

## **BJP and Coalition Politics: Strategic Alliances in the States of Northeast**

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### **Abstract**

*The BJP has dramatically increased its footprint across the states of Northeast India and has emerged as the 'fulcrum party' in Northeast India. Despite numerous contradictions in goals and values between the BJP and regional parties in Northeast India, it has formed 'strategic alliances' in order to achieve its goal of a 'Congress mukt Bharat' (CMB). The regional parties too have flocked to the BJP because of the 'linear relationship model' that determines centre-state relations, i.e. regional parties tend to align with that party which controls the purse at the centre. Anti-incumbency factor, the emergence of NEDA, assembly floor management, 'paratroopers' to the BJP, the growth of the RSS, the role of party strategists, and the co-option of regional leaders to the BJP have strengthened BJP's presence in Northeast India. This paper highlights the reasons for the growth of the BJP and its relations with regional parties in Northeast India and points out the contradiction and challenges that will shape this complex relationship.*

### **1. Introduction**

The electoral success of the BJP in the sixteenth Lok Sabha elections (2014) can be attributed to a number of factors. While the 'Modi factor' may have been a trump card, the victory of the BJP 'could be attributed to its ability to appeal to voters who had not been well mobilised previously, and in places where the party had been weaker in earlier elections'.<sup>1</sup> In states like Assam, it witnessed unprecedented electoral success. The political expansion of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in terms of electoral seats as well as its acceptance and popularity amongst the electorate in the states of Northeast India indeed presents a fascinating story which must be analysed.

Suhas Palshikar was of the view that the BJP has emerged as the central political force

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Tillin (2015) Indian elections 2014: explaining the landslide, *Contemporary South Asia*, 23:2, 117-122, DOI: 10.1080/09584935.2015.1030354, P.118.

in Indian politics replacing the Congress<sup>2</sup>, and now it has begun to spread its presence in the states of Northeast India. A party which is generally perceived as a ‘North Indian’, ‘Hindu Party’, ‘Marwari Party’ by most of the people of Northeast India, has now it has been able to transcend this ‘North Indian’ image and become a dominant political player in the states of Northeast India. Through alliances with regional parties, the BJP has usurped the role of the Congress and it now determines the fortunes of the region which connects ‘mainland’ India to Southeast Asia. Chief Ministers of 4 states in Northeast India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura) are from the BJP, furthermore this party is part of the ruling coalition in Nagaland and Meghalaya. Only the state of Sikkim and Mizoram remains out of its ambit. This paper examines the reasons for the expansion of BJP in Northeast India and the nature of coalition politics in the states of Northeast India under the ‘Modi era’.

## 2. The Saffron Surge: 2014-2019

The saffron surge is prominent as the BJP has expanded its presence to a number of states of Northeast India.

**Table 1: Seat share of BJP in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh**

States	No. of Seats in Lok Sabha before 2014 general elections	No. of Seats in Lok Sabha after 2014 general elections
Assam	4 (2009 Lok Sabha election)	7 (2014 Lok Sabha election)
Arunachal	0	1

*BJP is yet to open its account in states of Sikkim, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya.*

Prior to 2014 general elections, the BJP only had 4 seats from Northeast India, i.e. state of Assam, in the Lok Sabha. Now the number of seats for the BJP has doubled and its vote share too has increased substantially. The vote share of BJP too has increased after state assemblies elections in Northeast India. The party has now assumed pan-Indian dimension, and this has strengthened BJP’s claims that it has grown beyond a ‘Hindi-belt’ party. At a press conference, BJP President Amit Shah opined “we have an MP in Ladakh and Kerala. We have a government in Kohima and in Kutch.” A total of twenty five Lok Sabha seats from Northeast India may prove to be critical for the BJP in due course of time.

In addition to the goal of Congress Mukt Bharat (CMB), winning assembly seats and having favourable allies is also important for it will help the BJP control the Upper House of the Parliament.

<sup>2</sup> John Harriss (2015) Hindu Nationalism in Action: The Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian Politics, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 38:4, p.717.

**Table 2: Assembly Seats Won (Congress Vs BJP)**

Sr. No.	State	Post 2014				
		Assembly election Year	Congress	BJP	CM /party	Parties supporting NEDA
1	Arunachal Pradesh	2014	42	11	Nabam Tuki, Congress	
		2017	1	49	Pema Khandu, BJP	BJP
2	Assam	2016	26	60	Sarbananda Sonowal, BJP	BJP
3	Manipur	2017	28	21	Nongthombam Biren Singh, BJP	BJP
4	Meghalaya	2018	21	2	Conrad Sangma, NPP	Member NEDA
5	Mizoram	2013	34	0	Lal Thanhawla, Congress	
6	Nagaland	2018	0	12	Neiphiu Rio, NDPP	Member NEDA
7	Tripura	2018	0	36	Biplab Kumar Deb, BJP	BJP
8	Sikkim	2014	0	0	Pawan Kumar Chamling, SDF	Member NEDA

*A comparative picture of Congress and the BJP in the State Assemblies of Northeast India*

### 3. Reasons for the Saffron Surge

The saffron surge has been felt in two folds- *firstly*, increase of vote share and assembly seats in state of Northeast India; *secondly*, the surge is also linked with change of perception and greater acceptability of the BJP as a party by the electorate who had earlier perceived it as a ‘marwari party’. In both these instances, a greater insight is needed for the dramatic transformation of fortunes of the BJP in Northeast India. The increase in vote share and seats of the BJP in assembly elections can be attributed to a number of factors.

