

Regionalism and Political Party in North-East India: A Case Study of Naga People's Front

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The Indian parliamentary democracy manifests immense variations in its socio-cultural practices, the nature of political institutions and their functioning. With bewildering diversity of identity of the social groups and institutional practices, inevitably there have been numerous political parties that have sprouted both at the national and regional level. One will surely be, surprised to know that there is the existence of over thousands of political parties which are registered with the Election Commission of India (ECI). However, it is worthwhile to note that most of them do not play any significant role in the political processes of the country. The Federal nature of polity as enshrined in the constitution of India provides for two tiers of governments. One operates at the Central level and the other at the state or unit level with strict divisions of powers and functions in order to ensure a harmonious functioning of the democratic institutions. It is undeniable that a country of India's size and population with perplexing differences and conflicting interests, regional political parties play a very significant role in the political process.

There are several causes for the growth of regional political parties in India. Certain factors nourish its growth and in the furthering of its successes. The first and foremost factor which serves as a facilitator in its growth is out of the need to check the excesses of central authority, i.e. the central government. A regional political party can be of immense help in terms of controlling and containing the undue centralizing tendencies of the national level political parties. The domination of the national parties can adequately and reasonably be restrained by the presence and effective intervention of regional level political parties. National parties soon after coming to power, they will certainly work for the propagation of its own set of ideologies and values, policies and programmes that are likely to further their long-term party interests. India is a vast country with huge pressure of billion plus population. Size and the effective functioning of a political system could be an arguable proposition in the context of increasing population, rapid expansion of democratic institutions.⁴ It is possible that some regions get proper attention and preferences while other remains largely neglected.

Democracy is predicated upon the principles of majority of votes owned by political parties in a competitive election and are conventionally mandated to rule over the minor groups. Smaller social groups and smaller regions are likely to be undermined. It may result in jeopardizing their socio-economic and political interests. In such circumstances, regional political parties can be very useful for the protection and promotion of their interests. There are states or regions that lie on the extreme periphery of the country that visibly show deficits of political awareness, proper training and development of leadership skills etc. which can be considered prerequisites for the success of liberal democratic politics. Since there exists numerous states very far from the centre, it can hamper political development and such other qualities required for a competitive democratic politics. A developing society like India often witness demonstrably lack of civic culture, political efficacy and differentiation.⁵ Therefore, under such circumstances, a regional political party can contribute tremendously in the development of political culture. In other words, it can reasonably be assumed as a parameter for measuring the process of standardization of socio-political life which is a prerequisite for a well functioning and sustaining of democracy.

Arguably, regional parties play an important role in matter of promotion of interests which are mostly of localized nature. Since, the Central Authority or the Central Government located at a far distant from the several or most of the regional units, very often, it might not be able to address several important socio-political issues and other related problems. In such scenario, regional political parties can be of immense help. It can represent certain pressing issues and problems, which otherwise would have remained neglected or not adequately represented. The diverse nature of India's socio-cultural life can, safely, be promoted under a political system wherein different political parties including the specific region-based smaller political parties are allowed to thrive and function. India is widely known for its multicultural social life and marked variations in terms of its cultural moorings, languages, social conventions and political development. This can give rise to diverse interests which are of political nature. Regional political parties can facilitate the peaceful and orderly

progress of a nation through the practice of accommodative coalition politics.⁶ As such; regional political parties assume greater significance in the functioning of democratic polity, for its sustenance and success.

Regional Political Parties in North-East of India: An Overview

The North-East India (NEI) had several socio-political institutions which are mostly traditional in nature even before the India's independence from the colonial rule. The state of Assam by virtue of its geographical location, that invariably and strategically remains at the centre of North-East Politics and has been historically affecting the other states in the region. It could be mentioned that initial enthusiasm and interest shown by the peasantry class of Assam who had prepared the platform named Raij-mels for resisting the oppressive acts of the British. Gradually, the educated middle class came up with such organizations as the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha and the Tezpur Ryot Sabha. The Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha was formed as early as 1884 in order to represent the rising aspirations of the people to the British Government. Some other organizations were formed later, namely, the Assam Association in 1903, the Upper Assam Association in 1880, the Shillong Association, the Nowgong Ryot Sabha, the Sylhet Association, and the Assam Chatra Sanmilan etc.⁷ These associations had been instrumental in awakening a sense of national consciousness and political awareness at the early stage of political activity in the state. It prepared the ground for the growth of similar political organizations such as numerous interest groups and political parties. Mention may be made of some of the important regional political parties in the state of Assam.

The Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was one of the first regional political parties, which was a conglomerate of different tribal organizations of the then composite state Assam. It was formed in 1966 with the demand of a separate state of "Udayachal" for the indigenous schedule castes and tribes under the leadership of Samar Brahma Choudhory and Charan Narzary. It continued its crusade for several years. Meanwhile, the All Bodo Student's Union's acceptance of the offer for a Territorial Council under the 6th Schedule of the Indian constitution undermined the role of the regional political parties.⁸ In the 1980s Assam Movement had changed the contours of the state politics. It started on a volatile issue of illegal immigrant from the neighboring Bangladesh. Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) was formed to spearhead the movement. This political organization mostly led by students and middle class later on was transformed into a political party, namely, the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and ruled the state for several terms. The other important regional political parties in the state are the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and the Bodo People's Front (BPF).⁹ In Meghalaya and Mizoram too, there were several political parties in Meghalaya was the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) formed on regional political parties formed from time to time for representing their interests and grievances. One of the prominent and powerful region July 6, 1960 on the issue of imposition of Assamese as the state's official language. The party launched mass protest demanding separation of tribal belts from the then composite state of Assam. Amongst the other notable regional parties are the People's Democratic Front (PDF), the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), the Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM), and the Garo National Council (GNC).¹⁰

The state of Mizoram has witnessed the rise and fall of several regional political parties at different periods of time. The Mizo Union happened to be oldest regional political party in the state. The party was formed against the despotic rule of the Mizo Chiefs and campaigned vigorously for allowing the commoners to participate in politics during the British rule. It may be worthwhile to mention some of the regional political parties in Mizoram in the present times as well as in the past: the Tribal Union (TU), the Mara Freedom Party (MFP), the Mizo Integration Party (MIP), the Mizo Labour Party (MLP), the kalai National Council (KNC), the United Pang People's Party (UPPP), the Chakma Jatiya Parishad (CJP), and the Mizo National Union (MNU) and to this list, another half dozen of regional political parties can be added.¹¹ The tiny Himalayan State of Sikkim can be distinguished from most of the other states by virtue of being ruled by regional political parties for a long period of time, precisely since the days of its integration with India. The Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) and Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) have been at the helms of affairs for more than a decade in Sikkim. So far as party politics in Tripura and Manipur are concerned, there are some regional political parties functioning from the early days of grant of statehood. But most of the time, the CPI(M) in Tripura and Congress (INC) in Manipur have dominated the electoral politics of these two states.¹² The growth and success of regional political parties relies largely upon emotive and emergent issues that concern the socio-political and economic interests of particular groups. The Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) has been a glaring illustration of such phenomena. It was an outgrowth of the long drawn Assam Movement against the catastrophic flow of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants into Assam. It claimed that this has threatened the very existence of the indigenous population. In Nagaland, similarly, there were a good number of state based parties formed after the elevation of the Hill District to a full-fledged state in 1963. However, most of them admittedly did not have an enduring impact on the political horizon of the state. But the Naga People Front (NPF) have made an unprecedented and strong inroad and in the subsequent election scripted spectacular successes in the state politics of the nation.

Therefore, the present paper is a humble attempt for exploring the possible causes for the rise of regional political party in the north-eastern region and the certain factors for promoting the parties in the task of doing exceedingly well in electoral politics of some of the states, particularly in Nagaland. In the government making processes in the North-Eastern part of India, sometimes the coalition experimentations can also be found wherein power is shared between the regional and national political parties, e.g., Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam.¹³ However, it is often the emotive and sensitive political issues that spark the growth of regional political parties in North-Eastern Region (NER) of Indian sub-continent. As soon as the passion, charge and emotion to these issues subside, these parties very often go into oblivion.¹⁴

The Naga People's Front: Its origin and objectives

Nagaland attained statehood much earlier than the other states of the North-Eastern Region. Previously known as the Naga Hill District (NHD), it was a part of the composite state of Assam and was placed under the direct administration of Governor. However, the fragile and volatile nature of politics that prevailed during the 1960s created deep socio-political and security issues that eventually necessitated the early grant of statehood. As a consequence, party activities and penetration of other grassroots democratic institution begun to take roots in a gradual manner. Although, some disgruntled sections of Naga leaders continued their ambition for the formation of a separate and sovereign Nagaland. In the first ever state Legislative Assembly Election, barely two political parties contested viz., the National Party and Democratic Party.¹⁵ In the succeeding elections, number of political parties increased and elections started to become more politicized. Till 1987, there were several regional political parties that came and fought for the state legislative assembly election. Mention may be made of the Nagaland Nationalist Organization (NNO), the United Front (UF), the United Democratic Front (UDF), the National Convention of Nagaland (NCN), the Naga National Democratic Party (NNDP), the Naga People's party (NPP), etc. There were some regional political parties which changed their nomenclature in the subsequent elections while some other got merged with another political party.

