Assam is a land of about 25 million people, situated in the northeast corner of India. The principal language of Assam is Assamese although a large number of other languages are spoken. Assam comprises an area of 78,523 square kilometers (30,318 square miles). Except for a narrow corridor running through the foothills of the Himalayas that connects the state with West Bengal, Assam (and the northeast) is almost entirely isolated from India. Assam is a land with an illustrious recorded history going back to the 4th century BC. It was an independent kingdom throughout all of history till the end of the first quarter of the 19th century when the British conquered the kingdom and annexed it to British India. Assam's economy is based on agriculture and oil. The state produces a significant part of the total tea production of the world. It also produces about half of India's petroleum.

Since independence from the British in 1947, Assam has been one of the states in the federal structure of the Indian Republic. However, geographically it has been shrinking as new states have been carved out of erstwhile Assam. Currently there are seven states in the northeastern region of India. In last over 50 years Assam has witnessed political and social strives and in recent times the number of such conflicts has risen. Over the years the nature of these conflicts has changed. As one of the states in the periphery far away from the center (capital) of the country, and having relatively small and inconsequential representation in the parliamentary democracy (only 14 Members of Parliament in a House of 543 members), the state has been often ‘neglected’ in the larger plan for economic development of the country. The perceived neglect of the state and the region has been at the heart of many protests against and demands from the central (federal) government. In the beginning, these protests, demonstrations were about issues that have broader implications for the society. For example, in 1960s the people of Assam were demanding for an oil refinery in the state as the Indian government decided to build a refinery in some other part of the country for refining crude oil drilled from the oil fields of Assam. An oil refinery was perceived as a source of employment generation for the native people of Assam, and of revenue in terms of royalty for the state which may help economic development of the state. Later on, the people of the state have raised their voices about large scale unemployment, shortage of food supply.

In the Indian federal system, although the state governments have some power in formulating and implementing developmental plans, a substantial part of the funds comes from the central government and therefore most of the time the state governments play a passive role. Moreover, if the political party in power in state assembly is same as the political party in power at the center then it is almost always the case that the state government will not antagonize the central government. In Assam, until 80s, the centrist party always used to be in power.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were persistent disputes between the government and the Assamese students and some Assamese political factions over the rights of illegal immigrants to citizenship and suffrage. The grass-roots political movement (often referred to as Assam Agitation) demanding safeguarding of the interests of the natives was peaceful and was whole-heartedly supported by almost all native people of the state. The natives considered it as a war for survival against the onslaught of uncontrolled migration of millions from Bangladesh and elsewhere. The state government and the Government of India responded by the use of force to suppress the movement. Many demonstrators were killed. In 1985, an accord was signed between the Assamese students (who spearheaded the movement) and the Government of India. This was followed by an election to the state assembly in which a very youthful, student-led government by the Assam Gana Parishad, a newly formed regional party, came to power. Although the main clause of the Assam Accord – identification and deportation of illegal immigrants who came after 1971 – remained largely unfulfilled, and the problem of illegal immigration is still a vexed question, many of the other clauses mainly aimed at socio-economic development were implemented. However, internal bickering and charges of corruption led to the downfall of the Assam Gana Parishad government in 1990 although they came back to power later.

The events of 1980s changed the dynamics of the Assamese society and polity in many different ways. First, for the first time in the history of independent Assam a regional party was voted to power. Second, the benefits of the Assam accord were cornered by a relatively small group of people that mainly consists of Assamese speaking urban middle class who happened to be connected to the leadership during the Assam agitation. Third, the clear identity of the beneficiaries from the Assam accord also paved the way for fractionalization of the Assamese society which, to a large extent, evolved as a common nationality over centuries through political, cultural and religious events and efforts. Fourth, rise of militancy in 1980s and most of 1990s is probably the most visible fallout of the events of 1980s. It has become a common practice for all civil movements to have support of a militant group. Although each of these militant groups is identified with a social, political problem at hand, there seems to be larger coordination among them and most of them favor or fight for secession from India. Currently there are about 34 militant groups in Assam.

The socio-political problems of Assam are much more complex than they look. Some of them are rooted in the history and others are the direct or indirect fallouts of piecemeal public policies that somehow fit and feed to the evolution of multi-party democracy in India. In this paper, we would like to narrowly focus on the later. In last 25 years, the number of social conflicts in Assam (and in the northeast) has risen. In most cases, these conflicts involve smaller social groups mobilized under any conceivable pretext, namely language, ethnicity, caste, profession, or history. Their demands range from reservation in jobs to creation of separate state within Indian union to complete independence from India. The outcomes of such movements have often been the government doling out something to appease the revolting groups. The benefits of such policies are often cornered by a sub-group within the revolting group and it gives rise to further fractionalization and conflicts. The government policies are often criticized for
lack of understanding of the complex nature of these problems in a complex multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic society. One thing that has been overlooked in general discussion and debate is that these policies somehow are contributing to, or maybe emerging from the evolution of multi-party democracy in India.

In last quarter century, Indian democracy has witnessed the rise of strong regional parties representing regional interests. Interestingly, in most cases these regions are far from the center (the capital) and often there is a perceived sense of neglect by the central government in those regions. This phenomenon has inflicted considerable harm on the national parties and has severely retarded formation and growth of any national party. The most important fallout of this development is that in last 25 years there is minority/coalition government at the center with support from regional parties. Given the complex diversity of the country and economic inequality between regions and states, multi-party democracy with many regional parties may be seen as an inevitable and ‘appropriate’ state of affair. In this political setup the game of governance at the center has to put considerable effort on the stability of the coalition at the center. Although larger coalition partner reduces the number of issues the government has to pay attention to, it also runs a higher risk of collapse in case of defection. Moreover, to prevent a defection by larger coalition partner is costly. On the other hand, having smaller partners is attractive and beneficial for both government and the coalition partner. First, if the partner defects, the government may not collapse. In other words, there is a low risk of collapse. Also, the cost of prevention may not be as large as in the case of large coalition partner. Second, for the smaller partners it is not in their best interest to defect because by doing so they are worse off.

Now, my contention is that the government policies in the conflict-ridden regions like Assam evolve from this game. But this feeds into another development in the receiving ends. The group to which this policy has been doled out consists of individuals with different standing and power. Since these policies largely ignore the internal structure and dynamics of the group it is purported to serve, the benefits of such policies are unequally distributed among the people. Then the relatively worse off members of the group mobilize under another pretext and lead to another social strife.

We want to show the following:

1) The piecemeal policies are the results of the dynamics of the political game in a multi-party democracy.
2) The distribution of these piecemeal policies is skewed and it leads to further fractionalization of the society and more conflicts
3) Fractionalization and conflicts are costly and therefore the government policies are welfare reducing from the entire society’s point of view.