### 4. Anti-Incumbency Factor

The governments in the states of Assam and Tripura were bound to face this challenge.<sup>3</sup> In such a scenario, any government will face a difficult time from the electorates, but the failure to anticipate the level of discontentment amongst the masses must be pinned down to the party high command. An ostrich type attitude did not help the Congress or the CPI-M in Assam and Tripura respectively. The need for ‘parivartan’ in 2014 marked the beginning of ascendancy of the BJP in Assam when it captured seven Lok Sabha seats in Assam. The BJP kept issues of ‘cow politics’ and ‘Ram Mandir’ aside

<sup>3</sup> Tarun Gogoi led Congress government in Assam was in power for three terms, from 2001-2016; In Tripura, the CPI-M was in power for 25 years and Manik Sarkar was the Chief Minister for twenty years.

and struck an alliance with the BPF and the AGP and through the slogan of ‘jati, mati, bheti’ stressed to keep the cultural and territorial sanctity intact for its sons of soil. In 2016, the war cry of a new “battle of Saraighat” by the BJP helped galvanise the ‘khilonjiyas’ against the ‘outsiders’.<sup>4</sup> As Bhattacharjee point out, “Alignment with regional groups who led mass political movements in order to drive out the “Bengali Muslims” has obviously benefited the RSS and BJP camp.”<sup>5</sup>

A post poll survey conducted by CSDS shows that ‘the levels of discontent against the performance of the Tripura government and the Chief Minister were fairly high — close to a third of respondents were “fully dissatisfied”. Past surveys have shown that such high levels of discontent are a clear indicator that a government is on its way out.’<sup>6</sup> In Meghalaya too, which went to polls in 2018, the CSDS polls show that people were dissatisfied with the ruling Congress Government. Bucking the anti-incumbency factor will always be a test for any party, more so when a pro-Modi wave was being felt strongly across the nation.

### **5. Northeast Development Alliance (NEDA): The Anti-Congress Alliance**

Regional parties have flocked to the NEDA. Formed in May 24, 2016, this political coalition seeks to bring about an alliance between BJP and non-congress and regional parties. Such an attempt was made earlier too when the North-East Regional Political Front was floated by the Naga People’s Front (NPF) and AGP in October 2013. NEDA was formed the same day the Sarbananda Sonowal took Oath of Office for the post of Chief Minister. For Ram Madhav, a key strategist for the BJP, there would be spill over effects and “these parties have joined the NEDA holds tremendous significance in that it would immensely help the states of the region resolve several inter-state and intra-state issues that have been pending for long.”<sup>7</sup> The ambitious Act East Policy will require synergy amongst political parties and NEDA can play an active role in coordinating policies, services and goals. But ‘Act East implies different things for different states in the region - for Meghalaya it is Act South to find new motorable routes to Bangladesh; for Tripura it is Act West to improve its trade with Bangladesh through the Chittagong port; for Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Act North is critical for India’s geostrategic interests. NEDA can offer foreign policy aid and advice to these states in order to better engage with its five neighbouring countries.’<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Akhil R. Dutta (2017) BJP’s Electoral Victory in Assam, 2016: Co-opting the Khilonjiyas. *Social Change*, 47(1), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Malini Bhattacharjee (2016) Tracing the Emergence and Consolidation of Hindutva in Assam, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 16, 2016 vol LI no.16, p.87

<sup>6</sup> Discontent powers vote for change, *The Indian Express*, March 5, 2018. Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/Northeastern-states-2018-assembly-elections-tripura-polls-meghalaya-nagaland-left-front-5086021/>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

<sup>7</sup> BJP gets 10 regional parties under NE Democratic Alliance umbrella, *The Indian Express*, June 24, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> BJP Acts East With New Anti-Congress Bloc, Puts Himanta Biswa In Charge, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/hours-after-sonowal-oath-ceremony-bjp-forms-anti-congress-bloc-in-northeast-1409824>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

The formation of Northeast Democratic Alliance (NEDA) was vital in holding the 'flock' together. Parties such as People's Party of Arunachal, Asom Gana Parishad, Bodoland People's Front, Ganashakti Party, Manipur Peoples Party, Manipur Democratic People's Front, National People's Party, United Democratic Party, Hill State People's Democratic Party, People's Democratic Front, Mizo National Front, Sikkim Democratic Front, Indigenous People's Front of Tripura and the BJP constitute the NEDA.<sup>9</sup> There is a general tendency among the regional parties in Northeast India that they tend to align with the party in power at the centre. Several instances reveal that parties have changed track and leadership to ensure that a 'linear relation' exists between the regional and the party at the centre. Past history has revealed that regional parties of Northeast India have been rather fickle minded when it comes to supporting the party at the centre. The states of Northeast India are very resource dependent on the Centre and therefore 'shifting alliances' has become a norm. The formation of BJP led NEDA is an attempt to consolidate these floating alliances. Barring 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha where the BJP consolidated its position, and the 6<sup>th</sup> (1977) 11<sup>th</sup> (1996) and 12<sup>th</sup> (1998), most of the Lok Sabhas' has been dominated by the Congress. During the decline of Congress era, India witnessed the proliferation of political parties. Over the years, there have been several instances where regional political parties have changed alliances to suit their political convenience.

