

# The Bhartiya Janata Party in the States of Northeast India

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## Abstract

*Northeast, is customarily distinguished from the Indian mainland on a perceived sense of historical marginality and ethnocultural and religious differences. The formation of regional political parties can also be attributed to this cultural specificity and political identity of the region. The emergence of the BJP in the region is not alarming, unanticipated or even extensive. And if viewed in the context of certain factors this development would also seem unsurprising, such as the dynamics of complex inter-ethnic relation in the region and most importantly the inability of the Indian national Congress (INC) to keep pace with the emergence and incorporation of local elites into the party. BJP also focusses on the factors of development of the region to become an active “economic gateway” under the Act East Policy.*

**Keywords:** *Northeast, BJP, inter-ethnic relations, regional parties, development.*

As one drives uphill from Guwahati, considered the gateway to southeast Asia, towards another sister state, Meghalaya, one comes across numerous statues and large painting of Christ along the highway. At one point one could also see a mural of Christ with the words, “(W)elcome to Christian state”. Though the mural remains, the ‘designation’ of the state of Meghalaya as Christian state however has been removed. I began with this description to press home the point that in popular imaginaries and layman impressions, Assam is seen as a frontier to “Hindu mainland” and the “Christian Northeast”. So, the apparent growth of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in the region not only complicates the popular imaginary but from the perspective of the BJP is considered a huge success.

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The region comprising the seven states, collectively termed as the Northeast, is customarily distinguished from the Indian mainland on a perceived sense of historical marginality and ethnocultural and religious differences. The politicisation of this perception has produced competing ethnopolitical demands, the complexity and variety of which led the region being considered an ‘outlier’. In many cases, beginning with the “Nagaland for Christ” movement, it also led to the privileging of specific religious and cultural selves (Thomas, 2016). This relationship between region, ethnicity and religion led observers to conclude that a civilizational faultline exists between this periphery and the mainland and that subsequently became the foundational template for representing the region (Mankekar, 1967). Communities and ethnic identity movements have adopted this story to sometimes interrogate their cultural incorporation and political affiliation with the Indian state (Dev, 2011) and sometimes to also imagine a shared regional self-identity as “northeasterners”.

The formation of regional political parties can also be attributed to this cultural specificity and political identity of the region. All most all the regional parties are the result of regional aspirations and movements seeking autonomy and preservation of cultural identity. The All-Peoples Hill Leaders’ Conference (APHLC) (Chaube, 2017); the Mizo National Front (MNF) (2018); the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura (IPFT) (Ali, 2013) , the Asom Gana Parishd (AGP) (Bahn, 2020) and even a national party with a largely regional presence, the National People’s Party (NPP) (2013), to name a few, avowedly identify with the interests and identity projects of specific ethnic groups.

This representation of the region as not only an ethnocultural but also a religious outlier continues to dominate elementary portrayal of this region. Popular descriptions of the region and the constituting states are also shaped by the degree of religious diversity and proportion of religious groups (Ramachandran, 2017) in the region. There is little surprise that such ethnocultural and religious representation of the region acquires fresh political salience in the backdrop of the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the region.

This is not to suggest that the diffusion effects of this collective self-identification unambiguously influence an uniform regional political culture or even constitutes a single political field. Because a cross-state analysis of the region will reveal immense variation in the dynamics and materiality of social identity, politics and electoral competition in each of them (Dev, 2011). Moreover, ethnic identity affiliations in each of these states, undergo change with their level of aggregation (Laitin, 1998). For instance, within the state of Nagaland Aos and the Angamis, fiercely identify with their respective tribe categories; within India, they identify themselves with the Naga nation and collectively both Nagas and Mizos identify themselves as “northeasterner” within India. These choices at their level of aggregation produce their own dynamics of identity and difference that has implications for electoral competition and political outcomes. Yet, in spite of these internal variations it is still possible to argue that a broader politics is deeply informed by a collectively imagined region based on the idea of difference. Even as it is internalised, it is also contested.

How do we then, given this cultural, and political context, explain the growth of a party like the BJP which argues for “one India, one law” in a region where ‘difference’ has been accorded institutional recognition. How do we explain the political relationships between a party that embodies a majoritarian ethic and a region where the history of state-formation manifests the role of innovative constitutional provisions and politico-administrative policies (Dasgupta, 1997) that prohibits the imposition of such an ethic?

