

Mobilizing the Marginalized: Understanding the Rise of Bharatiya Janata Party in the Frontier State of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The growing popular acceptance of the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) in a well-entrenched multi-cultured tribal society in the contemporary frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh could be situated behind the horizon of structured electoral politics. There upon, it is contemplated as a cumulative after-effect of the right-wing ideological narratives strategically navigated through the complex socio-cultural settings to establish itself in the cultural and political imagination of the tribal people. Further; banking on dynamically structured political mechanisms, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) led BJP has persistently attempted to reset cultural and political discourse by leveraging on the multiple cleavages. Thus, this paper seeks to identify and examine the plethora of the Hindutva discourse engineered by the RSS-led BJP in the realm of socio-cultural setting that facilitates the political goal of the current dispensation in the state.

Introduction

Embarking onto the strategically sensitive space located at the extreme periphery of the country that has a little communication with mainland India for many decades; and represents complex demography- a mélange of races, ethnicities, faiths, tribal customs and cultures and a multiplicity of issues make it difficult for an ideology riding on religious nationalism to gain a foothold in the tribal state (Bhattacharjee, 2016).The BJP nevertheless managed to make an inroad into the state in 1982 and subsequently entered into electoral politics of the state in the third assembly election of 1984 by registering its presence in the psephological map of the state by winning one seat. Though, unlike the glorious electoral history of the Congress party that sustained for more than three decades since the introduction of electoral politics in the state. The BJP,

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on the other hand, could not succeed in establishing a well-organized party structure with effective leadership and remained a seasonal political party marginalized for decades. The primary reason for this could be attributed to the rule of the Congress party in providing symmetric government at the national as well as the sub-national level that has left a few spaces for the new entrants in a politically uncontested space for decades. Significantly, the political pattern of the state has always been influenced by the party in power at the Centre mainly because the state's geo-political and economic situation is heavily dependent on the Centre's assistance for various socio-economic development making the government of the day mere an appendage to the party in power at the Centre. And in congruence to this, the ruling government of the state has been habitually adhering to the conventional trend of 'flowing with the ruling party at the centre' causing 'ruling-syndrome edge' depicting unique and peculiar characteristics of Arunachal politics (Bath, 2009). Further, the changing dynamics of politics at the national level in the post-1990s led to the formation of the BJP led National Democratic Alliance government in 1998 have unleashed a new political discourse at the national vis-à-vis state level. Subsequently, the corresponding impact of new political development was also realized in the state. The changing dynamics of party leadership within the Congress party cultivated factions, one group being the Congress (M) headed by the then chief minister Mukut Mithi and another faction known as Congress (A) headed by Gegong Apang. In an unprecedented political development, a faction led by Gegong Apang break off from the Congress party and crafted an electoral alliance with a United Democratic Front and formed the BJP-led coalition government in 2003, thus giving the party its first state government in the Northeast. However, after the BJP-led NDA lost the 2004 general election, the faction patch-up with the parent party. Though the coalition government survived only for 45 days but significantly it further reassured the RSS-led BJP in consolidating the party's outreach deep inside the grassroots level and acquainted ideology, policy, and programmes of the party with the tribals. Consequently, in the parliamentary election of 2004, the saffron party was able to win both the east and west parliamentary seats. Moreover, the party managed to secure 18.99 percent of votes polled for the first time in the assembly election as evident in (Table 1. & Table 2.)

The BJP emerged as a potential alternative to the Congress in the state over the decades but the subsequent revival of the Congress party and its successive electoral victories in the state has stagnated the BJP's prospects for more than decades. However, the 2014 Lok Sabha election witnessed a new paradigm shift in Indian politics where a tectonic shift of political equilibrium at the centre from the middle of the centre ideological pinning of the Congress to the right-wing brand of politics of the BJP that rolled out a new political discourse to usher in a new India free from the Congress (Rai & Kumar, 2017). Correspondingly in sync with this new political development, within the two years in 2016, the state also underwent a political transformation marked by frequent mergers and defections which ultimately led to the fall of the Congress government after the 33 legislators headed by now Chief Minister Pema Khandu quit the Congress party and merged into the Peoples Party of Arunachal (PPA).