During the 1990s, regional parties such as the AGP was part of the ruling coalition governments led by V.P. Singh, H.D. Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral, which was supported from outside by the Congress. Another regional party, the BPF which was part of the ruling Tarun Gogoi led Congress government in 2006, is now a member of the NDA. The 'slipperiness' in terms of shifting alliances is not just limited to regional parties, but occasionally 'mainstream' national parties have also indulged in the unthinkable. In the state of Mizoram, when elections to the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) in April 2018 delivered a hung result, the Congress and the BJP formed an alliance 'United Legislature Party (ULP)', to prevent the Mizo National Front (MNF) from controlling the Council. It critically reveals a few things- *firstly*, though the central leadership of BJP and the Congress were uncomfortable with the 'marriage of convenience', there is little they could do because control over their own party members and politicians in Northeast India is a tad more difficult when compared to top down control approach of mainstream parties in central India. It is largely because regional leaders are more politically entrenched and hold considerable clout in their own constituency. *Secondly*, what is also reveals that the fickle nature of coalition politics in the peripheral India, is rarely highlighted by the national media. Such a coalition of two bitter parties forming an alliance to keep a regional party away from assuming power, even at the grassroots level is unthinkable in any of the mainstream states. Indeed, out of sight is out of mind and therefore such fickle coalitions politics is quickly brushed under the carpet. *Thirdly*, in peripheral states, for the sake of

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<sup>9</sup> In spite of PM Modi's push for a digital India, NEDA does not have any official website till date, and neither any document is available which clearly states its members or its structures. Furthermore, it has not yet released any public document stating its objectives and goals.

occupying public offices, parties whether regional or national, and for the leadership too, ideology hardly matters and everyone wants to enjoy the 'spoils' of such a system. What makes the proposition of shifting alliances in Northeast India more of a permanent feature is that the states continue to be dependent on the centre for all the funds. The Northeastern states are resource rich but revenue generation continues to be negligible and hence continue to be economically dependent on 'New Delhi'. By the creation of NEDA, it is expected that the states of Northeast India would move from 'briefcase politics to development politics.'<sup>10</sup> Critically looking at the NEDA, it is part of a backup plan for BJP to be part of ruling coalition in states where it does not have enough seats or negligible political presence. The states of North East India need the BJP because they are resource dependent on the Centre where BJP controls the 'briefcase'. The BJP needs the smaller states of Northeast India to claim that they are home to seventy percent of the Indian population. The BJP needs allies, even if small, for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. Amit Shah pointed "We want to win more than 21 seats out of 25 seats from North East."<sup>11</sup> These seats are critical for the BJP because it seeks to balance any losses that emanates from the Hindi heartland. More importantly, in quest of a CMB, for the BJP, it simply helps to 'rub it in'. Essentially, it is an anti-Congress bloc.

## 6. Post Elections Strategy and Floor Management Skills of the BJP

The 2014 Lok Sabha results have tremendously boosted the self-confidence of the BJP leadership and the Modi- Shah combination has made sure that the winning juggernaut continues and spills on to the Assembly elections. Since then, elections have taken place in 27 assemblies where the BJP was won Haryana, Himachal, Uttarakhand, Tripura, UP, Assam and Gujarat with relative ease. With pre and post poll alliance with regional and other parties, it has formed government in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland.

With the help of smaller parties, defections and favourable governors, The BJP has been able to form government in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya. The state of Arunachal Pradesh has seen political turmoil and politicians have defected from one party to another in the last two years. In 2014, Assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh saw BJP get only 11 seats and the Congress 42 seats. However after large scale defections, and quick succession of four chief ministers, BJP now has 48 MLAs and has formed the government in the state. In Manipur, after the 2012 assembly elections, the BJP had only 21 seats in a 60 member Assembly. Yet, with quick the help of local parties like the NPP and the NPF, the BJP was invited by the Governor Najma Heptullah (who is a member of the BJP) to form the government. On being accused of being no neutral, she remarked "I know Congress is still largest party, it's

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<sup>10</sup> Under BJP and its allies North East has moved from 'briefcase politics to development politics': Amit Shah, available at <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-under-bjp-and-its-allies-north-east-has-moved-from-briefcase-politics-to-development-politics-amit-shah-2617072>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

<sup>11</sup> Amit Shah sets target of 21 Lok Sabha seats from northeast - Times of India, May 24, 2018.

not incumbent. It's the responsibility of Governor vested by the Constitution to weigh and measure stability."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in Meghalaya too, inspite if getting only two seats in a 60 member assembly, it is now a part of the NPP led ruling coalition. Indeed, while the Congress won the largest number of seats and also staked claim before the respective governor to form government but the BJP managed to secure a majority there with post-poll alliances and their leaders were sworn in as chief ministers.<sup>13</sup> The Congress has emerged as the 'new untouchable' for the smaller regional parties in Northeast India.

## 7. RSS and its Support Base

The RSS has been able to expand base across the country and the states of Northeast India have also come under its radar. The RSS has painstakingly deepened its roots in the states of Northeast India where ethnic diversity and tribal aspirations have led to demands for sovereignty and creation of new states. The states of Northeast India, RSS faces problems which are peculiar from those of mainland India. While several Vivekananda Kendras and schools, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, medical camps, and coaching centres have been set up in different states, the issues of 'Hindu' refugees, eating habits in Christian dominated states, the push for Hindi language have proved that it won't be any easy to win over the hearts of peoples in Northeast India. Though 'sister' institutions and organisations like Yuva Vikas Kendra, Ekal Vidyalaya, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Vivekananda Kendra, the RSS has been able to make its presence felt by reaching out to tribal youths and 'to concentrate on clean slates.' According to Bidyut Chakraborty, "RSS has a strong network in the North-East and with the BJP being in power at the centre and in some of the states, it is natural that the RSS would try to be more visible, and expand its already present organizational network."<sup>14, 15</sup> Issues of Ram Mandir or protection of cows or 'nationalism' is unlikely to cut ice in this part of the country. The Namami Brahmaputra festival and the 'deendayalisation'<sup>16</sup> of institutions in Assam has only led to more criticism. Additionally, its base in Nagaland and Mizoram continues to be weak. It has however picked up emotive issues such as conferment of Bharat Ratna to Rani Gaidinliu, the legendary Naga freedom fighter to strengthen its claim that it will honour those

