

BLOCK 4
PARTY POLITICS AND
ELECTIONS

SHANXI NORMAL UNIVERSITY

BLOCK 4 INTRODUCTION

Block 4 has one unit, i.e., Unit 10: Political Parties and Party Systems. The unit explains the meanings of political parties and political systems and the differences between types of political and political systems. It highlights that political systems indicate the number of political parties that exist in a political system. Based on their numbers, the political system can be identified as a single-party system, two-party or bi-polar system, multi-party or multi-polar system. The categories or types of parties are national, state, and unregistered, unrecognised parties. The state parties are regional parties that are primarily concerned with the ethnic, cultural and developmental issues of the regions. The unit also traces the evolution of the party system in Northeast India and discusses the common features of the region's political parties and political systems. In the end, the unit discusses political parties and party systems in different states of Northeast India.



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UNIT 10 POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS *

Structure

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meanings of political parties and party systems and their differences;
- Discuss the evolution of parties and party systems in Northeast India;
- Examine the general characteristics of political parties and party systems in the region; and,
- Analyse the characteristics of political parties and party systems in a specific state of Northeast India.

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

In Northeast India, political parties are among the most effective agencies that articulate the people's concerns. They are a link between the people and the government. They represent people in the legislative assemblies and the Parliament. They also address their concerns outside the legislative bodies, in the public space. According to the Election Commission of India (in 2021), across North East India, there are twenty regional parties. The Election Commission of India categorises these parties as "State Parties". Arunachal Pradesh has three such parties. Assam is home to four regional parties. Both Meghalaya and Mizoram have three regional parties each. There are two regional parties, each in Manipur, Nagaland, and Sikkim. Tripura has only one "State Party". There are eight national parties all across Northeast India. Their presence varies in the states. These parties are Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and National People's Party (NPP). There are a total of forty-eight registered unrecognised parties in the whole of the Northeast. Sikkim has twenty-four registered and unrecognised parties. Assam is home to eight such parties. Manipur has six, and Meghalaya has five registered and unrecognised parties. There are only three such registered unrecognised parties in Mizoram. Both Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have one party each. Tripura has no registered unrecognised parties. This unit discusses broad characteristics, types of parties, and party systems in different states of Northeast India.

10.2 PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS: MEANINGS

Political parties are devices through which people represent themselves in the legislative bodies and the government. They also articulate peoples' interests and strive to address them outside the governmental institutions. In a democracy, their main purpose is to capture the state for making policies for the people. The parties that run the government are the ruling parties, and those outside the government are opposition parties. In India, political parties can be categorised based on their programmes, area or region of existence, ideologies, and formal registration with the Election Commission of India. The Election Commission of India (ECI) categorises (in 2021) political parties in India as national parties, regional or state parties, registered unrecognised parties. The ECI categorises parties on the basis of their performance in elections. The academic discourse does not strictly follow the definition of political parties. In academic discourse, the parties are categorised based on their programmes, area or region of their existence or political activities, support base in ethnic communities, ideologies, etc. They are generally categorised as leftist, rightist, left of the centre, regional, ethnic-regional parties. In Northeast India, the regional parties mainly address their regions' ethnic, nationalistic, and regional issues. In academic discourse, they can be categorised as regional or ethnic-regional parties.

Apart from being viewed in terms of types as national, state or registered unrecognised, political parties can also be viewed in terms of party systems. Political systems are different from the types or categories of parties. Types of parties are decided based on their performance in the elections. Political systems denote the number of political parties. Based on their number, the political systems are termed the single-party system, bi-party system or multi-party system. There are many parties in India, and Several parties form alliances or coalitions and rally around a major party: in this way, the major parties become poles around which other parties rally.

