



The Rise And Growth Of BJP As The Second Dominant Party In Manipur: An Analysis Of The Factors for Its Victory In The 2017 And 2022 State Assembly Elections

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Abstract

The BJP has established itself as the major political entity in Manipur, a state in India's northeast, by winning back-to-back assembly elections in 2017 and 2022. This paper looks into the reasons for its success, such as its alliance-building, its attractiveness to different ethnic populations, its development-focused agenda, its image of security and stability, and its benefit from being in power in the Central government. The paper also examines the difficulties and the ramifications of its triumph for both regional and national politics in India.

Keywords: Coalition politics, Political defections, BJP, Congress, Manipur.

Received 24 August, 2023; Revised 04 Sep., 2023; Accepted 06 Sep., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Manipur is one of India's Northeastern state with a complex socio-political landscape, characterized by ethnic diversity, armed conflicts and political instability. According to 2011 Census, the state has a population of about 2.8million, comprising mainly of three major ethnic groups: Non tribals - including Meiteis (60%) inhabiting the valley districts following Hinduism and *Sanamahi* as their religion; the tribals - Nagas and Kukis (40%) inhabiting the hill districts following Christianity as their religion. The state has witnessed several movements for secession, autonomy, and self-determination by various armed groups belonging to different ethnic communities. The state has also experienced frequent political turmoil, with frequent changes of governments, defections of legislators, and imposition of President's rule. The Political scenario in Manipur has been dominated by the Congress party since 1956 when the state has its first election for territorial Council and the Zenith of the Congress party's dominance was when they formed the government for three consecutive terms in 2002, 2007 and 2012 Assembly Elections.

However, in the 2017 elections, the Congress failed to form the government despite winning 28 out of 60 seats, paving the way for the first BJP-led coalition government. The BJP had won 21 seats only but was able to form the government with the support of National People's Party (NPP)-4, Naga Peoples Front (NPF)-4, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)-1, Lok Janshakti Party (LJP)-1, an independent MLA, and a Congress defector. The BJP further Consolidated its position in 2022 assembly elections by winning an absolute majority with 32 seats out of 60. The Congress which got 42, 21 seats in 2012 and 2017 elections, got just 5 seats in this election which was a humiliating defeat. Therefore, the emergence of the BJP in Manipur has emerged as a noteworthy phenomena deserving of academic study. It raises several questions about how did the BJP establish their presence in Manipur, a state which has been dominated by the Congress party and a state with a long history of ethnic strife and a strong sense of regional identity? What elements made the BJP successful in Manipur? How did the BJP modify its philosophy, plan of action, and structure to fit the local environment? So, the main objective of this article is to answer these questions by conducting a comprehensive and systematic analysis. A mixed-methods technique is used in the study to incorporate quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources, including election results, surveys, party manifestos, media reports, interviews, and observations.

MANIPUR'S POLITICAL HISTORY AND CONTEXT:

In 1949, the king of Manipur accepted the merger agreement with the Indian government and as a result the state joined India union. Some segments of Manipuri society, however were against the merger and called for Manipur to have an autonomy or independence. Since then, other movements and military conflicts for self-

determination have taken place in Manipur, including from the hill tribes (Kuki's and Nagas). Some of these organizations are still operating and taking part in negotiations for a political settlement with the Centre. Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya attained their statehood in 1972. Since then, Manipur's political system and administration have seen numerous changes. The Manipur People's Party (MPP), a local party that favored more autonomy for Manipur inside India won the first assembly election in 1974. However, due to defections and Political instability in the state politics, MPP was unable to complete its entire mandate. The Janata Dal(U) another regional party, with the help from Congress (I) was able to win the election in 1978. But then, defections and dissidence led to JD's dismissal in 1980 under President's rule. In 1980, Congress (I) got a majority in Manipur and Rishang Keishing—the first chief minister from a hill tribe—formed the government. Keishing held onto his position of authority until 1988, when he was succeeded by another Congressman, Raj Kumar Jaichandra Singh. President's rule was once more imposed in Manipur in 1990 as a result of political unrest and instability. 1992 saw the restoration of Congress to power under the leadership of Rishang Keishing, who was appointed chief minister for a second time. In 1994, Rishang Keishing was deposed by members of his own party, and Raj Kumar Dorendra Singh took over. Wahengbam Nipamacha Singh then succeeded Raj Kumar Dorendra Singh in 1997. A hung legislature occurred in Manipur in 1998, with no party obtaining a clear majority. Under the direction of Radhabinod Koijam of the Samata Party, a coalition government was established with the MPP, BJP, Samata Party, and a few independents.

