

## **THE RISE OF SAFFRON WAVE IN NORTH EAST INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has equated the recent victory of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in assembly elections in Tripura in North East region of India with the rising sun which is “saffron” in colour. The absence of electoral competition of national parties in the region has played a crucial role in the polity of the region taking a different course. The electoral success of BJP in recent couple of years in various states of the region, achieved through policy of alignments and coalition building through electoral engineering has brought the region into political limelight of the nation. This meteoric rise of a national political party in the region has various implications for the regional as well as national polity, peace process and development in the region and India’s foreign policy design of Act East Policy.

**Keywords:** North East Region, politics, BJP, conflict, peace, Look East.

### **INTRODUCTION**

North East Region of India comprises of the eight states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The North East region of India is one of the most backward region of the country with its backwardness rooted in structural factors of geographic isolation, lack of economic development, ethnic diversity and resultant ethnic tensions and conflicts, numerical electoral insignificance and consequent political marginalization and lack of integration with the national mainstream. The policies and initiatives towards the region for its development have been marred in their progress due to lack of dynamism and due interest from the centre, regional politics pulls and pressures, inter-state frictions within the region and moreover continuous feeling of alienation and marginalization within the population of the region.

North east India has been witnessing a dynamic political shift in its polity in last couple of years. The region has been getting unprecedented focus in coverage in national media and politics with the emergent political competition between two national parties Congress and BJP. The

‘Congress Mukht Bharat’ mission of BJP leadership has reached North east in last couple of years with the formation of government in Assam in the year 2016, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh in the year 2017 and reaching culmination point with the formation of government in Nagaland, Meghalaya, and in the unassailable fortress of Left the state of Tripura in 2018. This rise of saffron or blooming of lotus in a short span of time in the region has thrown up interesting questions to ponder over. The rise of BJP in pole position in region’s politics has various implications for national politics, regional politics, and peace process in the region, economic development process of north east region, Act East policy and international implications in form of relations with the neighboring countries.

### **North East –The Enigma**

The North East Region as a whole shares majority of its boundary (more than 4500 km) with neighboring nations. The geographic isolation from mainland India and closeness to the nation’s neighborhood has influenced the demography, polity and the aspirations of the people. The problem of nationalism and turbulent historical process of political accommodation of such regional aspirations and demands has shaped the consciousness and attitude of people towards the government at centre. The ethnic heterogeneity and immigration from neighborhood and various backwards region of the country has created socio-economic fault lines in the society. The lack of economic development with prevalence of colonial economic order and dependence on aid from centre for development with deep rooted corruption and vested interests has further kept the region backward and in extreme poverty. Whereas the mainland India in Post Economic Reform era has achieved significant economic growth, the feeling of being left out of the growth story has further aggravated the alienation and marginalization in the people of the region. The resultant feeling of narrow regionalism rooted strongly in identity politics has shaped the polity of the region to a large extent with the demand for autonomy, separate state, economic redistribution and huge support for son of soil movements with targeting of outsiders to the region.

The rise of insurgency with a range of demands and myriad groups has given rise to what is described by eminent journalist from the region, Subir Bhaumik as the ‘troubled periphery’ of India. The role of China and ISI of Pak along with anti-India regime of Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party in Bangladesh in past and Indian government apathy towards dealing with military Junta in Myanmar has further exacerbated the crisis. New Delhi’s crackdown on the militant outfits with stringent laws and use of force has evoked criticism from international human rights groups and civil society and dented the image of Indian democracy. The initiatives like look east policy for linking the region with the economically dynamic region of South East Asia has also not been able to take off due to the troubled politics and security

situation in the region and to a certain extent because of the lackadaisical approach of the New Delhi government. This has created an enigmatic situation in the region and an area of serious concern for regional and national politics.