Political parties began its activities in Nagaland soon after it attained statehood. The first General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland took place in 1964 in which surprisingly, no political parties came forward for the election. There was no contest among the political parties. National parties or for that matter any other regional parties did not show their interest and willingness to participate in the electoral politics. It had 40 seats at the time of first election which was later raised to 60 seats in 1974 in the third General Election to the Legislative Assembly. Since, there were no political parties contested in the first election, all the 40 seats were wrested by the independent candidates. It can be mentioned that altogether 73 candidates' vied for the 40 allotted assembly seats which reflected rather a lacklustre and lesser competitiveness in the rather newly functioning democratic polity of the state.

In the second General Election which was held on February 6, 1969 to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, gradually political activities started to gear up and few political parties came into the Naga state politics. Two regional political parties' viz., the Nagaland Nationalist Organization (NNO) and the United Front of Nagaland (UFN) participated in the assembly election held in 1969. Party-wise performance indicates that the first party won 22 seats while the other remained contented with 10 seats. The remainder 8 seats were captured by the independent candidates. With the passage of time, however, the number of political parties increased and participated actively in the electioneering process. A major national political party like the Indian National Congress (INC) made a late entry in the state politics and participated for the first time in 1977 and won as many as 15 seats out of the 37 it had contested. As far as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is concerned, it took part in Naga state politics as late as in the year 1987 but the party failed miserably. It is noteworthy that In each successive General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland, there have been invariably new political outfits that had emerged in the electoral scenario and fought the election, for instance, the National Convention of Nagaland (NCN), the National Democratic Party (NNDP), the Nagaland People's Party (NPP) and the Nagaland People's Conference (NPC) etc but unfortunately sans any substantial success.

The Naga People's Front (NPF) was initially known as the Nagaland People's Council (NPC). It was transformed to present nomenclature on 18th October, 2003 in a meeting held in Kohima.¹⁶ The party leadership felt the need for change in order to broaden the party activities, its popular support base and also to adapt with the dynamics of socio-political conditions. Referring back to the Naga People's Council (it was also known as Nagaland Peoples Conference (NPC) as a regional political party and its electoral performance, it managed to get 17 seats of the total 60 assembly seats in 1993. In the next election held in 1998, surprisingly the party drew a blank while the Indian National Congress (INC) secured absolute majority winning as many as 53 seats and the Independents won 7 seats. In its persistent and tireless endeavor to increase the tally of seats, the General Election to the Legislative Assembly held in 2003 proved to be a turning point for the Naga People's Front.

However, before referring the detail performance of the political party (NPF), it will be rather pertinent to highlight some of the main aims and objectives of the party. The regional political party declares its commitment to the principles of democracy, fostering peace and harmony, goodwill and a sense of fraternity

among the different ethnic groups residing in the state. It specially emphasizes on ethical dimension of politics wherein values are considered to be held in high esteemed, focusing on value based achievements rather than pursuing rhetorically overcharged unprincipled politics. Since it is a well-established fact that the tentacles of globalization have engulfed most parts of the globe, the state of Nagaland in India cannot remain unaffected. This has necessitated for due contemplation and thoughts for preserving the rich and pristine cultural heritage of the various ethnic groups, which is supposedly, in fragile condition. The party urges every Naga to be responsible towards the preservation of rich cultural heritage and take pride in their ancestors. The Naga People's Front proclaims that it is well aware of the prolonged struggles and violence in the state in their pursuit to resolve the long pending Indo-Naga political issue. The state has suffered badly in the socio-economic and political fronts because of the continuation of unsolved nature of indo-Naga political imbroglio. The party is vehemently, against the adoption of any violent and subversive methods in the realization of political objectives. It propagates the ideals of peace and believes in peaceful negotiation wherein the solutions to all social and political conflicts lie. It proclaims in an explicit terms for a peaceful resolution of the long pending Indo Naga problem and strive towards bringing a sense of unity and integrity among the different ethnic groups. It has clear and unequivocal agenda of integrating the contiguous Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and bring them under common administrative roof and will provide protection to all the ethnic groups who are the indigenous inhabitants of the state. It aims at the rightful restoration of clean image and pride of the Naga history. It further declares that there will be constant endeavor for removing corruption at all levels of governmental machinery. The spirit of self-discipline and self-reliance are accorded priority in the elaborative list of its objectives which is enshrined in article II of the party's constitution. Again, the party shows concern of the continual trend of waning of moral values among the new generation and the emphasis on guarding the core values for a healthy, stable, peaceful and progressive society.

