Elections in Northeast India:

The Bharatiya Janata Party wins in Tripura,

Makes Inroads in Nagaland and Meghalaya

The results of the Assembly elections in three States in Northeast India were announced on 3 March 2018. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved a remarkable victory in Tripura, ending 25 years of the Left Front's rule in the State. In the Christian-majority States of Nagaland and Meghalaya, the BJP made significant advances to ally with and help regional parties form the government. The elections in the Northeast have increased the national footprint of the BJP and allowed it to play up its inclusive character.

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The highlight of the results of the Assembly elections in three States in Northeast India in February 2018 was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s victory in Tripura, which ended 25 years of the Left Front's rule in the State. In the two other States of Nagaland and Meghalaya, a coalition of regional parties formed the government, with the help of the BJP. While the BJP's win in Tripura dealt a crushing blow to the Communists, whom the BJP sees as an ideological adversary, its advances in the Christian-majority States of Nagaland and Meghalaya are significant for the party to showcase its inclusive character. The recent results

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also increased the national footprint of the BJP with the number of States ruled by the party, either on its own or as part of an alliance, going up to 22. For the Congress, it was yet another electoral setback, with one more State, Meghalaya, slipping out of its control.

Tripura

The BJP's win in Tripura is remarkable for not only ending 25 years of the Left's rule, but also for the dramatic spike in the party's vote share over the past five years. The BJP's vote share increased from 1.5 per cent in 2013 to 43 per cent in 2018, and its seat tally went up from zero to 35 seats. While the BJP won a majority on its own in the 60-member Tripura Assembly, its ally, the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), won another eight seats, giving the alliance a two-thirds majority.[2]

The BJP's spectacular win in Tripura cannot be explained by anti-incumbency alone, which the party astutely channelled through its '*Chalo Paltai*' (Let's Change) electoral slogan.[3] It is true that, according to the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) post-election survey in Tripura, one-third of the respondents were "fully dissatisfied" with the incumbent government.[4]

There were, however, several other reasons for the BJP's win. First, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had intensified its activities in the State over the last five years and built up the BJP's organisational strength to counter the formidable cadre base of the Left. According to one estimate, the number of RSS *shakhas* (branches) jumped from around 60 in 2014 to over 250 in 2018. The charge was led by the BJP's Tripura in-charge, Sunil Deodhar, a former RSS *pracharak* (volunteer), who was sent to the State in 2014. Second, the tie-up with the IPFT yielded rich dividends for the BJP. The alliance won 17 of the 20 constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes, all of which were earlier held by the Left Front.

[2] "General Election to Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result 2018", Election Commission of India. http://eciresults. nic.in. Accessed on 9 March 2018.

[3] "'Chalo paltai' finds its resonance in Tripura", Rahul Karmakar, *The Hindu*, 3 March 2018 http://www.thehi ndu.com/elections/tripura-2018/chalo-paltai-finds-its-resonance-in-tripura/article22920814.ece. Accessed on 7 March 2018.

[4] "Discontent powers vote for change", Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar, *The Indian Express*, 5 March 2018. http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/northeastern-states-2018-assembly-elect ions -tripura-polls-meghalaya-nagaland-left-front-5086021/. Accessed on 8 March 2018.

Third, the disarray within the Congress helped the BJP. The Congress, which had won 10 seats in 2013, could not win a single seat in 2018, garnering only two per cent of the vote share. Since the 2014 national election, several Congress leaders, including seven members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), had left the party. All of them won this time on the BJP's tickets. Fourth, the inability to create jobs as well as implement the revised pay scales, under the Seventh Pay Commission, for government employees hurt the Left Front government. At present, State government employees in Tripura are being paid salaries under the Fourth Pay Commission and the BJP's promise to implement the latest pay grades worked electorally.

Finally, the BJP's central leadership spared no effort in Tripura. By the BJP's own count, 52 central ministers visited Tripura over the past three years. The BJP's General Secretary, Ram Madhav, who is in charge of the Northeast, had publicly proclaimed that Tripura was the "battle royale" for the BJP in this round of elections.[5] The convenor of the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance, Himanta Biswa Sarma, was active in stitching the alliance with the IPFT. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a difference by addressing four rallies in the State. The BJP also did well in projecting a young leader, Biplab Deb, as a chief ministerial candidate to counter the four-term Chief Minister of Tripura, Manik Sarkar. Deb was sworn in as Chief Minister of Tripura on 9 March 2018 in the presence of Modi, several central ministers and seven BJP Chief Ministers.