<sup>12</sup> 'Governor Najma Heptulla invites BJP to form government in Manipur, explains why she didn't call Congress', available at <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-governor-najma-heptulla-invites-bjp-led-group-to-form-government-in-manipur-2352509>, accessed on 22.08.2018

<sup>13</sup> Post-poll alliances were preferred by governor in Goa, Manipur and Meghalaya, The Times of India, May 16, 2018

<sup>14</sup> RSS initiates a mass contact programme in North-East India, Konkan, parts of UP, Available at <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/JucGzLSVI6LxzkWywXL0TI/RSS-initiates-a-mass-contact-programme-in-NorthEast-India.html>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

<sup>15</sup> Referred to Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right, Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen, in 'Target northeast: How RSS plans to make region saffron', The Hindustan Times, Dec15, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> 'Deendayalisation' broadly refers to naming of public educational institutions and roads by the BJP government in Assam after Deen Dayal Upadhyay who was the co-founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangha.

regional heroes who have been ignored by erstwhile governments. Its 'one nation, one culture' might just be tweaked to suit its political interest in the coming years.

### 8. Role of Chanakya

The rate, at which BJP has expanded its footprint across the length and breadth of India, is surely going to make its rivals more worried than ever before. The Congress has been rather slow when it comes to choosing allies or in making decisions on support to a regional party. When it comes to hung electoral results, the BJP was more decisive and proactive, willing to sacrifice any ministerial claim but in the process making sure that it is part of the non- Congress led ruling coalition in states of Northeast India. After learning the hard lesson in Goa and Manipur where the Congress was unable to form the government inspite of getting more seats than the BJP, the Congress high command dispatched its leaders Kamal Nath, Mukul Wasnik and Ahmed Patel to Shillong to cobble up an alliance to form a government, but here too it was shrewdly out maneuvered by the BJP tacticians.

It becomes very clear that the BJP for the sake of 'Congress Mukt Bharat' (CMB), the BJP is willing to be 'junior partner' to regional parties, especially in Northeast India. However, the CMB goal for the BJP would not have been possible without its 'Chanakya'- Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma. A former AASU leader and a Congressman, Dr. Sarma joined the BJP in July 2015, is now the chief trouble shooter for the BJP and is the main architect of the 'rainbow coalition', wherein the BJP seeks to coexist with its regional partners through dialogue from a margin rather than pushing forward claims and demands through a top down approach. In spite of having substantial Christian population in Meghalaya and other states of Northeast India, what really helped swing regional parties towards the BJP is that it controls power at the Centre. Sarma's skills at negotiation and man management and his ability to hold the attention of the audience through rousing speeches, have all been a striking feature of his political journey. During his days in the Congress, Tarun Gogoi, the Chief Minister (2001-2016) was constantly dependent and defending Sarma for all his acts and deeds. But things started to go sour eventually and in 2015, Sarma along with other 'young turks' eventually joined the BJP, it was beginning of the end of the Tarun Gogoi Congress regime in Assam. Himanta Biswa Sarma has continued to maintain healthy relations with his Congress counterparts in other states and has made new friends in the last three years which has cemented his stature in the BJP. Indeed the "mainstreaming the northeast region" in the country's politics has been the focus for this 'Chanakya', and Himanta Biswa Sarma has proved to be BJP's man in Northeast, again.<sup>17</sup> His political

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<sup>17</sup> Himanta Biswa Sarma is BJP's man in Northeast, again, The Deccan Chronicle, March 3, 2018; Also refer to Vikas Tripathy and Sandhya Goswami's article (2018) National Narrative and Regional Subtext: Understanding the Rise of BJP in Assam in Studies in Indian Politics, 6(1), 60-70., where they argued that three factors contributed to BJP's success in Assam; firstly; the need for a strong state-level leadership and declaration Sarbanand Sonowal as the CM candidate; secondly, a strong anti-incumbency wave in Assam and projection of state politics into a two party system, i.e. Congress versus BJP; and thirdly, the induction of Himanta Biswa Sarma into the BJP, all were critical factors.

acumen and the ability to reach out to regional politicians has culminated in the BJP entering new frontiers and has also strengthened its position amongst communities which were seldom seen as being part of the 'mainstream'.

### 9. Co-option of Regional Leaders to the BJP

The electoral support for BJP has been on the rise for the last few years but seldom has it translated into seats. The BJP had won only 4 seats in 2009 Lok Sabha polls and 5 seats in the Assembly (2011 polls) from the state of Assam. It had virtually no political strength or leadership in other states of Northeast India. But now it is beginning to flex its muscles and through pre-poll alliances and co-option of regional leaders to its fold, it has taken significant strides to sideline the grand old party and establish itself as the 'fulcrum party' of the Northeast India. The electoral victory in the Assam in 2016 proved to be a major turning point for this party for it helped open the gateway to other states in Northeast India. Perhaps, such an upturn in political fortunes would not have been possible without co-option of regional leaders under its umbrella.