Economic activities and its diversification are also given proper attention in the objectives of the party, particularly, on the rural economic transformation with a vision of removing the existing imbalances in the Naga society. For the purpose of promoting clean and efficient administration, the Naga People's Front as a regional party declares that it will strictly abide by the rule of law in the dispensation of justice.

Assessment of the factors for the success of the regional party:

The state of Nagaland has witnessed prolonged internal socio-political disturbances much before the grant of full-fledged administrative unit of the Indian Union in 1963 and even after that also, there was no visible respite. The Naga showed extreme reluctance to join the Indian Union on the grounds of its claim that they are a distinct tribe remained separated and disconnected historically and culturally with the mainland India. Therefore, they demanded an independent and sovereign Nagaland without any sorts of political intervention from the mainland Indian Government. Subsequently, a reign of terror and chaos prevailed in the state due to clashes between the pro-Naga political factions and the Indian security forces. However, Nehru's astute leadership, tact and political maneuverability worked well in assuaging the rising tension. As a result, it is noteworthy that among the other north-eastern states of India, Nagaland despite any persistent claim or wish was granted full administrative unit under the Indian democratic federal polity. But this policy of appeasement could not dissuade certain sections of Naga people who were not convinced of the hawkish aggressive policy of the Government of India in its attempt of integrating Nagaland within the Indian Union. Several underground organizations like the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) declared Nagaland as a free and independent country and waged intermittent war against the established government institutions. The socio-political unrest continued for several years during the 1950s and the 60s which caused massive loss of property and human lives. For a long period of time, the state had been in a whirlwind of internal strife and disturbances that resulted in complete chaos and disorder. The economy of the state got stagnated and developmental programmes had taken a backseat. This situation was taken to full advantage by the Naga People's Front with a mission to rejuvenate and revive the degenerated Naga society towards a new horizon of hopes and aspirations, peace and prosperity. It is thus, the prolonged political disturbances and acute social disruption in the Naga society that had brought a regional political party into the contour of the state politics of Nagaland.

It may be mentioned that Neiphu Rio's leadership and personality assumed lot of significance in the overall success of the regional political party in Nagaland. His towering personalities, charismatic and astute leadership coupled with vast political education and experiences have much for the success of the Naga People's Front. Mr. Rio who belongs to Angami tribe entered into active political fields in 1987. Although, he was not successful in his first attempt while contesting as an independent candidate for the assembly post, years later, he contested on a Congress (Indian National Congress) ticket and was elected as the member of the Legislative Assembly. He served in different capacities in the Nagaland Government such as the minister of Home and Technical Education, Arts and Culture, Nagaland Industrial Development Corporation etc.

During S.C. Jamir's rule between the periods of 1998-2000, sharp differences arose between Neiphu Rio and the chief minister over the question of Indo-Naga political issue. In particular, it started in the year 1998

when the Naga militants ambushed his motorcade and fortunately, he escaped without serious harm. He along with K. Therie, the then power minister had taken a confrontationalist approach thereafter, in their dealing with the Chief Minister S. C. Jamir. Mr. Therie specially, undertook sustained campaign to spread anti-Congress propaganda which angered Mr. Jamir. It is worth to mention here that the release of the booklet "Bed Rock of Naga Society" published by the Naga Pradesh Committee. This was alleged to have published with the tacit support of the chief minister and leader of the congress (I) who was SC Jamir himself at that point of time. The booklet became controversial since it had objected the legitimate claims of the Naga history and their political aspirations. This distanced them to the extent that they had no other option than moving apart. After his resignation from Congress (I), he joined the Naga People's Front and returned to the State Legislative Assembly from his home constituency i.e., Northern Angami II.¹⁸