Nagaland

In Nagaland, the electoral contest was at one level between two prominent leaders – incumbent Chief Minister T R Zeilang and former Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio – both of whom, at one time, belonged to the same party, the Naga People's Front (NPF). In 2017, Rio, who has been sworn in as the State's chief minister, quit the NPF and joined the Nagaland Democratic People's Party (NDPP). The BJP, which was in an alliance with the NPP, too, switched sides before the 2018 election. The BJP contested the election in partnership with the NDPP, thereby projecting itself as an opposition party. This strategy worked well, with

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[5]   "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 March 2018.

the BJP increasing its vote share from two per cent in 2013 to 15 per cent, and winning 12 seats in 2018, an all-time high for the party in the State.[6] Though the NPP emerged as the single largest party in 2018, with 26 seats in the 60-member Nagaland Assembly, the NDPP with 17 seats was able to cross the majority mark with the help of the BJP and other smaller parties.

While both Rio and Zeilang did play a part in drawing voters to their respective parties, the Lokniti-CSDS pre-poll survey revealed that voters were also paying a lot of importance to the candidates rather than the party. According to the survey, in both Nagaland and Meghalaya, 61 per cent of the respondents said that they would vote for the candidate compared to only 20 per cent who said that their vote would be based on the political party. This particularly helped the BJP, which is perceived as an anti-Christian party. The Lokniti-CSDS survey found that 58 per cent of respondents in Nagaland, where the Christians comprise 88 per cent of the population, saw the BJP as an "anti-Christian" party. However, the BJP still ended up winning 12 seats in Nagaland, possibly because most of its candidates were Christians and the electorate voted for the candidate and not the party.

Meghalaya

As in the case in Manipur in 2017, the Congress was the single largest party in Meghalaya in 2018 with 21 seats in the 60-member Assembly. It still could not form the government losing out to a regional party, the National People's Party (NPP), which won 19 seats.[7] The NPP staked claim to form the government by roping in several of the smaller parties as well as the BJP, which had won two seats, and getting the support of 34 MLAs. It helped that the NPP, led by Conrad Sangma who has been sworn in as Meghalaya chief minister, is an ally of the BJP at the Centre.

That the Congress could not cobble the numbers in Meghalaya together, as in Manipur in 2017, was not surprising. Compared to other parts of India, the Northeastern States are inordinately dependent on central funds. Political parties usually tend to favour alliances with

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6   "General Election to Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result 2018", op. cit.
7   Ibid.

the party that is in power in Delhi. Voters, too, often believe that the same party in the State and at the Centre helps in development. Thus, the Lokniti-CSDS survey found that nearly 50 per cent of the voters in Meghalaya and Nagaland said that the same party rule in the State and the Centre is required for development. These sentiments helped the NPP, which had the backing of the BJP, to edge out the Congress in forming the government.

Conclusion

The three States of Tripura, Nagaland and Meghalaya together account for only five seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament). As such, the results will not have a significant impact in the national elections scheduled for 2019. Besides an increase of the national footprint of the BJP and the significance of being part of the governing coalition in Christian-majority States, there are, however, several important takeaways from the election results. First, the defeat of the Left Front in Tripura, coming seven years after they were voted out of West Bengal, dealt a huge blow to the Communists who are now in power only in Kerala. The importance of this aspect was emphasised by Deodhar when he said that the BJP's win had "broken the backbone of Communism from JNU to Kerala."[8] Second, the BJP's win in Tripura, where nearly two-thirds of the population are Bengalis, would make the BJP optimistic of making inroads into West Bengal in the 2019 national elections. Third, the results in the Northeast were a boost for the BJP after what was seen a disappointing outcome in the 2017 Assembly elections in Gujarat where the BJP won a majority, but fell way short of its pre-poll target. Fourth, now that the BJP is in government in several of the Northeastern States, it will have the difficult task of managing aspirations as well as separatist demands. In Tripura, for instance, the IPFT has already raised the demand for a separate tribal State to be carved out of Tripura.

Despite the positives for the BJP in the Northeast, there will be different factors at play in the Assembly elections later this year in the bigger States of Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. A common thread in the election results in the Northeast was that the BJP had campaigned on an anti-incumbency platform. However, in the other States, with

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[8] "How Tripura was won", Esha Roy, *The Indian Express*, 4 March 2018. http://indianexpress.com/article/india/tripura-assembly-elections-2018-results-bjp-manik-sarkar-amit-shah-narendra-modi-5085186/. Accessed on 9 March 2018,

the exception of Karnataka, that go to election in 2018 the BJP will be the incumbent rather than the challenger. Anti-incumbency will be an issue for the BJP in the Assembly elections, later this year, and in the 2019 national election, as was shown in the recent by-elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh where the Congress defeated the BJP.

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