The expansion of the BJP to the 'frontier states' is definitely far more complicated because of its ideological moorings. Till recently, in Northeast India, the Congress was seen as a 'custodian' of tribal, dalit and religious minorities, but slowly regional parties (AGP *etc.*), parties which seek to represent minority religions (AIUDF *etc.*) and parties which represent tribal communities (ASDC, BPF *etc.*) have started to carve out its own political space and each of these parties have witnessed the emergence of leaders who are beginning to get more vocal and want a share of the pie. While the BJP and the Congress will continue to strive for political space in Northeast India, barring the AIUDF, no other party is untouchable for the BJP and *vice versa*.

Regional leaders have 'para-dropped' on BJP before elections. In the state of Assam, leaders from the AGP and the Congress started joining the BJP well before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Trouble signs were already apparent with growing anti-congress sentiments in Assam. The question was who could really fill the political space which was bound to be created due to poor performance of the Tarun Gogoi led Congress Government? The AGP is a shadow of its past and the fear of being swamped by 'outsiders' led to the call for protection of 'Jaati, Mati, Bheti' by the BJP, struck the chord of the Assamese people. Sarbananda Sonowal, the current CM of Assam from BJP was a AGP legislator from Moran in 2011. Similarly, other AGP leaders such as Hitenda Nath Goswami, Chandra Mohan Patowary, Naba Doley, Padma Hazarika and Jagdish Bhuyan joined the BJP prior to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Likewise, prominent congress leaders like Himanta B. Sarma who joined the BJP in 2015, was a Congress legislator from Jalukbari. Other Congress leaders such as Bolin Chetia Saikia, Pradan Baruah, Pallab Lochan Das, Piyush Hazarika, Rajen Borthakur, Abu Taher Bepari, Kripanath Mallah, Binanda Kumar, Jayanta Mallah Baruah followed the footsteps of Dr. Himanta B. Sarma. Most of the 'paratroopers' won elections on the BJP ticket and now have been well rewarded and hold ministerial positions in the Government of Assam.

In the state of Manipur, politics is essentially a power struggle between the Naga and Kuki hill tribes and the Meitei community which dominates the valley. The elections were held in backdrop of an economic blockade when new districts were created in the Naga dominated areas. Anti-incumbency factor must have definitely factor with the Nagas being critical of Ibodi led Congress Government. But the BJP has major challenges to deal with and the Naga Peace Accord will test the 'elasticity' of this coalition government. The current Chief Minister N Biren Singh was a member of the Congress from Heingang Constituency, joined the BJP in October 2016. Likewise other Congress leaders such as Francis Ngajokpa, Y. Erabot Singh, Vungzagin Valte, S. Achouba, T. Shyam Kumar, Y. Suryachandra, Ngamthang Haokip, S.Bira, Ginsuanhau, Paonam Brojen, T. Lokeshwar Singh have joined the BJP. Leaders belonging to the Trinamool Congress N Biswajit Singh, Joykishan Singh, Oinam Lukhoi and T .Robindra Singh also joined the BJP before the assembly elections. Once again, ministerial positions have been awarded to such regional leaders.

Meghalaya went to polls in 2018 and its verdict left enough scope for national parties to influence regional players. Congress which was in power for nine years, faced an uphill task given the anti-incumbency factor and the defection of regional leaders to the BJP fold. But in a Christian dominated state, the BJP also realized that 'cow politics' will gravely hurt its chances; it did not mention anything about beef consumption in the Meghalaya party manifesto. It essentially implied that BJP for the sake of CMB, was ready to embrace a 'soft hindutva' image which spoke on diversity and respect for each other cultures and eating preferences. Prior to the elections, eleven MLAs resigned from the Meghalaya Assembly which included seven of the Congress, one NCP, and four Independents.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently many of them have joined the BJP. A.L. Hek, Billy Kid Sangma, Adolf LU Hitler Miller joined the BJP. Likewise Sanbor Shulliai (NCP), John Manner Marak (NPP) and other independent members also joined the BJP prior to elections. The election resulted in a split verdict, and Congress getting the most number of seats, BJP with two seats, still managed to have a piece of the pie. NPP leader Conrad Sangma submitted a letter of support to the Governor (who incidentally is from the BJP) from 34 MLAs, including 19 from NPP, six from United Democratic Party (UDP), four from People's Democratic Front (PDF), two each from Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and the BJP, and an independent. While the BJP was willing to play a junior partner in the whole alliance, man management skills by Dr. Himanta B. Sarma and Ram Madhav proved to be pivotal in formation of the NPP led government in Meghalaya.

The state of Nagaland witnessed assembly elections in 2018. Politics in the state of Nagaland has been dominated by personalities and tribal identities, and solution to the Naga question is a dominant theme. It must be recalled that it must have been the only state in India to an opposition-less assembly, when eight Congress MLAs joined the Naga Peoples Front(NPF) led Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) in 2015. The

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<sup>18</sup> Four Meghalaya MLAs join BJP two months ahead of assembly polls, *The Indian Express*, January 3, 2018.

NPF though it severed ties with the BJP before the elections, continues to be part of the BJP led NDA outside Nagaland. Several leaders joined the BJP in the process which include T. Lotha (NCP), Y.Patton, S.Paangyu Phom, Tovihoto Ayema, Longrineken, Jacob Zhimoni (NPF). The elections threw in a hung verdict where in the twelve seats won by the BJP proved to be vital. The BJP played its cards smartly and decided to go with its pre poll alliance with Neiphu Rio led Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) rather than TR Zeliang led Nagaland Peoples Front (NPF).