The absence of strong national party competition has acted as an inhibiting factor in the political reconciliation and connecting the population of the region to the national mainstream. The national political parties have been apathetic towards the region because of its numerical electoral significance being too low with only 25 Lok Sabha seats and 498 assembly seats. Regional political parties, various fronts and outfits have flourished in absence of such a national alternative by exploiting the poverty and regional backwardness as rhetoric and agenda of narrow regionalism.

### **The Rise of BJP**

The rise of BJP can be seen as a national party in the region which is in power at the centre in its quest of ending its political untouchability due to its cultural and ideological agenda of Hindutva and gain political acceptability for alliance and power sharing in the region. This also indicates an expansionist drive on part of BJP to acquire a pan -India character by shedding the tag of North Indian, upper caste and upper class party. The BJP's rise to power in centre in 2014 election was on account of its electoral gains in north Indian states and the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The party wants to get seats in the region to add to comfortable majority in possible return to power in 2019. The electoral victory in ethnic diverse region of north east gives a wider acceptance to Modi's leadership too. Rahul Verma and Pranav Gupta have rightly emphasized the significance of the rise of BJP in north east as "More than electoral considerations, the region's significance to the BJP's ideological project is guiding the party's political strategy. It is here that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) meets its three long-time adversaries –illegal immigrants (read Bangladeshi Muslims), Christian missionary activities, and secessionist movements threatening territorial integrity – that are antithetical to the project of 'akhand rashtra'."

BJP's relentless mission north east in last few years has employed interesting mix of strategies which has resulted in the recent huge electoral success. The command of BJP's regional strategy in an unchartered territory was given to Ram Madhav who had played an instrumental role in bringing together an unlikely alliance in a power sharing arrangement in state of Jammu and Kashmir. BJP employed services of a regional hand in form of Himanta Biswa Sharma, an ex congressman from Assam to win over regional outfits as allies and engineered defections in the Congress cadres in various states with Tripura being a classic case. The star campaigner for the elections in the region were chosen with an aim to woo the votes as evident in bringing Yogi Adityanath to garner support of the Gorakhnath math followers for BJP in the state. This helped

BJP a party having a scant presence in the region to have an outreach to masses with an engineered political base.

BJP formed a political coalition called the North-East Democratic alliance (NEDA) in 2016 with several regional political parties such as Sikkim Democratic Front, Asom Gana Parishad, Bodoland People's Front, Naga People's Front, Asom Gana Shati, National People's Party and United Democratic Party. In the second conclave of NEDA at Delhi in September 2017, Amit Shah emphasizing the importance of NEDA said, "it is not only a political platform but a platform to culturally unite all eight north eastern states and increase their involvement in national affairs." NEDA provided a united voice for the region despite diversity and also a mechanism for the parties to find an effective representation in National Democratic Alliance (NDA) meetings.

BJP's mission north east seriousness was visible in visit of one of the Union Minister in the region every 15 days. Yet the election campaign was left in hands of regional leadership with local issues at top and not allowing national issues to hijack the agenda as evident in state elections in Assam Manipur and Tripura. BJP strategy makers in the region have shown awareness of the electoral calculus as evident in being flexible in pre election and post election alliance ties in Meghalaya and Nagaland resulting in emergence in a king maker role in government formation in both the states. The emergence of Congress as the single largest party in Meghalaya elections and its failure to form the government in the state reminded of the Goa episode wherein too it was outsmarted by BJP backroom negotiation strategy. This micro management of regional politics was absent in the opposition camp which made job of BJP easy. The anti incumbency factor in the region against the ruling party or alliance who were in power for at least last two terms was another contributory factor in electoral gains for BJP.