However, due to internal conflicts and defections, this government only held power for nine months before it fell. Under the direction of Nipamacha Singh of the MPP, the Congress, CPI, JD(U), and several Independents formed another Coalition government in 1999. Again, due to dissension and defections, this government also got disintegrated within a year and President's rule was enacted until the 2002 election. In 2002, the Congress became the majority party and established the SPF Coalition government in Manipur under Okram Ibobi Singh. The Congress continued to dominate even in the next two assembly elections - 2007, 2012. So, Okram Ibobi Singh, under his strong and able leadership was able to secure comfortable majorities for three successive terms (2002, 2007, and 2012). During his time in office, he also dealt with a number of difficulties and controversies, including the extension of the NSCN(IM) cease-fire, the creation of new districts in the hills, the need for Inner Line Permits (ILPs) in the valley, the rise of corruption and nepotism and an increase in extrajudicial killings and human rights violations.

However, in 2017, Manipur witnessed a close contest between Congress and BJP, with both parties winning 28 and 21 seats respectively. But then, the BJP managed to form a Coalition government with the support of NPP, NPF, LJP, TMC, Independent, and a defected Congress MLA. Nongthombam Biren Singh, a former Congress leader who defected to BJP in 2016, became the chief minister of Manipur and completed the five years tenure. In 2022, for the first time in two decades, the Congress fought the 12th assembly elections as an Opposition party. In this election, the BJP created history by winning 32 out of 60 seats reducing the Congress to only 5. The rest of the seats were distributed among smaller parties and independent candidates. Whereas the NPF won five seats out of ten it contested from the Naga-dominated AC, the newly floated Kuki Peoples Alliance (KPA) won in the two Kuki-dominated AC it contested. In fact, no Kuki ever won in the Naga inhabited areas and vice versa.

THE PERFORMANCE OF BJP IN MANIPUR POLITICAL HISTORY FROM 1984 – 2022

The BJP has made major strides in the Northeastern region of India, especially since the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections and when it won seven out of fourteen seats in Assam and formed its first government in the state in 2016. This was followed by the party's victory in the 2017 Manipur State Legislative Assembly election, where it managed to form a government despite winning only 21 out of 60 seats, compared to the 28 seats won by the Congress. Despite having no significant presence in the state prior to 2017, the BJP was able to retain their power in the 12th State Legislative Assembly election held in 2022, winning 32 out of 60 seats and forming a single-party government for the first time. This was a remarkable achievement for the party, because, even though BJP Manipur was already formed on 2nd August 1980, yet it failed to play any significant role in the state politics. It wasn't until 1995 when Thounaojam Chaoba Singh won from the Nambol Constituency that the BJP won its first seat in the state.

In 2000, the BJP won six seats, but by 2002 it had lost four of those seats. In the Manipur assembly elections of 2007 and 2012, the BJP was unable to gain any seats. However, after winning 21 out of 60 seats in the 2017 Manipur assembly elections and forming the government with the help of numerous regional partners like the NPP, NPF, LJP, JD(U), etc., the BJP's fortunes in the state underwent a significant turnaround. In 2022 assembly elections, the BJP created history by winning 32 out of 60 seats and formed the second BJP government.