The demise of the CPI(M) in Tripura is as spectacular as the rise of BJP led alliance with Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT). The BJP (35 seats) and the IPTF (8 seats) completely demolished the CPI(M) which won 13 seats and the Congress did not even open its account. While seeking a 'Communist Mukh Bharat' in Tripura, the BJP picked up issues of the 7<sup>th</sup> Pay commission and the need for honouring Bir Bikram Kishore Deb Burman of the Manikya dynasty whose contribution to Tripura was systematically ignored by the CPI-M. These issues along with the anti-incumbency factor certainly helped BJP extend its footprint in this left bastion and along with IPTF, which has a largely Christian support tribal base. But Tripura was one state where the RSS groundwork proved to be vital. Deeper introspection will reveal that, the establishment of its political foothold in Tripura would not have been possible without a fair number of political 'paratroopers' to the BJP. Prior to the assembly election in 2018, a number of regional leaders joined the BJP from across the political spectrum. In August 2017, 'led by Sudip Roy Barman, the MLAs - Ashish Kumar Saha, Diba Chandra Hrangkhawl, Biswa Bandhu Sen, Pranjit Singh Roy and Dilip Sarkar — along with hundreds of former Trinamool Congress leaders and workers, had joined the BJP.'<sup>19</sup> Likewise, several Congress leaders also joined the BJP prior to the elections - Sudip Roy Burman ( MLA from Agartala) ,Ashish Kumar Saha (MLA from Town Bordowali seat), Diba Chandra Hrangkhwal (Karamchhara), Biswa Bandhu Sen (Dharmanagar), Pranajit Singh Roy (Radhakishorepur) and Dilip Sarkar (Badharghat). all got BJP tickets from the same constituencies. All these are urban and semi-urban seats, the traditional Congress stronghold in the state. Two other former Congress MLAs, Subal Bhowmik (MLA from Sonamura) and Manoj Deb (Kamalpur), have also received BJP tickets.<sup>20</sup> In due course, given that the BJP is opposed any creation of any more new states, it remains to be seen how the demand for Tripaland will shape the BJP-IPTF alliance.

In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, after the by-poll in 2017, the BJP now has 48 MLAs in the 60-member House along with nine PPA legislators, one Congress and two Independents. When elections were held in 2014, the results were totally in favour of the Congress.

<sup>19</sup> 6 TMC ex-MLAs in Tripura recognised as BJP legislators - Times of India, December 11, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Tripura Assembly polls: All ex-Congress MLAs in BJP first list of 44, The Indian Express, January 28, 2108.

**Table 3: Seat Share of different political parties in Arunachal Pradesh**

Party	Seats won by the party
Bharatiya Janata Party	11
Indian National Congress	42
People's Party of Arunachal	5
Independent	2

Source: Election Commission of India, available at [eci.nic.in](http://eci.nic.in)

The change of fortunes for the BJP in the state of Arunachal Pradesh infact is closely related with the history of political instability in the state. Since January 1999 till July 2016, Arunachal Pradesh has witnessed eight chief ministers with none of them completing their five year tenure.<sup>21</sup> The fluid nature of politics in Arunachal Pradesh can be seen by the fact that Pema Khandu, who became Chief Minister in July 2016, changed party affiliation twice in three months from the Congress to Peoples Party of Arunachal Pradesh and then joined the BJP in December 2016. BJP never won the mandate of the people but when Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu along with 42 Congress MLAs quit the party and joined Peoples Party of Arunachal (PPA) which is partner of NEDA, BJPs quest for a CMB was truly on track. It must be recalled that such shift in party allegiance is not new in the state of Arunachal Pradesh when in 2003 when under almost similar circumstances Gegong Apang took away MLAs from Congress and formed a BJP government only to return to the Congress fold.<sup>22</sup>Essentially, in Arunachal Pradesh, the rise of fortunes of the BJP was not so much because of 'para-trooping' of leaders to this party, rather it was 'transplantation process' where in personnel were replaced, parties were created and all for the cause of saving the 'body politic'.

Sikkim goes to polls in 2019. In the 2014 Assembly elections, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) won 22 and the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) won 10 seats in the 32 member Assembly, the BJP and the Congress did not open their account. It has lost considerable vote share in the recently held Gram Panchayat election in 2017, and now is increasingly come under pressure from the BJP leaders of Sikkim. Pawan Kumar Chamling who has become the longest serving Chief Minister of a state, is seeking to overcome the anti-incumbency factor. In 2017, three former SDF ministers – RB Subba, KN Upreti and Birbal Limbo and some middle-rung leaders joined the BJP.<sup>23</sup> The SDF does not have any formal alliance with the BJP at the state level but it continues to

<sup>21</sup> Arunachal Pradesh is tired of political instability, available at <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/arunachal-pradesh-pema-khandu-congress-nabam-tuki-trans-arunachal-highway-nefa-tathagataroy/story/1/12038.html>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

<sup>22</sup> BJP Forms Government In Arunachal Pradesh As Chief Minister Pema Khandu, 32 Others Join Party, [ndtv.com](http://ndtv.com), available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bjp-forms-government-in-arunachal-pradesh-as-chief-minister-pema-khandu-32-others-join-party-1643769>, accessed on 26.8.2018.

<sup>23</sup> Sikkim Democratic Front downplays three ex-ministers joining BJP, *The Indian Express*, December 26, 2017.

be a partner in NEDA. The BJP is keen to have an alternative to the dominant SDF in Sikkim, and it may have to 'piggy back' on other parties to achieve its goal. Bhaichug Bhutia's recently formed the Hamro Sikkim Party (HSP) and already there are murmurs of a covert alliance between the BJP and the HSP. It won't be surprising to see that as Assembly elections come closer, more defections from the ruling party to others will become a reality.

Mizoram is going to have elections in December 2018, where the Congress and the MNF are dominant players.