The development agenda for the region was pushed forward by the Modi Government after coming into power. The previous NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpeyi had created a separate ministry for the region with mandatory allocations and Modi government following it with trade and tourism as focus areas with development of the region as a mainstay of India's Look East Policy. The Government's launching of Hill Area Development Programme and other initiatives for massive infrastructure development under a 5,300 crores scheme has created reverberation in the aspiring youth population of the region. Modi's 'Act East' policy design has a special focus for road and railway infrastructure to boost the regional economy. The government has converted 900 km of tracks to broad gauge all over the region, built railway link of Tripura and Kohima with rest of the country, launched trains like a new Rajdhani express, Tripura Sundari express between Agartala and Delhi, railway projects to connect Imphal, Aizawal and Shillong and bilateral MOU agreement with Government of Bangladesh to develop rail link

between Tripura and Chittagong to boost flow of commodity trade in the region. The government focus and promises on regional connectivity, with it being the major hurdle in economic development of the region provided instant connect with the masses. The huge investments and target achievements under accelerated road development programme and Bharatmala Programme, capacity and facility upgradation of airports in the region and developments of new airports at Tura, Rupsi and Agartala along with target of completing the flagship connectivity project of Act East policy the India-Myanmar-Thailand by 2020 has further shown the intent of the government in making unprecedented push for infrastructure development in the region. Inauguration of Tuirial hydro power project in December 2017 in Aizawl is another step towards developing the region as energy supply hub of India. This development discourse at the epicenter of the BJP's electoral campaign brought instant connect with the masses.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES**

### **National Politics**

The timing of the expansionist surge of BJP in North East with the national elections scheduled in 2019 has sent various ripples in domestic politics. The inability of the Congress Party to check the electoral juggernaut of BJP in North East has sent signals for alignments at regional levels and national levels to check BJP among regional parties. The rise of BJP has also created challenges for survival for all the major regional parties from West Bengal and Orissa in east to UP and Bihar in north. This performance of BJP in elections in north east is going to propel a coalition of opposition parties in the country. The beginning has already been made with Bahujan Samaj Party(BSP) and Samajwadi Party(SP) in Uttar Pradesh coming together in Uttar Pradesh for the by-elections to the two Lok Sabha seats. The talks of Third Front are already on with debates over its composition and strategy in recent times. This might lead to a triangular or bipolar contest in 2019 elections and possibility of return of the coalition era of 1990s in Indian Politics. The BJP government's support for simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and state assemblies may become more vociferous with the recent gains.

The success of BJP in recent times also contains roots of various challenges on ideological front to fulfilling the expectations of allies and population of the region. BJP in Tripura has forsaken the Hindu Nationalism agenda and entered into alliance with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura, a separatist tribal outfit with demand for separate state of Twiparaland for the tribals. The voices for a tribal chief minister and demand for 'respectable representation' are the signs of testing times ahead for the coalition in working together on the agreed common minimum agenda without BJP's support for a separate state. The political opportunism and defections have been prevalent in the politics of the region in recent times bringing instability with Arunachal

being the most significant example. The accommodation of the leaders who joined BJP from other parties and got elected as legislators is another challenge for the leadership in a state with small size of the assembly. Then there is another fault line within the party between the workers associated with ground work for years when it was not a political force to reckon and the new electoral champion leadership. Rahul Verma and Pranav Kumar have remarked that the BJP in the region has become a coalition of extremes after its social base has undergone massive transformation and it's a challenge for BJP to manage this coalition and at the same time avoid the dilution of its ideology. The adjustment of interest and demands of Bengali versus the tribal population in Tripura, hill tribes versus Meitei dominated plain areas in Manipur and tension between pluralism advocated during elections and the core ideology of homogenizing cultural nationalism of Hindutva will become a challenge.

