tribune*, on January 30, 2003, with the caption, "AGP Panel to study Impact of River Linkage" the AGP-led Opposition had engaged an expert committee to study on the issue of river linkage project before forming an opinion. Apart from the AGP's stand point, the project was opposed by Abani Bhagabati, a Reader in the Department of Geography, Guahati University. It was stated that the talk about the availability of surplus water in the Brahmaputra and Barak River basin were misleading as there was no systematic assessment made on the availability and potential water use in these two basins. It was stated that because of scarcity of water even the progressive farmers in many areas of Assam had failed to cultivate land during the winter season. It was argued that the mega project would also affect biodiversity aspect of the North East.

### **Conclusion**

The study found that the Opposition had a diverse opinion and the state government did not have any concrete plan on the issue of river linkage. The Opposition was however, successful in making the government agree on constituting an expert committee in consultation with all political parties, associations and the scientists of the state. At the end the project was not materialized.

### **References**

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