**Table 4: Seat Share of different political parties in Mizoram**

Party	Seats 2013	Vote Share 2013	Seats 2008	Vote share 2008	Seats 2003	Vote share 2003	Seats 1998	Vote share 1998
INC	34	44.61	32	38.89	12	30.06	6	29.77
MNF	5	28.66	3	30.65	21	31.69	21	24.99
MPC	1	6.15	2	10.38	3	16.16	12	20.44

Source: Election Commission of India, available at [eci.nic.in](http://eci.nic.in)

Mizoram is probably one of the last bastions for the Congress, and it won't be easy to hold on to it. New parties are Zoram Exodus Movement (ZEM) and People's Representation for Identity and Status of Mizoram (PRISM) are likely to challenge the incumbent government. The MNF has ruled out any alliance with the BJP though it is a member of the NEDA, for the forthcoming assembly elections. 'Chakma politics' will be a dominant theme and interestingly the BJP (5 members) and the Congress (6 members) have jointly formed the Chakma Autonomous District Council to keep the MNF out. The BJP which virtually has very little presence in a Christian dominated state. In October 2017, the Maraland Democratic Front (MDF) and the BJP formally merged to counter the Congress in Mizoram. It remains to be seen how marriage of convenience between the NDF, MNF, BJP and NEDA works. Most regional parties would prefer the BJP rather than the Congress at this stage because it controls the 'purse' but the cliché 'nothing is permanent in politics', might just become a defining feature of politics in this frontier region.

### 10. One Nation, Multiple Contradictions: Challenges Ahead

For the BJP, getting together a group of anti-Congress regional parties might be as easy task, but the real challenge is managing the contradictions between 'one nation and regional aspirations'. The BJP policies and goals are often contrary to what the states of Northeast stand for. Palshikar argues that the expansion of BJP and its electoral success has made it more centrist and 'it has acquired a capacity to signal different meanings to different sections of its followers.'<sup>24</sup> To expand its political foothold in the states of northeast India, the BJP has adopted a 'soft hindutva' stand, sidelining issues

<sup>24</sup> Suhas Palshikar (2015) The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38:4, 719-735, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2015.1089460, p.722.

such as 'beef politics'. The Northeast rather than being a monolith is a land of diversity-of cultures, aspirations and needs; and it is for this reason, that managing the 'ungovernable' region will be a herculean task. The 'friendship model' as espoused by the BJP where in regional parties are working under an 'umbrella' framework may be punctured with holes due to glaring contradictions between the BJP's vision of '*akhand Bharat*' and the demand for greater autonomy by the states of Northeast India. Moreover the resource dependence of the eight states on the Centre may lead greater strains on the economy.

*Firstly*, the challenge of territorial integrity and the demand for creation of new states and greater autonomy is perhaps the biggest challenge to the BJP at the Centre and for the NEDA. The issue of Nagalim , Bodoland and now Tiplaland and inter-state boundary disputes is bound to shake the foundation of NEDA and will lead to uncomfortable questions which neither the Centre or the state leadership can answer.

*Secondly*, the centre has signed a number of peace accords with many insurgent groups. The status of such accords is under wraps and there is no sight to what constitutes a 'meaningful dialogue' or an 'honourable solution'. The peace talks with insurgent groups of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur have been rather stalled and no solution seems possible.

*Thirdly*, the issue of cultural diversity and lifestyle differences will always haunt the BJP-RSS leadership. With Narendra Modi at the helm of all political affairs, Hindu chauvinists expect him to pursue religious/communal polarization for there are political gains to be made.<sup>25</sup> But it may not be an easy policy to pursue in the states of Northeast India. Cultural insensitivity towards people of Northeast India by the 'Sangh' leaders have often been exposed and eventually if stressed upon too much by the 'Nagpur' leadership, it may just backfire. Though hindi cinema is popular across India, it continues to be banned by insurgent groups in Manipur. Likewise, imposition of Hindi and other such 'hindi-belt' ideas by the Centre is often treated as cultural imperialism. The resistance and contradictions between regional forces and the BJP's need to increase its footprints in the Northeast can be seen by the fact that even the immersion of ashes of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Doyang river was opposed by the Lotha Hoho, which is the apex body of the Lothas, on the ground that such rituals were 'alien to Naga culture'.<sup>26</sup>

*Fourthly*, controversial issues like NRC and refugee politics and changes to the Indian Citizenship Act by the Centre will lead to more problems than solutions. Already in the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, there are operations by state forces and non-state forces to flush out 'non-NRC people' from its territory. Additionally, several organizations like Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chhatra Parishad

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<sup>25</sup> James Manor (2015) A Precarious Enterprise? Multiple Antagonisms during Year One of the Modi Government, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38:4, p.748.

<sup>26</sup> After protests, Vajpayee's ashes immersed in Nagaland's 'unnamed river', *The Hindu*, August 27, 2018.

(AJYCP) in Assam too are asking for an 'Inner Line System' in Assam like that of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. It is indeed a box of pandoras.