Table 1: Electoral Performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party in General Elections to Lok Sabha held in Arunachal Pradesh (1991-2019)

Year	Total no. of constituencies	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats lost	Total valid votes polled by party	Votes share (%)
1991	2	2	0	2	15,943	6.11
1996	2	2	0	2	51,085	17.41
1998	2	2	0	2	71,505	21.75
1999	2	1	0	2	69,389	16.3
2004	2	2	2	0	2,97,286	53.85
2009	2	2	0	2	1,86,076	36.24
2014	2	2	1	1	2,75,344	46.62
2019	2	2	2	0	3,79,679	58.89

Source: Statistical Reports of General Election to Lok Sabha from (1991-2019) issued by the Election Commission of India.

Note: BJP fielded a party candidate for the first time in the 1991 Mid-Term Election.

Table 2: Electoral Performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Arunachal Pradesh Assembly Elections (1984-2019)

Year	Total no. of Constituencies	Seats contested	Seats won	Seats lost	Total valid votes polled by party	Votes share (%)
1984	30	06	01	05	17,280	7.69
1990	60	-	-	-	-	-
1995	60	15	00	15	43,116	3.37
1999	60	-	-	-	-	-
2004	60	39	09	30	87,303	18.99
2009	60	18	03	15	29,929	05.21
2014	60	42	11	31	1,57412	36.21
2019	60	60	41	19	3,15540	50.86

Source: Compiled from Statistical Report on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh.

Note: BJP fielded a party candidate for the first time in the 1984 Assembly Election.

But in a dramatic political move, all the 33 legislators from PPA again defected to the BJP in December 2016 and it staked claim to form the government for the second time without winning the mandate directly. Further, in a much-anticipated state assembly election of 2019, the BJP emerged victorious crossing the major threshold with a resounding majority despite of its multiple contradictions and challenges. Thus, it has demonstrated the party's capability in sustaining electorally in a varied situation. In this context, it is argued that the electoral success of the party has made it more centrist, and it has acquired a capacity to signal different meanings to different sections of its followers (Palshikar, 2016).

Though the unprecedented rise of the BJP in the state could be attributed to the conventional after-effect of the party in power at the centre. However, this paper argues that the popular acceptance of the BJP in a well-entrenched complex multi-cultured tribal society in the contemporary frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh, among the other reasons, is believed to be premised on well-calibrated ideological narratives engineered by the BJP's ideological parent-RSS in the realm of a socio-cultural milieu of the tribes through various mechanisms. The region's significance to the BJP's ideological project is guiding the party's political strategy (Yadav, 2018) as RSS and its affiliates view the region as strategically significant mainly because of its geopolitical and unique socio-cultural settings. Moreover, the RSS has considerable support base in the state, making it a strong centre for the activities of the Hindutva in the region (Kanungo, 2011). Thus, the paper intends to examine the various nuances of new cultural and social reconfiguration processes unleashed by the RSS-led BJP in the region which is certainly facilitating the political goal of the party.

Hinduizing the Nation Building Process

The underpinning ideological discourse of the RSS-led BJP in the context of the frontier region has a long genealogy dating back to the circumstance under which the state has evolved. A Philosophy for North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) endorsed by the Nehru-Elwin outlined that 'let the tribes grow in their way on their own heritage, according to their own genius and tradition that there shall be no forceful imposition of another culture and... old culture should be helped to grow and developed into the new' (Elwin, 1957, p. 137) had been contemplated as a guiding principle for the development of the NEFA. Paradoxically, the process of integration of the frontier with the mainstream India was largely dominated by the exclusionary policy with minimal contact with the ethnic minority and one cultural section monopolizing power, controlling the state apparatus, and delineated the cultural identity of the minority groups (Hashmi & Saeed, 2014). Moreover, such precepts were further postulated through the process of appropriation of the tribal cultural practices rather than cultural harmony in NEFA (Darwar, 1999). Notably, the process of setting the 'Hindu nationalist' (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2007) ideological discourse was indoctrinated through the state apparatus that was evident in the whole process of 'nationalizing the frontier' (Bath & Babin, 2021). Sanjib Baruah in his book 'Durable Disorder' maintained that 'post-1962; cosmetic federal order involved giving new Sanskrit name to Arunachal Pradesh name that in a Hindu nationalist world view proclaim the region's ties with the rest of India' (Baruah, 2005, p. 53). Therefore, Hinduizing the frontier tribes as a prerequisite in fostering the national integration were deeply embedded in the whole process of integration with the mainland India. Moreover, the state, through multiple agencies have played a critical role in Hinduizing the frontier. For instance, Ramakrishna mission formed in 1966 was only among the other missionaries that were particularly endorsed by the government authorities to carry out their missionaries' activities in NEFA after independence (Chaube, 2012, p. 39). The underlying objective of such policy was to mainly inculcate the values of Indian patriotism and acquaint the tribes

with tenets of liberal Hinduism through education and other allied services in the tribal belts. In addition to this, integration of the tribes with the mainstream was attempted by imposing Hindi as the medium of instruction. The Hindi language was taught along with basic education and the mission's firm roots in Hinduism were no doubt preferable to the central government than the introduction of Christianity into the frontier (Lintner, 2018).