10.3 EVOLUTION OF PARTY SYSTEM IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Political parties and party systems in Northeast India developed broadly through three phases: One pre-Independence phase; two, the phase between the late 1940s - mid-1970s; and, third, the phase between the 1970s-2021. In the first phase, political parties in Northeast India existed in Assam, which consisted of those areas which were annexed by the British over a period, and became separate states in the post-Independence period. Congress was the first party to emerge in Assam. But there was no branch of Congress or it's formally affiliated in Brahputra valley until 1920. Prior to that, there had existed political associations in different cities of Assam. These associations sent representatives to sessions of the Congress parties (Guha 1977). The Khasi Hill District Congress was set up in Shillong in 1938. In this city, the Hill Union also was set up by MacDonald Khar-Khongor, who had left Congress. After that, Congress started setting up its units in the partially excluded areas. The 1930s also saw the emergence of Congress in the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. As an opponent of the Congress, MacDonald Khar-Khongor attempted to develop Hill Union in different hills of Assam, Tripura, and Manipur. However, he was unsuccessful in developing the Hill Union into an active party (Chaube 1973: pp. 74-75, 81-82). In the second phase (the late 1940s – mid-1970s), Congress emerged as the single largest party, especially the first general election of 1951-52 till the fourth general elections of 1967. In this phase, Northeast India consisted of Assam comprising hills districts and NEFA, and two Union Territories (Manipur and Tripura). It was the period of what Rajni Kothari conceptualises as single-party dominance, the dominance of the Congress. However, the dominance of the single-party Congress in Assam was not without the presence of other parties. They were weaker than Congress (Deka 1976). Although in Assam, Congress continued to maintain its hegemony until the late 1970s, it started facing a challenge in the hill districts in the 1970s. The leaders in the Hill districts founded APHLC (All Hill Peoples Legislators Conference) in 1960 against the decision of the Assam government to introduce Assamese as the language of instructions in the academic institutions. It also faced the challenge of movement for the hill state from the Hill districts (Deka 1976; Sarma 2002). Like in other parts of the country, Congress faced a challenge in Assam or Northeast too. In the third phase (1970s-2021), regional parties emerged in all Northeast states. In

this phase, along with Assam, the hills which earlier had formed Assam's districts emerged as separate states: Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh (both first became Union territories, then states), Manipur and Tripura both became states from Union Territories, and the state of Sikkim became a part of India in 1975. This phase is characterised by the proliferation of state or ethno-regional parties in every state. These parties often ally with the ruling party at the centre. Some of them merge with the ruling party at the centre. Before 2014, the Congress party or the United Peoples' Alliance (UPA), led by it, influenced the regional parties in Northeast India for most of this phase. Since May 2016, the North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), and regional alliance parties consisting of Naga People's Front, Sikkim Democratic Front, People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh, Asom Gana Parishad, and Bodo People's Front was formed under the leadership of the National Democratic Front (NDA). The BJP is the biggest party in the NDA. In 2021, all state governments in the states of Northeast India are led by the parties belonging to the NEDA. As you have read in section 10.1, all three types of parties - national, state and unrecognised registered exist in Northeast India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What is meant by a party system?

2) Discuss the evolution of the party system in Northeast India.

10.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTY SYSTEM IN NORTHEAST INDIA

We can identify some common characteristics of political parties and party systems in the states of Northeast India. These characteristics are related to the issues which are part of their programmes; relationships between the regional and national parties, the dominance of one party in the party system, adaptation of the strategy of the national parties to the context in the specific state. However, there may be some state-specific characteristics that you will notice in the next subsection, i.e., 10.5 of the unit. This section of the unit deals with common features of the party and party systems in Northeast India.

10.4.1 Programmes of the parties

The state-level parties in Northeast India focus on the regional and ethnic issues of their respective states. In this sense, they are ethno-regional parties. They articulate issues relating to ethnic and regional identity and development, i.e., political autonomy, greater access to resources, recognition of their distinct cultural and linguistic identity, ending discriminatory policies of the centre, cultural specificities, and preservation of cultural identity, recognition of regional language, medium in education and government services, migration from other regions or neighbouring countries, etc. Generally, the regional or state parties' programs consist of issues raised by the civil society movements in the region.

10.4.2 Relationship between the regional and national parties

As the regional parties focus on the region-specific issues related to ethnicity and regional development, they are often critical of the policies of the central governments. Most regional parties argue they are regional parties with a national outlook. Relationships between the regional parties and the national party that heads the central government are conflict and cooperation. Some regional parties either ally or merge with the parties that lead the central government. This happens due to a split in the regional parties, defection, or fall of the government headed by the regional parties in the states. In the 1970s, in Meghalaya, the APHLC was split, with one section joining the Congress. From 1916, several regional parties joined the NEDA, or leaders of regional parties joined the BJP, the ruling party at the centre.

10.4.3 Dominance of a Party: National or regional

Until 2014, generally, the Congress party or an alliance led by it was a formidable political force in the region. Since then, it has been replaced by the BJP-led alliance NEDA in the region. Although the state-level political parties of the Congress or the BJP played important roles in Northeast India, in some states, these are the state-level or ethnicity-based regional parties that play decisive roles in the politics of the states. As you will read in section 10.5 of the unit, in Sikkim, the state-level ruling party has remained the dominant party in the state.