The following data's shows the rise of BJP in the state since 1984 till 2022 by studying both elections of the state legislative assembly and the Lok Sabha:

Table-1: Past Electoral Performances of Bharatiya Janata Party in Manipur Assembly Elections (1984 – 2022)

Year	Contested	Won	Votes Polled	Votes%	Votes % in Seats Contested
1984	12	0	6163	0.71%	3.89%
1990	11	0	18549	1.87%	10.11%
1995	20	1	38405	3.35%	10.82%
2000	39	6	142174	11.28%	18.32%
2002	46	4	126044	9.55%	12.11%
2007	14	0	12536	0.85%	3.95%
2012	19	0	29663	2.12%	6.83%
2017	60	21	601539	36.48%	36.48%
2022	60	32	702720	37.83%	37.83%

Source: Compiled from Statistical Report on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Manipur

Table-2: Electoral Performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party in General Elections to Lok Sabha held in Manipur (1984-2022)

YEAR	SEATS CONTESTED	SEATS WON	TOTAL VALID VOTES POLLED	VOTES SHARED %
1984	1	0	58521	7%
1989	1	0	19559	2.3%
1991	2	0	68594	8.1%
1996	2	0	50314	5.2%
1998	1	0	94543	12.6%
1999	1	0	9110	1%
2004	2	0	213892	20.7%
2009	2	0	127146	9.49%
2014	2	0	168271	12%
2019	2	1	553377	34.3%

Source: Statistical Reports of General Election to Lok Sabha from (1984-2022) issued by the Election Commission of India.

In June 2015, there was an Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections in the hill areas of Manipur. The BJP was able to secure 21 out of 144 seats which is significant for the party as the party had never won even a single seat before. In November 2015 there was By-elections in Manipur for two Assembly seats- Thangmeiband and Thongju AC in which both the seats were won by the BJP. It meant that the party opened its account in the State Legislative Assembly by capturing two vacant seats. In January 2016, there was local body elections (18 Municipal Councils and eight Nagar Panchayats) in which the party won some seats which they never won before. The elections were to elect 278 councilors and 586 Nagar Panchayat members in four districts of Manipur-Imphal West, Thoubal, Imphal East, and Bishnupur. The Congress (I) won maximum number of seats with 108 followed by BJP 62, CPI 2, LokJanashakti Party 4 and the Independents 102 in municipal council elections. Moreover, in the Imphal Municipal Council election held in June 2016, BIP has won 10 out of 27 seats as opposed to one seat that it won in 2011.

In March 2020, there was another By-elections in Manipur in Five AC, In which the BJP was able to win four out of five. The winners were: From WangjingTentha AC - PaonamBrojensingh, from Wangoi AC- OinamLukhhoisingh, from Saitu AC- NgamthangHaokip, from Singhat AC- Ginsuanhau. Apart from these four BJP winning candidates, the Independent Candidate from Lilong – Y. Antas Khan was also backed by BJP.

All these result shows that BJP is rising and making inroads for their dominance in Manipur electoral politics. After witnessing their back to back winnings in the local elections, Assembly elections and Loksabha elections we can also say that BJP has already entered and Captured the power.

2017 Manipur state assembly elections and the BJP's rise to power:

The 11th Manipur assembly election was conducted in the month of March to elect 60 members of legislative assembly. The Congress got 28 seats higher than 21 seats of BJP, but then, BJP was able to form the government with the support of National People's Party (NPP)-4, Naga Peoples Front (NPF)-4, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)-1, LokJanshakti Party (LJP)-1, an independent MLA, and a Congress defector. Let us analyse the factors that contributed to BJP'S victory in this election:

Anti-incumbency against Congress: One of the main reasons for BJP's success in Manipur in 2017 was the anti-Incumbency factor against the Congress government led by OkramIbobi Singh that ruled the state for 15 years from 2002-2017, While Ibobi Singh had some achievements to his credit, such as improving infrastructure, providing electricity and water supply, implementing welfare schemes, etc, He also faced several allegations of misrule, Bandhs, Economic blockades, strikes and Protests, Nepotism, favouritism, manipulation,

and Corruption (10% Ibobi). He was accused of being autocratic and arrogant in his style of functioning and of promoting his family members and loyalists in politics and administration. He was also blamed for creating divisions among different communities by playing politics over sensitive issues such as ILP demand in the valley and creation of new districts in the hills, which resulted into UNC's Economic blockade for 139 days from 1st Nov. 2016 to 19th March 2017.