Significantly, post-1962 Chinese invasion in the erstwhile NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) has led to a paradigm shift in the government's policy toward the frontier borderland areas. Consequently, substantive politico-administrative structures and institutions like all Indian patterns were gradually introduced in the frontier. Simultaneously, in pursuit of nationalizing the frontier along with the intent to contain the increasing cases of proselytization activities by the Christian missionaries in the tribal areas, the then prime minister Indira Gandhi tacitly endorsed the right-wing organization to carry out their organization's activities in the frontier borderland as she 'did not want the church in Arunachal and would rather have Hindu Missionaries, the Ramakrishna mission and the RSS fill in' (Rediff.com).

The consolidation of Hindutva politics at the national level in the 1980s has led to the formation of a right-wing political front BJP. Subsequently, the BJP extended its political outreach in the state in 1984. Though the party could not succeed electorally for another decade. But, with the help of a dynamically structured political mechanism, the RSS-led BJP has certainly expanded their ideological footprints into new areas by establishing and extending the sphere of influence with the help of the local notables (Kanungo, 2003). Beside the state, other non-state entities became the prime mover force in Hinduizing the integration process at the frontier. In this endeavor, the Right-Wing Hindu organizations under the umbrella of Sangh Parivar (family of associations) pioneered the discourse further. Their primary goal was to inculcate a sense of patriotic nationalism among the tribals living along the border areas. Though the Central to their idea of nationalism is that of Hindutva and establishing a Hindu nation (Hindu Rashtra) (Longkumer, 2020). Moreover, the apprehension of the right-wing groups on Christian missionaries' conversion activities in the state is seen as posing threat to Hinduism in particular and the national integration in general. Thus, apart from proselytization activities, the rightwing groups held the Christian missionaries responsible for the insurgencies and separatist movements in the frontier state and because of this, the Hindu nationalists see Christianity as antithetical to the national integration process. In this context, to contain the rise of conversion in the tribal areas, right-wing groups' affiliate Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was formed in 1952 spreading across the tribal belts with the sole purpose to check the conversion and reconverting those who had been converted to Christianity and bring them back to Hinduism. They argued that the 'traditional faith and culture of different janjatis is precious, preserve it and protect it to re-establish peace and tranquility among the different ethnic groups and the northeast region. If the traditional faith and culture (Sanatan Dharma-Sanskrit) are protected, the society itself gets protected, which is essential for the national security

and integration' (Roy & Ray, 2008). Thus, invariably juxtaposing the Sanatan-Dharma as the traditional faith and culture of tribal through the mechanism of the 'cultural appropriation' (Ziff & Pratima, 1997) of the local tribes' demonstrates the discourse convincingly orchestrated in sync with the larger 'Hindutva nationalist' (Banerjee, 1991) agenda of the RSS in the region.

Reconfiguring the Socio-Religious Settings

The deepening roots of Hindutva discourse in the contemporary frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh could be thus attributed to the decades of hard work, behind the scenes by the 'Sangh Parivar' (Jaffrelot, 2005) in pushing their ideological narratives strategically in the realm of the socio-cultural domain. The exertion of their ideological narratives into the socio-religious settings of the tribes is done by way of appropriation that often-attempted to link the local histories, myths and fables and idioms of the tribes with the larger Hindutva narratives. The region illustrates a complex demographic landscape. Arunachal Pradesh is ethnically a tribal state composed of 26 major tribes and more than 110 sub-tribes embracing distinct cultures and traditions. Moreover, based on their socio-cultural pattern, they can be classified traditionally into three sects; the dominant group being a follower of the traditional faith of 'animism' known as Donyi Polo or Sun-Moon worship, the second being the followers of both the Buddhist traditions-Mahayana and Hinayana followers, and third is Vaishnavism faith. However, this structural religious taxonomy has undergone the process of transformation because of the stress and strain due to the differentiation pressure exerted by the outside entities. The socio-cultural space has become a highly contested sandwiched by Christianity on one hand and right-wing Hinduism on another side. While underscoring the proselytizing activities by the Christian missionary, the RSS has actively exerted their influence through the process of appropriation by conscientiously placing their ideological narratives which suit the peculiar condition on the ground. The initial strategy of the expansion was mainly by facilitating the tribes in mobilizing the reformist agenda primarily targeting Christian missionaries whereas on the other hand, the right-wing groups encouraged the tribes in developing and institutionalizing the religious practices. As a result of it, a new religious taxonomy such as Rangfrism, Donyi-Poloism, Intayaism and so on flourished under the saffron arrangement and because of this, it is often claimed that the Donyi-Polo, considered a dominant traditional god for the majority tribes in the state were also seen as a branch of Hinduism (Chaudhri, 2013) by the right-wing associates. Further, the process of reconfiguring the socio-religious pattern has been operationalized by appropriating the cultural and religious practice of the various tribes and introducing the images of gods and goddesses, constructing temples and textualizing religious chants in a manner very similar to Hinduism (Daugherty, 2020) which was alien to the tribes. Besides, they have been facilitating the tribes to 'Hinduize' their gods and goddesses by incorporating them into the Hindu pantheon in pictorial form appeared frequently in households of every tribe in villages is another testimony. Interestingly, the process of constructing the socio-cultural appropriations was attempted primarily based on

