

ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Tripura Assembly Election: Stiff Challenge for the Left from the Bharatiya Janata Party

Tripura will be one of three States in Northeast India that will go to the polls in February 2018. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will be keen to continue its successful run in the Northeast where, since 2014, it has formed the government, either on its own or in alliance, in three States – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. The BJP has also specifically targeted Tripura, since the Left, an ideological rival of the BJP, has been continuously in power in the State for the last 25 years.

Ronojoy Sen¹

The Northeastern Indian State of Tripura, bordering Bangladesh, rarely figures in discussions on national politics. One of the reasons for that is Tripura sends only two members to the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in India. However, in one respect, Tripura stands out. After the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]-led Left Front was voted out from West Bengal in 2011, Tripura is the only State where the Left has been continuously in power for the last 25 years. However, the Left's reign could be under threat from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when the Assembly election is held in Tripura on 18 February 2018.

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

The Rise of the BJP in Tripura

The BJP's rise in Tripura as well as in the rest of the Northeast since 2014, when Narendra Modi was appointed prime minister, has been remarkable. Since 2014, the BJP has formed the government either on its own or in alliance in three Northeastern States – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. This period has seen a dramatic increase in the BJP's vote share in the region. In Manipur, for instance, in the 2017 Assembly election, the BJP won 36 per cent of the vote share compared to only two per cent in 2012. Similarly, the BJP's vote share in the 2013 Assembly election in Tripura was less than two per cent. During the 2014 national election, however, the BJP's vote share more than doubled to nearly six per cent. However, as in Manipur, there is a distinct possibility of a steep increase in the party's vote share in Tripura in the 2018 election. There are several reasons for this.

First, the BJP is especially keen to dislodge the Left from Tripura since it sees the Communists, along with the Congress, as an ideological foe. The BJP's general secretary Ram Madhav, who oversees the northeast, has gone on record in January 2018 to say, "The Tripura election will be the battle royale for us in this round of elections."² Second, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has been especially active in the State over the past few years organising camps and other activities. Third, the BJP is targeting the tribal vote since the Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute nearly 32 per cent of Tripura's population³ and 20 of its 60 Assembly seats in the State are reserved for the STs. Keeping this constituency in mind, the BJP has tied up with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) for the upcoming election. Besides, the BJP also has the backing of the Jamatia Hoda, a powerful body representing the Hindu Jamatia tribe who, according to the 2001 Census, constitute nearly eight per cent of Tripura's population.⁴ The tribals though are not a homogenous entity with Tripura being home to 19 notified tribes. There is some religious diversity among the tribals too. Nearly 80 per cent of the STs are Hindus, and 10 per cent each are Christians and Buddhists. Besides the IPFT, there are two other tribal outfits that will contest the Assembly

² "Tripura will be battle royale for us, says Ram Madhav: BJP plans to neutralise Left, gain larger footprint in Northeast", *Firstpost*, 19 January 2018. <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/poll-dates-announced-for-three-northeastern-states-bjp-has-eyes-set-firmly-on-wresting-tripura-from-lefts-grasp-4309833.html>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

³ "Demographic Features", Tripura State Portal. <http://tripura.gov.in/demographics>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

⁴ Tripura: Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes, Census of India 2001. http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_tripura.pdf. Accessed on 5 February 2018.

election – the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura and the National Conference of Tripura.

Finally, the BJP has been helped by the implosion of the Congress in Tripura. In the 2012 Assembly election, the Congress was the principal opposition party, having won nearly 45 per cent of the vote share. This came down to only 15 per cent during the 2014 national election. Since the 2014 election, several Congress leaders, including seven members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), left the party to first join the Trinamul Congress in 2016 and later the BJP in 2017. All seven former Congress MLAs are contesting the upcoming election on the BJP tickets. There have also been reports that the Tripura Congress president, Pradyot Deb Barman, is being actively wooed by the BJP.⁵ Deb Barman, the head of the erstwhile Tripura royal family, still commands some support in the State, and would be a prize catch for the BJP.

Prospects for the Left

Though the Left Front won over 52 per cent of the vote share in the 2013 Assembly election and 64 per cent of the vote share in the national elections, it is suffering from the effects of anti-incumbency, having been in power in Tripura since 1993. While the State has done better than the Indian average on human development indicators, such as health and education,⁶ it has been hobbled by the lack of industry, poor infrastructure and employment opportunities. The State is so cash strapped that it has been unable to implement the Seventh Pay Commission salaries for government employees.

At the same time, there is a divide between the tribals and the Bengalis, who constitute nearly 70 per cent of the population. In August 2016, several people were injured and property damaged in Agartala, Tripura's capital city, during clashes between Bengalis and tribals. Though the CPI(M) is often seen as a Bengali party, it had traditionally done well in the constituencies reserved for the STs, currently holding all 20 of them. In the tribal council,

⁵ "BJP seeks to net Tripura royal scion", Syed Sajjad Ali, *The Hindu*, 20 January 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bjp-seeks-to-net-tripura-royal-scion/article22597742.ece>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

⁶ "Tripura: Human Development Report – 2007", Government of Tripura, August 2008. http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr_pdf/tripura%20hdr.pdf. Accessed on 8 February 2018.

elected under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Act, 1982, most of the seats are also held by the CPI(M). However, the Left Front's grip on the reserved constituencies could be affected by the alliance between the BJP and the IPFT.

The Left's hopes of holding on to power in Tripura will revolve around Manik Sarkar, who has been the State's chief minister since 1998. The 69-year-old Sarkar is seen as personally incorruptible, declaring in his latest election affidavit that he has a bank balance of a paltry ₹2,410 (S\$49.70).⁷ For several years now, he has been donating his chief minister's salary to his party fund and subsisting on a monthly allowance. However, Sarkar's personal probity and tactical acumen might not be enough to stem the BJP tide. He has himself admitted that unemployment and poor infrastructure are major problems.⁸

The BJP has attacked him precisely on these deficiencies, with Modi saying at an election rally in Agartala on 7 February 2018 that the people must throw out Manik (the first name of the chief minister, which also means gemstone) and choose HIRA (diamond). By HIRA, Modi, who has a penchant for coining acronyms, was referring to highways, internet, roadways and airways.

Conclusion

The election in Tripura is likely to be a close affair. While the Left will be desperate to hold on to one of its last remaining bastions, the BJP will be looking at continuing its successful run in the Northeast. The Congress, which has traditionally been a strong force in Tripura and the Northeast, will remain a bystander.

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⁷ "With just Rs 2,410 in bank account, country's poorest CM Manik Sarkar turns even poorer after 4 terms", *India Today*, 30 January 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/amp/india/story/with-just-rs-2-410-in-bank-account-country-s-poorest-cm-manik-sarkar-turns-even-poorer-after-five-terms-1157223-2018-01-30>. Accessed on 8 February 2018.

⁸ "As term ends, Tripura CM Manik Sarkar says if Left didn't count, why are we BJP's headache now?", Esha Roy, *The Indian Express*, 5 February 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/tripura/as-term-ends-tripura-cm-manik-sarkar-says-if-left-didnt-count-why-are-we-bjps-headache-now-5051585/>.