This author is of the view that the emergence of the BJP in the region is not alarming, unanticipated or even extensive. And if viewed in the context of certain factors this development would also seem unsurprising. Such factors would to an extent include the BJP’s affiliation with and the activities of other affiliates of the ‘parivar’ the broadening of the party’s electoral appeal through regionalisation; the dynamics of complex inter-ethnic relation in the region and most importantly the inability of the Indian national Congress (INC) to keep pace with the emergence and incorporation of local elites into the party.

The electoral arrival of the BJP in the region began in 1996 in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, thereafter spreading to other states of the region consolidating its social bases primarily in ‘select pockets’ in each of the states. Its electoral presence in states beyond Assam began to take more consolidated shape once it learnt to “induce defections” (Chaube, 1985) and effectuate regional alliances by outbidding the Congress. The slow ascendancy of the BJP in the region therefore, corresponds with the growing decline of the Congress which had been a major political force in the region. The in-fighting, factional pressures, resistance to dynasty-based intra-party upward mobility intensified this decline of the Congress and the relative rise of the BJP. Interestingly, in most of the hill-states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and even Arunachal Pradesh the rise of the BJP not only in terms of seats but also vote-share has not been phenomenal. It has formed governments, largely by aligning with regional fronts that have historically sought “strategic alliance” with the party in power at the Centre.

The political salience of claims to difference and autonomy, that still is the central pivot of politics in the region, became apparent to the ‘parivar’ “decades back” (Gupta, 2018) when members from the RSS “saw an opportunity to fix the battered limb of a wounded Bharat Mata” (Shubhrastha, 2017) and plant the seeds of a “alternative ideology” (Shubhrastha, 2017) during the ‘anti-migrants’ Assam Movement. In 2003, the BJP government at the centre acknowledged the true weight of this politics when A.B. Vajpayee, as Prime Minister candidly recognised the “unique history of the Nagas” (Karmakar, 2018). As the party made national breakthroughs and commenced its expansion in ‘northeast’, it began to gradually calibrate its elemental ideological postulates with regional cultural and political sensibilities.

Thus symbols and issues central to the party’s political agenda, such as ban on cow slaughter or banning the consumption of beef, Hindutva, Uniform Civil Code, religious conversion or the Ram Temple are never the privileged idioms of political mobilisation in most states beyond Assam. The party rather focusses on a developmentalist narrative (2019) arguing that for social and political progress and its integration with the

mainland, the region should become an active “economic gateway” under the Act East Policy (Ziipao, 2018). Such emphasis on eclectic developmentalism finds specific empirical illustration in the creation of a separate ministry for the “development” of the region as also enhanced grants to each of the states for efficiently managing these activities. This is also manifested in the activities of the RSS, and other frontal organisations of the ‘Sangh Parivar’, like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Sewa Bharati, Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Ekal Vidhyalayas (Siddiqui, 2014). These affiliates of the “parivar” active in the region, and expanding progressively throughout, are engaged in “social welfare and developmental tasks” aimed at mainstreaming this “peripheral and backward” region.

Though a developmental paradigm provides crucial mobilisational and political foil to dissimulate an abiding ideological sub-text, it does not in any ways constrain the party or the affiliates of the “parivar” from utilising “local symbolic inventories” to surmount perceptions about its hindutva bias (Jenkins, 2001) and majoritarian image. According to some estimates there are around 1088 (Awungashi, 2019) Shakhhas (branches) of the RSS in the entire region. These Shakhhas along with “innumerable varieties of affiliates” (Appaiah, 2003) are engaged in discovering, interpreting, and appropriating, local cultural idioms and symbols within the broader ideas, practices and iconographies of a hindutva-centric inference of Hinduism.

The process is cogently summed up in an insider’s view of the working of the ‘parivar’ in the region. It says, “the challenge for the RSS...was to define, promote and entrench the term Hindu in the consciousness...in such a way that the local histories, myths, idioms, and fables become a part of the sangh’s conception of Hindu nationhood” (Shubhrastha, 2017). The challenge was managed with such missionary assiduity (Jaffrelot, 2010) that in a few decades it has come to impact the social and political life in many states of the region. As Jenkins shows in the case of Rajasthan, in these states too, the activities of the ‘parivar’ are now accompanied by “broad ideological adjustments” (Jenkins, 2001) by the party in ways that suit regional specificities. These adjustments, or

what we term as “strategic moderation”, allows the affiliates and the party to access social and political spaces inimical to the core ideology of the party and the broader “parivar”.