myths and histories of the tribes that fit the region within the larger Indic imagination of the Hindutva. They often use names, places, artefacts, and natural landscapes in the region that are imbued with new meanings. Moreover, myths and experiences are construed to make it relatedness with the larger notion of Bharatvarsh. Places such as Malinithan, Bhismaknagar and Parshuram Kund are some important places often claimed by the Sangh Parivar to trace their connection with the tribals living in the region. For instance, Madhvapur Mela (2020) was organized in Gujarat to represent the spatial continuities between the Dwarka in Gujarat with the Bhismaknagar of Arunachal Pradesh based on the mythological story of the conjugal union between the Lord Krishna and Rukmini (mother goddesses), though according to the Archeological Survey of India, Bhismaknagar city was built in the 8th century by the King Bhismak from Chutiya dynasty (The Citizen). Such an appropriation attempt has gained further momentum by extending an outreach exercise through the various educational incentive schemes. The RSS and its affiliates have setup a plethora of organizations such as Ekal Vidyalaya, Vidya Bharti, Bal Sanskar Kendra, and Friends of Tribal Society imparts formal as well as the informal education system. Moreover, organizations such as Seva Bharti and Bharat Kalyan Pratisthan run various student exchange programmes. Accordingly, to draw the people into the Hindu fold, they have been rendering various structural and economic support. Thus, by strategically synthesizing all the contradictory and contesting identities, the right-wing group has expanded their narratives into the socio-cultural and religious domain that has a wider ramification.

Implications on Socio-Religious Settings

It is in more recent times, with the development of communications networks, the right-wing Hindu organizations under the umbrella of Sangh Parivar led by the RSS have broadened their social base in a multi-ethnic tribal society. They present themselves as an inclusive group working for the welfare of the tribes by engaging the local communities in providing easy access to education, healthcare and so on. The RSS has 36 Shakhas and 50 units (First Post) and its affiliates are functioning in a diverse field across the districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Generally, school dropout youths and local public leaders are engaged in mobilization through regular Shakhas, Sammelans and Shivers. Significantly, the increasing right-wing exertion has also led to far-reaching implication on the socio-cultural and religious settings of the tribes. In a number game, Hinduism has achieved an incremental gain from 22 percent in 1971 to 29.4 percent; the Christian population bounced from 1 percent in 1971 to 30.26 percent whereas the followers of the indigenous faiths such as Donyi-polo, Rangfra and Amik-Mati sharply declined from 51.6 percent to 26 percent in 2011 census (Scroll.in). Thus, the primary adversary of the RSS led BJP in the state is the increasing number of Christians. Further to check the rapid conversion, Indigenous Faith (Protection) Act 1979 was passed in the state during the Janata Party government headed by P.K Thungon. The right-wing groups have a conviction that when tribes become the Christian, they cease to be tribes and therefore ineligible to apply for state benefits as tribes (Xaxa, 2005) and working on the similar objective, the Sangh Organizations have been facilitating the indigenous

organizations such as Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) for revocation of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to those individuals who have embraced the Christianity. Moreover, the ongoing contestations have largely diluted the tribes' socio-cultural and religious traditions and subtly moved in sync with either Hindu or Christian traditions in their conduct and character. Nevertheless, the tribal society maintains a complex strand of relationships holding a strong grip over the customary laws and traditions and because of this, generally, people identify themselves with their respective clan and community more than any other religious or ideological affiliations. For instance, RSS led BJP's conspicuous silence on the beef consumption issue in the state, contradicts their own position in the Hindi heartland region is one such manifestation of their manifold limitations that remains a challenge for the right-wing groups.

