
The BJP, Ideology and Electoral Politics in Tripura

Biplab Debnath

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Tripura University, Tripura, India

Abstract: *The article examines the factors behind the expeditious rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Tripura, the tiny North-eastern State of India in which the party had a negligible presence since Tripura's emergence as state. The paper highlights the party's political strategy in the state in successfully countering the strong left bastion at the height of its electoral presence for more than two decades. The paper however argues unlike other cases of mainland India, ideology was not a significant element in BJP's electoral success in the case of Tripura, and therefore its future success will depend upon a fine balancing act of managing its alliance as well as effective handling of the key socio-economic determinants that lies at the heart of state politics.*

Keywords: *Tripura, elections, BJP, CPIM, Hindutva, ideology, Marxism.*

In February 2018 Assemble Elections in Tripura, The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in alliance with the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT) achieved an unprecedented victory over the left government of CPIM bringing curtains to their 25 years rule in the state. Following his party's stupendous achievement, in replacing what is still widely recognised as a leftist fortress in an otherwise negligible national presence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made two notable remarks. One was the significance of the victory, even in an electorally marginal state of Tripura, for BJP's national stature. Second, and more importantly, was the Prime Minister's assertion that the outcome represents not only BJP's electoral conquest but also an 'ideological victory' [1]. If one goes by BJP's all out attempt to go past the left bastion in Tripura, asserting the significance of the victory and projecting it is a triumph of nationalist Hindutva, against what they perceive as anti-national forces of communism, may not come as a surprise. However, narratives of electoral significance, as well as ideological accomplishment, needs to be seen in perspective, to grasp the much deeper social and political dynamics at play in Tripura, dynamics which could well decide BJP's political fortunes in the state.

1. SMALL STATE, GRAND DESIGNS

For a state, with just two MP seats in Lok Sabha, the importance that Tripura received from the BJP central leadership was nothing less than monumental. BJP aggrandised the small state as the lynchpin of its attempt to extend its hold from the Hindi heartland to the uncharted territory of Northeast India. While it is beyond doubt that with a decisive mandate in Assam, ending the 15-year old congress rule, the BJP's was well on course towards the end. The party also registered a remarkable improvement in Manipur and Nagaland, forming governments in both in coalition with regional parties, besides scratching its way through in Meghalaya.

However, there was an undeniable realisation that the communist-ruled Tripura presented a challenge entirely different from the other states in the region. For here the BJP was faced with not just a political adversary, but a formidable cadre based outfit much akin to its mentor the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In fact, a time when communist parties were more influential in national politics, their organisational discipline was a subject of grudging admiration for the nascent BJP, even as they considered their ideological adherents as an internal enemy of Hindu nationalism [2]. And at present, despite being reduced to one of the country's last citadel, the left's organisational penetration into the rural interiors of Tripura over the course of two decades made them a formidable opponent for the BJP. This electoral and ideological face-off was a test case for both parties – for the CPIM to hold on to its remaining pockets and for the BJP to demonstrate its proficiency to get past an entrenched ideological rival and give themselves a template in facing other strong regional adversaries in West Bengal, Orissa and Kerala. And the BJP left no stones unturned in its pursuit. Through a series of high pitched campaigning by top central leaders including the PM himself, unstinting supply of money, deft use of social networking sites targeting the youths, intensifying Sangh's activities by increasing 'shakhas' and strengthening their 'vistarak' campaign to counter the left's formidable cadre base - the BJP waged an all-out war to dislodge the CPIM out of power. But most

importantly it stuck a timely alliance with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) – a tribal party demanding a separate 'Tipland' for its indigenous people.

2. IDEOLOGY VERSUS THE DEVELOPMENTAL AGENDA

In its zeal to make an electoral presence in the northeast, the BJP has also mellowed down its radical Hindutva narrative of the Hindi belt. It has to do with the unique socio-cultural setting of the states, many of which have a majority Christian population, setting the region apart from the mainstream where assertions of Hindu nationalism stands up as a contrast. The Hindu-dominated Tripura though remained an exception, demographically not seeming to be an arena where the BJP needed to soften its Hindutva ideology. But even here the party used it sparsely, occasionally bringing up the insider-outsider issue in the context of illegal migration from Bangladesh as a critique of the incumbent government's failure to tackle the same. Nations like Bangladesh and China, and their cultural and ideological adherents were also constructed as the 'other', having no place in a supposedly 'Hindu rastra' (as evident by Assam's Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's remark about the then CM Manik Sarkar to take shelter in Bangladesh if BJP comes to power). But unlike states like Assam, where illegal immigration is a driving force in its politics of nativism and identity, the BJP in Tripura brought up the issue subtly to avoid alienating the majority Bengali population who have their ancestral roots in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the BJP deftly managed its alliance with the IPFT. While the BJP outwardly rejected IPFT's demand for a separate state, on the grounds of unfeasibility as well to avoid losing out on the majority Bengali support, they also at the same time turned a blind eye over the indigenous Front's electoral campaign run primarily on the movement for Twipland. Rather than ideological assertions, BJP's electoral success in Tripura was an outcome of this astute balancing act between the tribes and the non-tribes and providing them with a long-absent alternative political space against the left.

