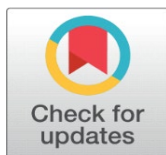
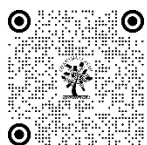


FROM THE FRINGES TO THE FOREFRONT: THE RISE OF THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP) IN NAGALAND

Riamei Jangmei¹

¹PhD. Scholar, Centre for Northeast Studies Policy and Research (CNESPR), Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India



ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intriguing phenomenon of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to prominence in Nagaland, a state with a predominantly Christian population. Historically, Nagaland's political landscape has been dominated by regional parties advocating for distinct ethnic and tribal interests. However, the BJP's recent electoral successes have significantly challenged this established political order, prompting inquiries into the factors driving its rise.

DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.2405

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

Keywords: BJP, Nagaland; Ideology, Election, Candidate, Political party, Manifesto



1. INTRODUCTION

The BJP's meteoric rise in Nagaland, from a fringe player to a dominant force, is a testament to its strategic adaptability and the resonance of its message in the region. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has exhibited a remarkable trajectory, characterized by a sustained and incremental growth in the State Legislative Assembly and electoral support. This phenomenon warrants a nuanced examination and discursive analysis to elucidate the underlying factors driving its ascent. These developments give rise to an intriguing question. What strategies did the BJP employ to achieve a commendable electoral outcome? Prior to the announcement of the results on March 3, 2018, it may have been arduous for a substantial number of individuals to conceive of the BJP securing 12 seats in the predominantly Christian state of Nagaland. Secondly, why is the BJP desperate to set its foothold in a small state like Nagaland with just one parliamentary seat?

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data collection was utilised in collecting the data, the researcher also engage in the analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, academic literature, and newspaper reports. Notably, the Election Commission of India's comprehensive dataset on the Nagaland assembly elections offers a valuable resource for elucidating electoral dynamics and trends in the state, thereby enriching our understanding of the electoral process.

3. BJP FOSTERING STRONGHOLDS

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) success in the 2023 Nagaland Legislative Assembly elections cannot be dismissed as a mere fluke. The BJP's steady growth in Nagaland's political landscape is a testament to its effective election strategies, meticulous preparation, unwavering dedication, and a voter engagement campaign that far surpassed its rivals. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the party meticulously crafted election strategies that considered every facet of the districts, including tribes, religious demographics, and other relevant factors, when selecting party candidates. This meticulous approach has progressively garnered support among the historically marginalized ethnic tribals in the state, particularly the Eastern Naga tribes and the Lothas of Wokha (Shah, 1996, 165-70). Under their leadership, electoral victory at any cost becomes the BJP's propelling force (The Wire, August 18, 2017).

The BJP embarked on an aggressive rural outreach strategy, specifically targeting marginalized and impoverished tribal communities. The party astutely recognized and addressed the needs of tribes, sub-tribes, and social groups that had been overlooked by other parties. Additionally, the BJP capitalized on the seven decades of unwavering efforts by RSS-backed organizations in remote tribal areas. These organizations, such as the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Ekal Vidyalays, Sewashram, and Sewa Bharti, had established a strong foundation of support among the tribal population in Nagaland (Indian Express, April 30, 2017). This strategic approach effectively countered the party's previous perception as an urban, middle-class entity.

The BJP is expanding its influence in Eastern Nagaland, especially in the five less-developed districts bordering Myanmar and Wokha district, which shares a border with Assam. These districts account for 24 seats and are generally more receptive to non-regional parties. Under the governance of regional parties dominated by "advanced" tribes, the eastern Nagas feel politically marginalized. Likewise, the Lothas of Wokha experience political marginalization amongst the "advanced" tribes. The BJP has skilfully capitalized on this opportunity by extending its outreach to these neglected groups. By empowering these groups and providing them with a voice in the political arena, it effectively countered the traditional dominance of "advanced" tribes in the region.

The BJP's performance in Nagaland improved significantly. In 2003, the party won seven seats, four in Eastern Nagaland and one in Wokha. This trend continued in 2008, when the party secured two seats, and in 2013, when it won one seat. Interestingly, since 2003, the BJP has won at least one seat in Mon district every election.

Moreover, whenever the BJP has won more than one seat, it has also secured at least one seat in Wokha. This suggests that the BJP's strength lies precisely in these four districts. The party seems to have a clear understanding of where its support base is and has strategically focused its efforts on these areas. This approach has helped the BJP to establish a foothold in Nagaland and compete with other regional parties.