Implications on the Political Settings

Though the RSS maintains a non-political front, it has worked hard from behind the scenes which has laid the ground for the BJP'S electoral success in the region. In the context of electoral politics, the RSS-led BJP could not initially succeed in leveraging the electorates for decades until the 2019 assembly election. However, the party had formed the government in 2003 and 2016 without winning any majority seats in the assembly elections and is widely anticipated that the RSS being the main conspirator in toppling the elected governments (DNA). Besides, the implications of the contestation between Christian and right-wing affiliates have political ramifications because till then religion was generally seen as a dormant issue in state politics, but it is gradually playing a major role during the elections. For instance, the role of religion was explicitly demonstrated in the parliamentary election of 2004 when the Arunachal Christian Forum passed a resolution urging Christians to vote against the BJP given the VHP's 11-point Hindu agenda (Bath, 2004). Significantly, the change of party in power at the Centre in 2014 and the subsequent reconfiguration of state politics led to the emergence of the BJP as a dominant political player by securing record breaking vote shares of 50.86 per cent in 2019 state assembly election opened new vistas. Though, the state is specially protected under the 'inner line regime' (Bose, 1978) along with the provisions of Article 371 (H) of the Indian Constitution. However, embarking on the structural and institutional arrangements of the state, RSS-led BJP has been allegedly attempting to reset the structures as a part of the homogenizing idea of Hindutva. For instance, the creation of the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Affairs along with the adoption of the Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy by the current dispensation has been seen as the brainchild of RSS in countering the rise of Christianity (The Arunachal Times). Therefore, the RSS led BJP in recent years has assertively pushed their Hindutva narratives touching upon the critical issues that have a larger ramification on the politics and state in general. Nevertheless, it also contains the roots of multiple challenges primarily on the ideological and electoral fronts. On the ideological front, the RSS-led BJP has been attempting to absorb all the alternate socio-religious discourse into the larger Hindutva narratives. However,

because of the contradictory nature of the tribal society, mobilizing them into a complete homogenizing culture under the Hindutva umbrella is a challenging task. The Second is on electoral sustenance, the state is known for its political instability and in such a volatile situation party riding on homogenizing ideology's credibility still larger question and the party in power at the Centre has always swayed over state politics. Moreover, voting preference is mainly based on ethnic considerations such as clans and tribes during the election. More significantly, unlike the Congress party, the saffron party is yet to sustain itself in electoral politics because it has been able to form an elected government for the first time in 2019 only and has yet to go through the public scrutiny ahead. The party also has not yet fully developed functional organizational structures at the grassroots level to mobilize the electorates. Nonetheless, the RSS-led BJP have broadened and deepened its outreach into the far-flung areas in the frontier region recently and assumed an inevitable cultural and political force to establish itself in the imagination of the tribes.

Conclusion

The prima facie study suggests that the reverberations of the BJP's rise in the state runs beyond the formal structures of electoral politics. And its underpinning political construct has historical antecedents that was strategically navigated across the complex socio-cultural settings of the tribes that facilitates the political agenda of the current dispensation. Moreover, in this endeavor, the right-wing groups have utilized the tools of appropriation to shape a vision of what it means to be Hindu (Longkumer, 2017). Significantly, the mobilization strategies of the RSS-led BJP in the state presents a contrasting impression as they have subtly moved away from the conventional techniques of mobilization generally employed in the Hindi heartland states. And in the context of the state, it has acquired regional facet by strategically recalibrating its operational aspects to sustain itself in a highly contested space. They sought to make an optimal mix of cultural and identity localization under the rubric of Hindu nationalism. Based on the above analysis, we contend that the growing popular acceptance of the BJP in recent decades is partly contingent upon the role of the right-wing ideological assertion navigated into the realm of socio-cultural and religious settings that managed to capture the political and cultural imagination of the tribes living at the periphery who felt marginalized by the mainstream. Moreover, with the help of dynamically structured political mechanisms, the party has managed to capture the political vacuum left by the Congress party. Further, despite of its electoral success in recent years, the BJP's political sustainability in the state will be severely tested in the three situations. Firstly, the state's political complexities in relation with the national and regional dynamics dictate the trajectory of the politics in the state. Secondly, the cross-cutting cleavages of clan and community shape the electoral landscape of the state and the last not the least, crisis of leadership.

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