In Arunachal Pradesh for instance, the emergence of revivalist movements among the Adi tribes ‘discovering’ the concept of “*Donyi-Poloism*” slowly spread among other tribes like the *Galo* and produced variants forms among the *Apatani* and *Nyishi* tribes (Chaudhari S. K., 2013). In spite of its long history in the state, Christianity had received little social and political salience until recent years when missionary activity among the dominant tribes of the state like the *Adi*, *Galo*, *Nyishi*, *Apatani* and *Tagin* Tribes (Chaudhari S. K., 2013) produced collective resistance and construction of identity projects for the revival of authentic cultural and religious selves. Thus Indigenous religious practices like *Donyi-Polo*, *Rangfraism* or *Intyaism* acquired new institutional forms (Chaudhari S. K., 2013) with reformed rituals, practices and iconography encouraged by affiliates associated with the ‘*Parivar*’ (Awungashi, 2019).

According to some observers in the parliamentary elections of 2019, this was noticeable in the West Arunachal constituency where Kiren Rijiju, a Buddhist from the *Monpa* community, stood as a BJP candidate against Nabam Tuki from the *Nyishi* community, a Christian and Congress candidate. Mr. Rijiju claimed that the Arunachal Pradesh Catholic Association (APCA) appealed to members of the Christian faith to vote for Tuki, whom they considered as “the pillar of catholic churches in the state” (2019). This alleged appeal and its politicisation polarised the electorate and some say, aided Rijiju. Tapir Gao, a member of the *Adi* tribe and the BJP candidate and winner from the East Arunachal Constituency was more categorical about the influence and role of religion when he attributed the conversion of tribes to the “catalytic work of the Congress” (Katiyar, 2017) identifying, thereby, the Congress as pro-Christian and anti-indigenous faith.

However, this revival and rediscovery of indigenous traditions and practices that creates the socio-cultural base for political expansion often

subsists in tension with the need to broaden the electoral appeal among the growing number of Christians. Two instances visibly reflect this tension between a purist ideological position pursued by other affiliates of the 'parivar' and the position of strategic moderation pursued by the Party. In 2017 the BJP-led government in the state had to rename the "Department of Indigenous faith and Cultural Affairs" more neutrally as the "Department of Indigenous Affairs" after being pressured by the Arunachal Christian Forum who viewed the former nomenclature as too anti-Christian (Majumdar, 2017).

On the other hand during a recent rally for parliamentary elections, the Chief Minister, Pema Khandu, a Buddhist expressed his intention to repeal the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act. This announcement was strongly condemned by representatives from indigenous communities and forums who appealed to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to intervene (Saikia, 2018). The Chief Minister did not act on his announcement and the RSS declined to publicly comment either in favour or against these actions obliquely acquiescing to the need for such ideological compromises.

Similarly in Nagaland, followers of the indigenous religion, Heraka primarily from the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei tribes (also collectively referred to as the Zeliangrong tribe) have been revived with support from the party and the affiliates of the 'parivar'. Heraka, an indigenous faith among these tribes was founded by Jadonang and promoted further by his protegee Rani Gaidinliu (Longkumer, 2010).

Various affiliates of the 'parivar' have been active in Nagaland since the 1970s but only after the formation of the BJP Government at the centre and election of state legislators from the party did their association with members of the Heraka faith become visible and politically contentious. During the recent elections to the state assembly and thereafter to the parliament, the discord between the followers of the Heraka faith and the Christians acquired political significance. The sitting Chief Minister, Z.R.Zeliang, was accused of being an RSS sympathiser and a Heraka supporter because he belonged to the Zeliang community. So much so

that he had to publicly state he was “baptised” in 1973 and is still a devout Christian (Majumdar, 2017).