In addition to it, the Congress party was facing serious problems in the hills of Manipur. The party and its MLAs were boycotted in all the hill districts of the state. The Congress MLAs have been boycotted in Churachandpur since the three Bills that the state Assembly passed on 31 August 2015. As a counter to the move of the government, several tribal student organizations namely the Kuki Students' Organization (GHQ); All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM) and the ATSUM (All Tribal Student Union, Manipur) have jointly protested against the three bills. In the tussle between the protesters and the security forces eight civilians were killed and around 40 were also injured in Churachandpur." The death bodies were kept in a morgue for more than one and half years. It was buried only on 25 May 2017 (exactly after 632 days)." So, all these incidents and issues gave a wonderful opportunity for the BJP to grab power in Manipur. In other words, the political situation in the state was in favour of BJP. Moreover, there is no alternative to the Congress party except the BJP to the electorate of Manipur, if the people want to change the party in power.

Defection of Congress leaders: Another factor that led BJP rise in Manipur was the defection of several Congress leaders to BJP before or after the election. Some defected looking for better political status or dissatisfied with the leadership of Ibobi or were denied party tickets by Congress. Some were also influenced by BJP's Promises or incentives or were influenced by the leadership quality of Modi. Some of these defectors were senior Congress leaders having a high profile in their respective constituencies or regions and later helped BJP gain votes and seats in Manipur. The first Congress MLA who defected to BJP was Yumkham Irabot Singh (former Congress Minister and sitting MLA from Wangkhei AC during the time) in the month of September 2016. Next, in the month of October 2016, Nongthombam Biren Singh (the then Congress Spokesperson), who later on became the new CM of Manipur and Francis Ngajokpa (Tadubi AC) also defected to BJP. Apart from these three persons, there were many others who still defected before or after election from Congress party to BJP. So, the practice of Defections becomes a game changer in the state assembly elections by weakening the Congress and strengthening the BJP, and it can be said that, these defectors were only changing the colour of their clothes. In other words, it was the same old wine in the new bottle.

Advantage of being in power at the Centre:

In the 2017 Assembly elections, Manipur voters, like those in other smaller states in the Northeast, cast their votes in favor of the party in power at the Centre. The main reason for that, the people preferred the state to be ruled by the party in power in New Delhi since this will make the central government more duty-bound and soft when it comes to allocating funds for development. In fact, the Union Government's financial support in a state like Manipur is crucial for the state's overall development.

Hard work of the BJP:

In order to win the elections, the party leaders and workers including the Prime minister and his colleagues, regional leaders put all their efforts together. In September 2016 (seven months before the election), the BJP central leaders like BJP Northeast in-charge Ajay Jamwal, Union HRD Minister and Manipur election in-charge Prakash Javadekar, BJP national general secretary Ram Madhav, Assam cabinet minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, and BJP Manipur in-charge Prahar Patel visited the state to kick-start the campaign. This was followed by visits of BJP Central leaders every other-two-week to Manipur before and during the assembly elections. In September 13, 2016, the party's national president Amit Shah along with Prakash Javadekar, in-charge for the Manipur elections and Himanta Biswa Sarma, launched the saffron party's election campaign in Manipur where a large crowd gathered at Hapta Kangjeibung in Imphal. According to reports, the gathering was the biggest BJP rally in Manipur history. On February 25, 2017, Modi along with Kiren Rijiju and Menaka Gandhi paid a visit to Imphal and gave a rally address promising that if the BJP is elected power, the UNC's indefinite economic blockade in Manipur will be lifted. He also viciously attacked O. Ibobi Singh, the then-chief minister of Manipur, charging that he was "running the most corrupt government" and "taking 10% commission." They also campaigned on various central schemes and clarifying the party's stand on contentious issues like ban of Beef eating especially to the minority Christians. Apart from the efforts of BJP's central leaders, one can't ignore the efforts of BJP's Karyakartas in the state.