The Naga People's Front is a political party of conglomeration of many minor state based parties having ideological and organizational ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and they together formed a coalition force named Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) in order to counter the domination of Indian National Congress (INC). In the meanwhile, Neiphu Rio toiled hard in order to unite the NGOs, the Naga Student Federation, the Naga Hoho, the Naga Mother's Association etc. Later, he was unanimously elected as the leader of the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland in a meeting held at Kohima. In fact, his name was proposed by a newly elected MLA, Mr. Z. Obed and the former state Chief Secretary, Noke Konyak seconded it. As soon as he was elected leader of the DAN, he spared no moments in declaring that regional party led DAN will give Indo-Naga political issue a top priority and he would work tirelessly for a honorable solution. In 2003, the General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland saw the Naga People's Front -led alliance won the election and thereby, bringing down ten year's rule of the Indian National Congress (INC). The Naga People's Front won 19 seats, followed by its alliance partner BJP-07, and the Nationalist Democratic Movement -05 while independents managed to secure as many as 04 seats. The Indian National Congress was able to garner as many as 21 assembly seats. Mr. Neiphu Rio became the chief minister on 6th March, 2003. Although as the later events unfolded, just few months before the completion of the full term of the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland, president rule was imposed in Nagaland on 3rd of January 2008, putting a halt to the democratically elected government. Very soon the next election to the assembly was followed. Neiphu Rio led Naga People's Front (NPF) emerged as the single largest party in the 60 member assembly. The Naga People's Front won the highest number of seats and was able to capture 26 seats, followed by the BJP-02, and independents -07. The opposition Congress could secure 23 seats and remainder 2 seats were captured by the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). As a leader of the coalition, Neiphu Rio formed the government on 12th of March, 2008 for the second successive term. Neiphu Rio's led Naga People's Front's spectacular success has much to do with his dedicated team which he choosed them with enormous care and thoughts and steered meticulously to successive electoral winnings. Leaders such as Dr. Shurozelie Lieziet Su, Kru Zakie, CM Chang and others have been a great morale booster in the overall success of the party and propelling it to a newer and greater height. Most of them have agreed to put aside their personal ambitions and agendas and were ready to sacrifice their selfish motives in order to ensure a better and stable regional government which had been well proven in their successive governance of the state. However, it could be mentioned that the Naga People's Front led coalition was not completely free from political hammering and humming of dissent.¹⁹ Stability, sometimes, wavers when the coalition partners were tempted to pull the cart of the government in different directions. Fortunately, things went and worked out well for the Naga People's Front in their second attempt to form and run the state government quite smoothly.

The 12th General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland was held on 14th of February 2013 proved to be a landmark in the history of a regional political party in Nagaland. In the assembly election as many as 188 candidates filed their nomination for the existing 60 assembly seats and it can reasonably be perceived and considered as highly politically charged and bitterly contested. On an average, above 3 candidates were found to be vying for each of the assembly constituency. The election scripted a sort of record when the Naga People's Front (NPF) single-handedly managed to garner 38 seats out of the 60 seats. The remaining seats were shared by the Indian National Congress-08, independents-07, the Nationalist Congress Party-04, the Bharatiya Janata Party-1, the Janata Dal (United)-1. This provided another third time opportunity for the Naga People's Front (NFP) and its alliance partners to form the regional government. India's Northeastern region thus, witnesses a very successful, efficient and acceptable political party with a strong regional mass-based so that it can counter the challenges of national political parties.

Concluding Observations:

The functioning of Indian parliamentary democracy since the days of its inauguration has witnessed surge of a strong undercurrent of regional forces in the arena of national politics. It is ubiquitous that a very large continental sized countries like India, governability with socio-economic and political justice have invariably remained at the core of politics of the nation²⁰. Although regionalism converts into a concrete political

institution with the formation of regional political parties, their participation in the national and regional politics provide certain semblance of legitimate cushioning in the governance of a young democratic nation like India. In India's North-Eastern Region, like the Naga Peoples' Front (NPF), some other regional parties similarly have a deep and significant impact on the political landscape of the North-Eastern Region such as the Assam Gana Parishad in Assam and the Mizo National Front in Mizoram. These parties often stand as solid political force against a particular brand of nationalist ideological expansion and in their attempt to the aggressive homogenizing tendencies of different parts of the nation, particularly, after the "dominant Congress System" declined during the 1970s.²¹ The growth of regional political parties in several Indian states such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the National Conference (NC) in Jammu and Kashmir, and the Trinamul Congress (TC) in West Bengal etc. amply demonstrate of the rising regional aspirations and interests of various social groups.²² It provides the local populace some degree of political space for a justifiable bargaining and deeply felt self-governing participatory image in the effective management of democratic institutions and designs. It is, needlessly to re-emphasize the facts that these developments often, signify the growing level of maturity, political consciousness and enhanced efficacy among the electorate at large which augurs well for the proper functioning and deepening of democratic institutions in the region.

NOTES:

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