The reason why such an alternate space became viable was that the left rule in Tripura over the years was akin to the Achilles version of governance where achievements ran hand in hand with its deficiencies. The fact that Tripura has the best track record in curbing insurgency among the North-eastern states owes much to the left rule. Manik Sarkar's two-pronged approach of domestically upgrading the state police machinery to efficiently tackle internal disturbances on the one hand and foreign intervention in Bangladesh territory on the other is a feat unique among the Indian states and have even generated narratives of a distinct 'Agartala Doctrine' of foreign policy [3]. Not only did the Sarkar government abolish the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), but also was able to maintain communal harmony by coalescing the tribes and the non-tribes putting a wrap over the simmering discontent among the indigenous communities over large-scale demographic transformation resulting from the rapid influx of Bengali migrants.

However the ushering of peace did not pave the way to development through industrialisation and investment. The anomaly between literacy and unemployment rate remained at the extreme. In 2015-16, as per the survey report of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, with 6,93,516 job seekers out of which 1,61,933 are tribes, Tripura recorded the highest unemployment rate in the country at both urban and rural areas [4]. This abysmal state of affairs is despite sitting at the top of the national literacy rankings, although the quality of education at all levels leaves a lot to be desired. So faced with BJP's lucrative electoral promises to the jobless, employees and the youths, Manik Sarkar's much publicised 'poorest CM' image and his constant harping about central deprivation, no matter how justified, seemed hollow to the electorates. BJP projected itself a political party, sitting high on financial resources and calling for transformation on a developmental agenda, rather than an advocate of the Hindu Nationalist agenda attempting to create an ideological polarisation between Hindutva and communism. There is no denying that the so-called Modi Wave, which swept almost the entire nation since BJP's stupendous success in 2014, also had its effects felt in Tripura. But as the result showed, the effect was more towards eliminating the Congress base - with INC's percentage of votes making a dramatic fall from 36.53% in 2013 to a paltry 1.8% in 2018 thereby losing all its seats - rather than that of the CPIM [5]. The latter, in spite of losing 33 seats still managed to secure 42.7% of votes with a dip of 5.41 % from 2013 and below BJP by a marginal 0.3% [6]. Whether and how much leftist ideology played a part in CPIM's influence among the tribal and non-tribal communities in Tripura all these years is in itself a matter of debate. Even if it does, CPIM's still considerable support base not only makes BJP's proclaimed ideological victory just marginal but also creates a situation where the party's propagation of Hindutva, however moderate, can find acceptance only if the other two essentials – development and security – is fulfilled in a geographically marginalised and ethnically diverse state.

3. THE ROAD AHEAD

Therefore despite the stunning victory, BJP's way forward in Tripura will not necessarily be smooth sailing. It could very well be determined by the party's politics of assimilation at two very disparate levels. Firstly, it will be imperative for the BJP to maintain a level of cohesiveness between its core adherents, the principal followers of the party's Hindutva ideology, and the majority of new entrants who joined the BJP's success bandwagon for their own economic or political interests rather than due to the party's ideological appeal. Since it is the latter faction which has been instrumental in BJP's ascendance to power, it is unlikely that the party will even come close to propagating the majoritarian and intolerant version of Hindutva that it does in mainland India. Thus despite ruling a Hindu majority, BJP's politics of Hindutva in Tripura will be moderate at best.

Secondly, BJP's tackling of identity politics of the IPFT, buoyed by its best electoral results to date, will be a crucial factor towards the social cohesiveness of the state. As evident by its demand for a tribal Chief Minister, besides 'respectable representation' in the new government, IPFT is clamouring for more political space, representing the interest of the indigenous community who they feel have been overlooked by the state over the years. While the choice of a Bengali Head of the Government was almost a foregone conclusion, the outpouring of reactions from the tribal community, particularly the youths, on identity lines, is a sign of things to come. But more importantly, IPFT will not only keep alive its demand for 'Twipraland' but make its movement more intense knowing its political viability vis-a-vis the indigenous community. The BJP might have opposed their demand, but the IPFT has never shied away from accepting the fact that their calls for 'Twipraland' has been the primary mobilising factor among the tribes, and would, therefore, keep the agenda very much on the table. For the BJP, the separate statehood issue is like a double-edged sword, an issue which has historically pitted the tribes and Bengali communities at the loggerheads, both of which constitutes an electoral asset. An astute political strategy of a delicate balancing act, probably aided by inclusive development and greater political autonomy for the indigenous communities, is what could enable BJP to manage this complexity. Any assertion of Hindutva ideology in Tripura, given the ethnic and identity setting, will not have any takers.

How far BJP is capable of managing this ethnic divide will determine Tripura's future. In a worst-case scenario, if the rift between BJP and the IPFT over statehood becomes unsustainable, BJP could well lose its pre-poll alliance of convenience with the front. While this might not make much of a difference in BJP's electoral fortunes, the IPFT, now confident about its standing among the indigenous masses, will be more assertive in taking its movement forward. In such a scenario Tripura could once again go back to the days of insecurity, lawlessness and ethnic clashes of the 80's. BJP's litmus test in Tripura would, therefore, be on its electoral management, employment generation and inclusive development towards the creation of a shared sense of belonging among the diverse ethnic communities. Narratives of the victory of ideas are nothing more than a coating over the decisive factors of anti-incumbency and the marginalisation of the indigenous, as ideology wasn't and nor will play a role notable enough to determine the electoral fortunes of Tripura.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Biplab Debnath is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tripura University, India. He has a Master's and M.Phil degree from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His areas of interest included India's foreign relations, regional security in South and Southeast Asia, and politics in Northeast India.