*Fifthly*, economic dependence of the states of Northeast India on the Centre continue to be high. According to the 14<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission, "Taking into account the disabilities arising from constraints unique to each State like low level of economic activity and the consequential low revenue capacity in terms of low tax base, low per capita income; the disability arising from large forest cover and hilly terrain; remoteness and having international borders; infrastructure deficit etc.", the following was allocated:

*"Apart from estimated share in Central Taxes of Rs. 3,13,375 crore during 14<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission (FFC) award period, FFC also recommends grant-in-aid of Rs.63,206 crore for North Eastern States.*

*Share of central taxes have increased by 251%, grant-in-aid by about 44% and in overall there is an increase of 183% in untied resources transferred to eight NE States under the recommendations of FC.*

*During 2015-16, Rs.32, 657 crore (i.e.79%) as devolution of taxes, and Rs.11, 433 crore (i.e.89%) as FFC grants have been released to the 8 North Eastern States.*

*For speedy development of North-eastern States, a Rs.740 crore is budgeted this year for schemes approved by North Eastern Council (NEC).*

*For Revenue deficit grants, Rs. 51,137 crore has been recommended to 6 North Eastern States assessed to be in deficit post devolution of central taxes, for local bodies Rs.8,866 crore and Central share to SDRF Rs.3,202 crore."<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>27</sup> "As against share of 6.16% of total tax devolution during 13<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission award, North Eastern States now get 7.94% of total tax devolution under 14<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission (FFC) award", Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Finance, available at [http://pib.nic.in/newsite/Print Release.aspx?relid=136681](http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=136681), accessed on 26.8.2019.

Table 5: Fund devolution in states of North East India

State	2013-14			2014-15			2015-16 (BE)			Increase over 2014-15	
	FC Tax Devolution	FC Grant Total									
1 Arunachal Pradesh	1046	763	1809	1110	921	2031	7232	159	7391	5360	264%
2 Assam	11575	508	12082	12284	1130	13414	17401	3283	20684	7270	54%
3 Manipur	1439	1741	3180	1527	1827	3354	3238	2122	5360	2006	60%
4 Meghalaya	1302	883	2185	1382	783	2165	3371	643	4014	1849	85%
5 Mizoram	858	1083	1941	911	1055	1966	2414	2166	4580	2614	133%
6 Nagaland	1001	1994	2996	1063	2023	3085	2614	3224	5838	2753	89%
7 Sikkim	763	258	1021	809	515	1325	1925	49	1974	649	49%
8 Tripura	1630	1071	2702	1730	1002	2732	3369	1175	4544	1812	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19613</b>	<b>8302</b>	<b>27915</b>	<b>20815</b>	<b>9257</b>	<b>30072</b>	<b>41564</b>	<b>12821</b>	<b>54385</b>	<b>24313</b>	<b>81%</b>

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Finance.

Three BJP ruled states – Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh share the top three spots for non-utilisation of central funds allocated under various projects.<sup>28</sup> While many states of Northeast India have delayed in implementation of development projects, some have even failed to submit utilization certificates too.<sup>29</sup> Intriguingly, there is also a sharp increase in assets of policy makers in Northeast India. Reports by Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) reflect that in states of Northeast India, with the only exception of MLAs and contestants from Tripura, there has been a substantial increase in the assets of MLAs and contestants contesting elections.<sup>30</sup>

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for a corrupt free 'swachh' nation may indeed be hard to achieve when policy makers are involved in several scams. The call for 'minimum government, maximum governance' has come under severe scrutiny; Ruparelia points out that in pursuit of a neoliberal vision, the Modi government has only "weakened the principle of collegial responsibility and challenged the checks and balances and separation of powers."<sup>31</sup> Statue politics and hyper-nationalism may just work for the 'mainstream states', but given its failure to deliver on its big promises,<sup>32</sup> the BJP may have a more arduous task of fostering unity amongst the masses and winning the hearts of the people on the margins. The strength of coalition politics is will lies in the ability of parties to achieve common goals through common means. In Northeast India, coalition politics of BJP-NEDA-Regional Parties is based on the 'common minimum', whereby the agenda of 'anti-Congress' brings them all together. Additionally, dilution of 'saffron colour' has helped the regional parties come closer to the BJP. However there are several centrifugal forces which will pull such parties apart too. How long will this bonhomie last is anybody's guess, but the results of 2019 Lok Sabha elections will be a real turning point. The consolidation of the 'Modi-BJP *lahar*' especially in the Northeast India will depend on numerous factors.

*First*, with Lok Sabha elections forthcoming, what emerges is a 'conditional alliance system', the regional partners of the BJP will be more critical of the BJP and will demand more share of the pie. *Second*, with Assembly and General elections nearby, more regional leaders of states of Northeast India are likely to join the BJP. The next few months will witness an intense political bargaining game between the BJP and the regional players. *Thirdly*, given past history, if the BJP fails to get a clear majority in

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<sup>28</sup> Three BJP ruled states in Northeast share top three spots in non-utilisation of central funds, available at <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/non-utilisation-of-central-funds.html>, accessed on 26.8.2018

<sup>29</sup> Centre blames North Eastern states for non-completion of projects on time, The Indian Express, March 2, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Asset growth of MLAs shows politics is a profitable profession in Northeast, The Hindustan Times, February 26, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Sanjay Ruparelia (2015) 'Minimum Government, Maximum Governance': The Restructuring of Power in Modi's India, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 38:4, 755-775, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2015.1089974, P.77

<sup>32</sup> Raju J. Das (2018) Contradictions of India's Right-wing Government and Growing Disenchantment, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2018.1535082, P.5

the forthcoming elections, change of political partnership and utility as well as futility of NEDA will come under scrutiny. *Fourth*, in states such as Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh where tribal politics, issues of ethnic identity and the margin of victory in assembly elections is just between 2000-5000 votes, political personalities become more important than the party they represent. As such national parties may find it difficult to reign in vocal and dissident leaders for they will break away to form new parties. *Finally*, the relationship between the BJP and its regional partners in Northeast India is 'dialectical' in nature. Regional parties need the BJP for it controls the distribution of resources and the BJP needs them to help achieve the goal of CMB. It is a 'marriage of convenience', but how much will this region and its people benefit from this relationship, only time will tell.