An observer, who also happens to be a Christian Naga, believes that Christianised tribes who are in a majority apprehend that being too close to the RSS, may allow followers of the Heraka exert new dominance in the politics of the state they have traditionally controlled. This distrust and suspicion therefore, has inter-tribal connotations for control of state power as traditionally the Ao and Angami were perceived as dominant groups controlling the levers of power.

Another observer this author spoke to attributes this inter-community contestation over state power to the political competition between Neiphiu Rio, an Angami who wanted to return to state politics and T.R.Zeilang, a Zeliang who was the Chief Minister at the time. This ultimately resulted in a split in the Naga People’s Front (NPF) with Rio forming a new party, the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP). The BJP during the last state elections in 2017 had an alliance with the NPF but tacitly supported and ultimately formed the government in the state in alliance with the NDPP.

The electoral implications of this contestation between the two communities had become so critical for the BJP in a Christian dominated state that Ram Madhav, the then National General Secretary of the party had to publicly acknowledge that it was due to the sacrifices of the missionaries that the people of this region stand tall today (Dey, 2018). It is little wonder that party workers in the region have come to term the party as “Bharatiya Jesus Party” (Shubhrastha, 2017). However, the fact that the BJP despite being perceived as anti-Christian was able to electorally expand in Nagaland where powerful church associations influence social and political narratives is a clear indication of the complex mix of cross-cutting and interrelated processes. The tenuous inter-tribal relations and competition for state power by tribal groups and anxieties about Naga political identity produces the political openings that the BJP exploits and which the Congress did in its heydays.



In contrast, this expansion has been very limited in the case of Mizoram, often described as the “lone sentinel of Christianity” (Chhakchuak, 2018) in the region. Except in some Chakma and *Reang-Bru* dominated constituencies, the BJP or the affiliates of the Sangh have been unable to penetrate the powerful and fiercely christianised {and homogeneous} civil society and culturo-religious bodies that dominate organised politics and everyday life in Mizoram (Gogoi, 2018). Yet the relentless pursuit for political expansion led the party to apply “a balm of love” (Ghani, 2019) through its “Christian Missionary cell” (2019) in the state. In Meghalaya too, Sangh affiliates have developed close relationship with indigenous faiths like the *Seng Khasi* and the *Niamtre* of the non-Christian *Khasi* and *Jaintia* tribes who consider themselves minorities in a state dominated by their Christian brethren.

This conjunctive process of supporting non-Christian indigenous communities and appearing pro-Christian does produce a contradiction. The BJP creatively manages this by politically positioning itself as “centrist” and making political tradeoffs as in the case of Arunachal Pradesh. Another strategy to convey a “centrist” message is to support or nominate Christian candidates as in Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Both these political strategies are counter-balanced by enabling the non-political affiliates of the ‘parivar’ to foreground threats to the cultural identity of non-Christian indigenous communities. This division of political and cultural labour not only insulates the BJP from any direct accusation of being partisan but also enables it to strategically utilise it for political purposes.

These instances from the region underscores not only a deeper tension that the party encounters between “ideological purity and political pragmatism” (Jaffrelot, 2001) as it expands in the region but also provides an insight into the political compulsions of the ‘parivar’ for accommodating such ideological compromises. For the ‘parivar’ capturing state power even at the cost of short-term ideological compromises is important for deepening its growing social acceptability as also institutionalising political consolidation. An insider account rather boastfully summarises this regionalisation of the party by explaining how “(I)n spite of being branded

as a polarising political force, it (BJP) has a secret recipe that allows it to bond well with strong regionalist, and in some cases, subnational satraps...This secret sauce (is) of unification and subsuming of strong regional sentiments within the accommodative, national politics of the BJP” (Shubhrastha, 2017).

Some explanations for the rise of the BJP agree with the foregoing cultural account. They insist that empirical data reinforce popular assumptions that support for the BJP from sections of the population who do not believe in its core ideology or programmes is due to the activities of its “non-electoral affiliates” (Thachil, 2014). According to this theory there is an “electoral division of labour” between the party and other affiliates of the ‘parivar’ like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Sewa Bharati, who engage in “social welfare services” amongst those who are unlikely to support the BJP. The “goodwill” they generate through outreach activities like schools, primary clinics etc. create the base for political recruitment. And It is inferred that it holds true for the ‘northeast’ as well. But this is not so. In much of the states in Northeast India, available data in terms of the number of seats, vote share etc. does not show this translation of social goodwill into votes.