In the 2018 Nagaland Legislative assembly election, the BJP contested nine out of the 20 constituencies in Eastern Nagaland, covering all eastern Naga districts and representing all but one eastern Naga tribe (Kumar, 2022, p. 125). Despite fielding candidates in only nine of the 20 Eastern Nagaland constituencies, the BJP secured three ministerial positions, including one for a Catholic legislator from Wokha. Notably, the party contested and won all five seats bordering Assam in both the 2018 and 2023 elections.

The BJP strategically prioritized fielding young candidates and allocating ministerial positions to representatives from districts that have been its strongholds. This approach reflects the party's efforts to cultivate a loyal base and maintain its dominance in key regions while carefully avoiding potential ethnic or regional tensions. Additionally, the BJP's decision to refrain from fielding candidates from electorally non-Naga indigenous tribes signals a cautious approach to navigating the sensitive dynamics of Nagaland's diverse tribal landscape (Kumar, 2022, 126).

4. THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

The ruling NPF's self-inflicted disarray played a significant role in the BJP's ascent in Nagaland, particularly as the election neared. The party grappled with an internal power struggle involving three prominent leaders—Zeliang, Rio, and Liezietsu—all former Chief Ministers. This infighting led to irreconcilable divisions among party members and a spate of floor crossings. Additionally, the intervention of the then Governor P B Acharya, a former BJP member, further eroded the NPF's credibility in the public eye.

Amidst the on-going conflict, Neiphiu Rio formed the NDPP, effectively splitting the NPF's support base. The BJP, with its astute political manoeuvring, demonstrated remarkable strategic acumen. Despite the internal turmoil within the NPF, the BJP maintained its 15-year alliance, effectively side-lining the once-dominant Congress in Nagaland's political arena. The NPF, a coalition partner of the central NDA government, remained in the BJP's orbit. Just before the nomination filing process commenced, the BJP struck a strategic alliance with the NDPP while keeping the NPF at bay. This calculated move acknowledged the equal footing of the two parties and the BJP's desire to avoid putting all its eggs in one basket. Given the delicate power dynamics, the NPF lacked the leverage to challenge the BJP's actions, and the NDPP, in turn, refrained from demanding a severing of ties between the BJP and the NPF. This strategy ensured that the power struggle remained shrouded in ambiguity long after the election results were revealed. Both the NPF and NDPP remained steadfast in their allegiance to the BJP until the very last moment, eagerly awaiting the BJP's decision. The BJP's strategic manoeuvring proved to be a resounding success.

Rio made significant concessions to secure the backing of the BJP, a decision that has so far paid off politically. In a pre-election agreement, Rio's party pledged to support BJP candidates in the remaining 20 seats. This explains the BJP's increase from one seat in the 2013 election to twelve in the 2018 state assembly elections. However, it has to be understood that the BJP's gains were not solely due to a surge in its popularity, but rather to its ability to tap into Rio's party's support base, which constitute approximately half of the original NPF's support base.

5. THE SMALL STATE SYNDROME, GOVERNMENT AT THE CENTRE AND ALLIANCE MAKING

Nagaland, a small state in India, faces unique challenges due to its small size, limited resources, and geographic constraints. This "small state syndrome" makes Nagaland vulnerable and dependent on external actors for support. These factors often result in a heightened sense of vulnerability and dependence on external actors, be they the central government or neighbouring states. This small state syndrome often leads to a perception of limited opportunities and resources, fostering a desire for development and economic growth. The BJP, with its pro-development stance and national-level policies promoting economic reforms, attracts voters seeking avenues for progress and prosperity in Nagaland. The party's promises of infrastructure development and economic upliftment align with the aspirations of a population grappling with the challenges posed by the small state syndrome.

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Nagaland can be attributed to the party's presence at the centre. When a political party is in power at the national level, it often has the advantage of being able to influence electoral politics of smaller states through policies, development projects, and resource allocation. The ascendancy of the BJP in Nagaland can be attributed, in part, to its incumbency at the centre. The symbiotic relationship between the BJP's central governance and its political fortunes in Nagaland underscores the intricate interplay between regional and national dynamics in the Indian political landscape.

BJP's control at the centre has facilitated a confluence of political influence and resources that has strategically positioned the party in Nagaland. This strategic alliance has allowed the BJP to leverage its national policy agenda, developmental initiatives, and resource allocation to garner support within the regional context of Nagaland. The perceived advantages accruing from the alliance with the central government have ostensibly contributed to the BJP's electoral success in Nagaland.

Furthermore, the centralization of power within the BJP at the national level has enabled the party to project a cohesive and unified political narrative, resonating with voters in Nagaland. The perceived stability and decisiveness associated with the central government under BJP leadership have played a pivotal role in engendering confidence among voters in Nagaland, thereby enhancing the party's electoral prospects.