Strategic alliances:

One of the main reasons the BJP was able to establish itself in Manipur was its strategic alliance formation with regional and state parties that had a broad support base across several ethnic groups in the region. For instance, the North East Democratic alliance (NEDA)–The NPF, which represented the interests of

the Nagas and the NPP, which represented various sectors of all groups were allies of the BJP led NEDA in 2017. By forming these partnerships, the BJP was able to appeal to a wider range of societal segments beyond the valley districts and was able to form a Coalition government even though it received less seats than the Congress.

Appeal to different ethnic groups:

The BJP also appeal to various ethnic groups, particularly the Meiteis, who make up the majority of the population in Manipur, helped it win over voters there as well. The BJP was able to take advantage of the Meitei's dissatisfaction and resentment at the previous Congress administration in handling the 2015 Framework agreement between the Centre and the NSCN-IM, which would jeopardize Manipur's territorial integrity and autonomy. The Naga's were dissatisfied to the Congress government's decision to create seven new districts in 2016 which was viewed as a step against the Nagas's desire for Greater Nagalim. In this way the BJP were taking the advantage by approaching and promising the Meitei's that it would safeguard Manipur's sovereignty and integrity at all costs. Apart from this, the BJP also promised to grant Scheduled Tribe status to Meitei's which would entitle them to reservation benefits in education and employment. On the other hand, the BJP also tried to woo the Christian minorities in the state by highlighting the BJP's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance. The BJP also tried to reach out to the Nagas and Kukis by promising to resolve their long-standing grievances and demands through dialogue and consultation. And when the assembly elections were declared, BJP got 21 seats lower than 28 seats of the Congress. However with the support from National Peoples' Party (NPP), Naga Peoples' Front (NPF) and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) the first BJP led government was formed in Manipur. Among these 21 elected members – 16 were from the valley and 5 from the hills. All these elements and causes help to explain how the BJP was able to establish itself in Manipur, a state that was previously thought of as an INC stronghold and a stronghold for regional parties. The BJP also made an effort to take into account their desires for autonomy and development within the context of the Indian Constitution. As a result, the BJP was successful in winning the support of various ethnic communities by addressing to their specific issues and concerns.

2022 MANIPUR STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS AND BJP 2.0

The 12th State Assembly election in Manipur was held in the month of February and March 2022 to elect 60 members of Legislative Assembly and when the results were declared on 10th March, the BJP scored the highest seats with 32. The Congress performance declined so much so that it got only 5 seats, sharing the same score with a regional party Naga People's Front (NPF).

Unlike the 2017 election, where the BJP used major issues for campaigning like Anti- Incumbency, frequent general strikes, economic blockades, etc; The campaign of BJP in 2022 Assembly elections focused on its achievements in the last five years. During its reign (2017 – 2022), the BJP government introduced various welfare schemes. Some notable initiatives introduced by the government include 'Go to Village', 'Go to Hills', 'Meeyamgee Numit' (People's Day), 'Hill Leader's Day', 'Chief Minister Hakshelgi Tengbang' (CMHT or CM Health Card), "CM Da Haisi" (Let's Meet the CM), "Lairik Tamhallasi" (Let the Kids Go to School), Start-up Manipur, Chief Minister-gi Sotharabasingi Tengbang (CMST Scheme for the Poorest of the poor), Chief Minister-gi Laiyeng Shen (Health scheme for the Widows), etc. Despite being a state largely dependent on the Centre, the BJP Government delivered much of its poll promises. Roads and Bridges were constructed, development packages were announced for the hill districts, and a Medical College was brought to Churachandpur, the first such institute in the hill districts. Whereas the tenure of the Congress-led government (2002 – 2017) witnessed frequent general strikes, Economic blockades, and fake encounters, the first BJP government (2017- 2022) have seen no such major incidents. In such a way, the BJP was able to bring renewed hope to the people of the state. By the end of its first five-year term, most of the senior politicians, bureaucrats and civil society leaders who aspire to become MLAs have now become members of the BJP.