I argue that a more substantive and alternative line of reasoning must build upon but move beyond facile cultural accounts. And this can be derived from scholarship on political parties, their organisational structures and the ways in which parties recruit and incorporate elite sections of the society. Drawing on Kanchan Chandra, I posit that the BJP engaged in a creative process of “elite incorporation” (“Elite Incorporation in Multi-ethnic Societies”, 2000) through which they gave political life to the cultural symbology and “goodwill” generated by the other affiliates of the ‘parivar’. An elementary form of the theory’s argument is that elites (social and political) would join (or confederate) those parties that provides them with better opportunities and flexibility for upward political mobility. Voter choices would depend on their comparative perception of a party’s (in the context of the region it is the individual candidate) high or low probability of winning. The caveat however, is that the incorporation of new elites would be possible when incumbent elites do not fear their own survival.

And this would be possible, according to Chandra, in a party that is growing and has a widening resource base to share.

The BJP, under a charismatic and secure leader like Modi has been able to incorporate new elites from a cross-section of the region's communities. This largely has to do with the disillusion of regional elites with the Congress because of its inability to ensure upward mobility of existing elites within the party and accommodate newly emerging elites as an entrenched elite monopolised hierarchies of power and office for political and dynastic interests. The in-fighting, factional rebellion, resistance to dynastic incorporation and centralisation of decision-making in a "high-command" diluted the relative authority of powerful regional leaders and resulted in the decline of the party. This provided the BJP with its much-needed political opening especially in Assam and later beyond that state.

The prominent case of Himanta Biswa Sarma, described as "one of the towering Congress leaders of Assam" significantly demonstrates how an entrenched hierarchy had institutionalised within the Congress party. Sarma deserted the Congress along with a significant number of sitting legislators from the Congress to become a powerful member of the BJP hierarchy. In spite of its centralised structure the BJP conceded local authority and power by giving voice and political opening to this disenchanted elite. It also attracted new elites from the rapidly expanding and mobile middle class that emerged amongst a large number of historically marginal communities in the region during the last decade due to increased developmental activities in the region. The party permitted articulation of their multiple and often cross-cutting interests to protect culture and identity as also fulfil political ambitions and access to expanding state resources.

This strategic concurrence to multiple claims and interests produces, at least at the moment, a durable arrangement where claims for the creation of a *Twipraland* can be accommodated without losing the support of electorally dominant communities in Tripura; concur to protect indigenous religious faiths without disrupting the claim for more religious freedom of Christians

in Arunachal Pradesh or privilege the interests of non-dominant tribes like *Konyaks*, *Zeliangs* together with the promotion of leaders from dominant tribal communities like the *Aos* and the *Angamis* to political office in Nagaland. None of the leaders newly incorporated into the party owe ideological allegiance to the RSS other than a selective deference that ensures their political survival. This institutional incorporation is a significant factor shaping the electoral expansion and success of the BJP and has no bearing on the ideological anchoring of the party in the region. Therefore, the accepted argument that 'saffron rise' owes its origin to the RSS is disputable because beyond Assam, there are no indications of a "societal or cultural transformation" (Jaffrelot, 2019) from below in most of the states of the region. On the contrary, 'strategic moderation' and/or "ideological adjustments" marks the electoral rise of the BJP in the region.

This article argued that the rise of the BJP must be seen in the backdrop of the decline of the Congress in the region and in that context its ability to incorporate and enable regional elites to find fresh political openings. The party in the process aggregated disparate interests and politicised and mainstreamed claims that only had peripheral salience. This assemblage of disparate groups and interests often works at cross-purposes and creates conditions that can be difficult to reconcile politically. As the collective regional resentment against the Citizenship Bill (2019), or the continuing political tussle between the BJP and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) (Deb, 2019) demonstrates this aggregation could only be provisional as the cross-cutting and complex coalition of communities and interests can, at any moment, subvert this newfound stability. For it must be remembered that unlike other states in mainland India where the BJP depends largely on the activities of a committed cadre (Jaffrelot, 2001), in this region the party depends largely on the authority, leadership and social networks of regional elites. Therefore, if the strength of the BJP and its rapid expansion in the region lies in elite incorporation herein also lie its weakness.

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