The ascent of the BJP to power in smaller states such as Nagaland can also be attributed to their adeptness in alliance formation and coalition politics. The BJP has demonstrated a strategic prowess in forging alliances with regional parties and garnering support from diverse political entities. This nuanced approach to coalition building has proven instrumental in navigating the complex socio-political landscape of smaller states, where diverse and fragmented political interests often prevail.

The BJP's success in alliance making can be understood within the framework of *realpolitik*, where pragmatic considerations, rather than rigid ideological positions, guide political strategies. The party has displayed a pragmatic adaptability to regional dynamics, leveraging local issues and concerns to build alliances that resonate with the electorate. This strategic flexibility enables the BJP to establish a broad-based coalition, transcending traditional political divides. Furthermore, the BJP's ability to communicate and negotiate effectively with regional parties is a testament to its leadership's political acumen. The party's leaders have showcased a keen understanding of the intricacies of state

politics, recognizing the importance of accommodating regional aspirations within the broader national framework. This nuanced approach has enabled the BJP to position itself as a credible partner for regional parties, fostering trust and cooperation in the pursuit of shared political objectives.

6. TUMBLING OF CONGRESS PARTY AND NAGA PEOPLE'S FRONT (NPF)

It is predictable that the BJP will defeat the Congress in the Hindu heartland. It is an ignominy to lose badly to the BJP in the majority Christian states of the Northeast. The Congress party has lost its bearings in a region where the Hindu nationalism of the BJP ought to be a grievous handicap. The Congress party should have been louder in their campaign and put up brave show with campaigns like "Christian Lives Matter" (Times of India, March 12, 2023). Christians account for nearly 88 per cent of Nagaland's population. The Congress party had the chance to tarnish the BJP as a party of anti-Christian violence by flooding social media with evidence of attacks on Christians but thought otherwise (Times of India, March 12, 2023). The Congress appears to believe that adopting the mantle of "protector of minorities" in the rest of India is a liability. The evaluation was flawed. It abandoned its once-famous strict secularism in favour of a mild Hindutva stance, which failed miserably. A feeble echo of the original did not garner much support. The Congress party lacked the conviction and ferocity necessary to take the initiative. The Congress did not wage a significant, aggressive campaign. The outcome of the February 2023 assembly elections, which resulted in the decimation of the Congress and the split within the NPF leading to the formation of the NDPP, has created a favourable scenario for the BJP. The BJP's utilisation of strategies to capitalise on this opportunity demonstrates the party's ability to penetrate areas that may have previously been considered inaccessible in the context of India's electoral politics.

7. CONCLUSION

The political landscape of Nagaland is characterized by a complex interplay between regional and national dynamics. Regional political parties have historically played a dominant role in shaping the state's political trajectory, while the BJP's recent ascent to prominence has introduced a new dimension to the state's political dynamics. The BJP's emphasis on strategic alliances, astute campaign strategies, and a younger profile has contributed to its growing influence in Nagaland. Moving forward the BJP must adapt to the changing aspirations of the Naga people and address the challenges that have hindered their effectiveness. By embracing transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and innovative approaches to the Naga political issue, the BJP can secure the confidence and exert a sustained influence on the trajectory of Nagaland.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Chatterji, P. A, Hansen T. B & Jaffrelot, C. (ed), (2019), *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Sethi, R. & Subrasta (2017), *The Last Battle of Saraighat: The Story of the BJP's Rise in the Northeast*, New Delhi, Penguin Publications.
- Bhupender & Illa, P. (2021), *The Rise of the BJP: The Making of the World's Largest Political Party*, New Delhi, Penguin Publications.
- Arkotong Longkumer (2020), *The Great India Experiment; Hindutva and the Northeast*, South Asia in Motion, Stanford University Press
- Phanjoubam, P., *How BJP Won Without Winning in Nagaland* Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.56, Issue No. 35, August 28, 2021.
- Hausing. K. S., *Five terms for CM: How Neiphiu Rio-led NDPP-BJP beat anti-incumbency*, The Indian Express, March 3, 2023
- Anderson, E. & Longkumer, A., *Neo-Hindutva': evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism*, Vol. 28, 2018—Issue 4, Taylor & Francis. Accessed on March 23, 2023

- Firstpost, North East election results 2018: BJP's flirtation with regional elements marks localisation of elections March 3, 2018. Accessed on April 24 2023.
- The Indian Express, Wary of BJP rise in Nagaland, Church is asking community to 'stand firm', February 23, 2023. Accessed on March 28, 2023.
- The Indian Express, "Nagaland assembly election result 2023 : In face of NDPP-BJP dominance, Oppn hopes to hold on, build for future", March 1 2023. Accessed on November 20 2023.
- The Naga Republic, "Politics of Culture and Ideology: The Disquieting Emergence of BJP in Nagaland", February 24, 2018. Accessed on April 25 2023.