Another factor for BJP Victory in 2022 Assembly elections was that, the BJP fought the election in both the hills and valley based on burning issues in the state. Some issues which the BJP used and promise to fulfill if elected again to power in the valley were-protecting territorial integrity of Manipur, withdraw the "draconian" Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) from the state, granting them the demand for ST status, drug menace, corruption, etc. On the other hand, in the hills as the Nagas and Kukis were more concerned with the protection of tribal rights and better autonomy, the BJP took their concern and give them assurance. When the election results were declared, the BJP got majority with 32 of 60 seats. Among the 32 elected MLAs – 25 seats are from the valley and 7 seats from the hills, which shows the rise from 16 to 25 in the valley and from five to seven in the hills in comparison of 2017 and 2022 assembly elections. One thing to be noted in Manipur elections is that, the parties ideology and poll manifestos remained insignificant, poll promises hardly matter in the state. In other words, an election is fought more on local or ethnic lines than on national issues.

Some of the other factors for BJP'S victory in 2022 Assembly Elections were: The Role of regional parties like NPP, NPF and KPA; A weak Opposition and Power at the Centre - The National People's Party (NPP), Naga People's Front (NPF) and the Kuki People Alliance (KPA) emerged as strong regional forces, winning seven, five and two seats respectively. The NPP positioned itself as an alternative to the BJP and the Congress, while the NPF and KPA represented the interests of the Naga's and Kuki's respectively. So, these regional parties cut into the Congress's vote share and helped the BJP to attain more vote share. A weak Opposition: The Congress, which was the single largest party in 2017, suffered from rampant defections and a lack of leadership in the last five years. The party lost so many elected members soon after the election, for instance, after 2017 Election there were 28 elected members, but within short time the Congress already lost 15 legislators and only 13 remain in the Manipur Assembly which includes Shyamkumar who defected to BJP on 12th March 2017 (i.e. a day after the result) and the trend went till the next election. The Congress also failed to mount an effective campaign against the BJP, and its former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh was largely absent from the public eye. The Congress also faced competition from other regional parties, such as the NPP, NPF, JDU and KPA. The next factor for BJP'S victory was Power at the Centre: The BJP's dominance at the national level also helped it to gain an edge over the Congress in Manipur. The votes in a small state like Manipur has been voting for the party which is in the Centre. The BJP leaders were also strategically clear in giving party tickets to right candidates who has high win-ability.

II. Conclusion:

In this study, the development of the BJP in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur is explored. According to the survey, the BJP has become a more powerful political force in Manipur since 2017, while other parties have lost ground or stalled. It also revealed that while BJP has done well in many fields, the other parties have struggled with election turnout in a number of Manipur voter groups, communities and areas restrictions or difficulties. It also found that the BJP'S rise has various factors like the anti-incumbency against the Congress, Advantage of being in Power at the Centre, alliance strategy, and adaptability to the Complexity of Manipur, all out efforts of the BJP, etc. But the other parties have suffered setbacks due to a number of issues like Congress leader Ibobi's misrule, corruption allegations, ethnic factionalism, Defections from their parent party to BJP, regional parties slitting the Congress vote share, etc. In summarizing the article, the BJP's rise to power in both Manipur assembly elections 2017 and 2022, was the compelling political situation in the state was in favour of BJP. Moreover, there is no alternative to the Congress party except the BJP to the electorate of Manipur, if the people want to change the party in power.

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