### **Peace process**

Peace process in the region amidst various complex fault lines and divisions within the society and the various insurgent outfits has also been plagued by lack of political willingness in the past. The 2015 December declaration of historic deal with National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak Muivah (NSCN -IM) group created a perception that BJP is a party which get things done and not status quoist. The recent victory in elections has though created uncertainty and challenge to balance the interests of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal and Nagaland with the added baggage of religion as a fault line in context of the hugely contentious demand of greater Nagalim by the Naga movement. Though various statements have been made by the senior leadership of BJP during the election campaign that there would be no compromise with territorial integrity of Assam and Manipur with the inking of the Naga Agreement but there has been growing unrest and warnings by various civil society groups and organizations. The peace process in Assam is again in fragile state with BJP traditionally demanding that talks with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) should be held in the framework of the Constitution. The BJP win in Assam and the return of ULFA leader Anup Chetia in 2016 has generated expectations for a conducive climate for talks between the pro dialogue faction of Arabind Rajkhowa and the Indian Government. The growing social base and dominance of BJP in Assam Politics with anti immigration at the heart of the electoral strategy hijacked the ULFA agenda and social base and now the pro dialogue faction was compelled to come to the dialogue table. The anti talk faction of Paresh Barua with non compromising demand of sovereign Assam and the suspicion of non implementation of previous agreements with insurgent outfits by the government has lowered the prospects of a quick progress in peace talks. The alliance of BJP with Bodoland People's Front(BPF) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is another tricky issue with stark differences over policy of granting citizenship to immigrant Hindus which is being opposed by the BPF as violation of Assam accord. The alliance lead by BJP came into power with slogan

of “Jati, Mati, Bheti (identity,land and homes), but there has not been much progress on that front and it has to walk a tight rope in Assam and as well as in the region as whole.

### **Act East Policy**

The ambitious policy of look east to make North East region as a gateway to South East Asia started by former Prime Minister Narsimha Rao failed to take off due to non reconciliation of issues of identity, liberalization hurdles, border issues with China, security situation in the region. The foreign policy dynamism has been very much evident during Prime Minister Modi’s tenure within neighborhood acquiring priority. The renaming of look east policy to Act East was described as symbolic step to put an end to rhetoric and lend dynamism to the policy and projects in the region. During the election campaign Prime Minister Modi said "Unless the northeast is developed, the dream of having a developed country will not be achieved and therefore the BJP government is paying special attention to the requirement of the region". Prime Minister Modi has promised to make the Act East Policy a reality. The Act East Policy has plans at bilateral and regional levels to develop and strengthen connectivity of north east with ASEAN region through trade, culture, people-to-people ties and infrastructure and connectivity projects. The major bilateral and multilateral connectivity projects include Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, Rhi-Tiddim Road Project which have been infused with vigor to develop in time to have transformative impact on the region. The deepening bilateral ties in trade and security with ASEAN nations and growing multilateral engagements of India in the region in BJP regime has put the Act East Policy at the fulcrum of the India’s Neighborhood engagements. The presence of ASEAN leaders at India’s Republic Day Ceremony 2018 as chief guests was a testimony to the significance of ties with the ASEAN region. The improved relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar with advent of pragmatism in India’s foreign policy and actions against the anti-India insurgent outfits on other side of the border by these governments has further created confidence in the ties. The realization under the BJP government of fast border infrastructure development in the region as an urgent need to manage threat from an aggressive China is going to get further impetus with BJP gaining power in the states. The pursuit of sub regionalism cooperation under SAARC after failure of neighborhood first policy has also hit a road block with Bhutan’ environmental concerns against BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal )transport network. India can pursue sub regional cooperation through Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) which necessitates aggressive pursuit of Act East Policy goals. Though some apprehensions has been raised in research report titled Social Mapping of Logistics, Infrastructure and India’s Look East Policy conducted by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group that infrastructure development in the region would promote further in migration to the region and also affect labour market. The report also points out that due to

absence of skills to participate in the development projects initiated under Act East Policy would result in outmigration from the region which would again fuel identity dilution threats in the region. It also predicts conflicts over resource extraction and possibility of class divisions in the society along with ethnic division creating another fault line in the society. This perspective throws emphasis on a cautionary approach to preserve the fragile peace in the region through a careful and calibrated execution of Act East Policy by the BJP governments in the region and the centre.

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