10.4.4 National Parties in the Local Context

The national parties, especially the Congress and the BJP, have all India-level programmes. However, they adjust their political strategy according to the cultural and local context in Northeast India. Even as some regional parties or social organisations accuse the national parties and the central government led by them of discriminating against the region, the national parties attempt to show concern for the cultural sensibilities of the region. The six-year anti-foreigner movement (1979-1985) in Assam and the Naga and Mizo insurgencies were important examples of resentment against the Congress and governments led by it. The alliances of the national parties with the regional parties help them to change their political strategy according to the local context. Such strategy

helped Congress to grow in the region before the BJP became a formidable force in the region, especially in the first two decades of this century.

10.5 PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS IN THE STATES

10.5.1 Assam

As states earlier, Congress remained the dominant party in Assam until the late 1970s. In the 1978 Assembly election, its strength declined to 26 seats in the house with 126 members. By the time the hegemony of the Congress declined, some parties such as the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), Ujoni Asom Rajya Parishad (UAPR), Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Asom Jatiyabadi Dal (AJD), and Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP) had come into existence between the 1960s-1970s in Assam. Apart from these non-Congress parties, left parties such as CPI, CPI (M), SUC are already present in the state. But the non-Congress parties could not replace the Congress in the 1978 assembly election. The Janata Party, which was ruling then the ruling party at the centre, could win only 53 seats, and its ally in the state, the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTA) could win four seats in the 1978 assembly election in the state. Reports of inclusion of bogus names in the electoral list for by-election in 1979 in Mangaldai Lok Sabha resulted in a six-year (1979-1985) ant-foreign movement in Assam. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) played a leading role in the movement. It formed the All Assam Gana Sangram Parisha (AASGSP) in 1979 to carry forward the movement. The AAGSP consisted of the AASU, Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP), Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Asom Sahitya Sabha, and Sadua Asom Karamchari Parisha. Following the signing of the Assam Accord on 15 August 1985, the Asom Gan Parishad was formed on 14 October 1985 as a state party in Assam. It was headed by P. K. Mahanta. The AGP won 64 out of 126 assembly elections held in 1985. With the support of some independent MLA, the AGP formed the government under the leadership of P.K. Mahanta. The AGP formed government twice, from 1985 to 1989, and from 1996 to 2001, with Mahanta as the chief minister. However, while AGP governments suffered challenges of governance, the party suffered from dissensions and splits. Soon after the signing of the Assam Accord, the Bodos expressed disagreements on the Assam Accord and started the Bodoland movement. It also faced a challenge from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which wanted the right to "self-determination" for "the Asomiya nationality". From the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP emerged as a formidable party in Assam. With the joining of the BJP by former Congress minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in 2015 and of the former AASU leader Sarbananda Sonowal, the BJP got two leaders with a solid support base and experience. Since 2015, the BJP has emerged as a dominant party in the state. Hemanta Biswa Sarma, chief minister of Assam since May 2021, heads the NEDA (North-East Democratic Alliance) in Northeast India, of which the BJP is a constituent. The objective of the NEDA was to strengthen the

BJP's base in the region with the agenda of the overall development of the region.

10.5.2 Meghalaya

Coalition and political instability have been essential characteristics of politics in Meghalaya. The state has had an average of less than two years of government tenure. One government lasted for ten days. In the first three decades of its existence, the state had more than twenty governments. It has more than ten regional parties (Sathapathy 2004). Until 2014, Congress and the NCP were two major national parties, and Congress retained this position for most of the time. Although the NEDA emerged as a dominant alliance of the non-Congress parties in 2016, the BJP contested in the 1993 election in Meghalaya. It did not perform well in this election. However, in 2003, assemble election for the first time in the state. The regional parties in the state focus on the protection of identities of the indigenous communities, prevention of influx of migrants into the state, and economic development of the state. However, the state-level parties are impacted by the sub-regional, ethnic or linguistic divisions (Sathapathy 2044). The regional ruling parties in the state generally ally with the parties that rule the center. Following the formation of Meghalaya state, the APHLC (All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference) emerged as the most formidable regional party in the state. However, a section of it merged with the Congress resulting in the split of the party. This set the trend in the party system of the state in which the regional ruling parties generally allied with the party or the alliance that headed the central government. In 2018, a coalition of more than five parties formed government in Meghalaya with Conrad Sangma as the chief minister.

10.5.3 Sikkim and Mizoram

The party system in the state is marked by one-party dominance. However, it is the ruling party that dominates the party system in the state. Banasmita Bora's study (2014) suggests that since Sikkim became an Indian state in 1975 party system in Sikkim is characterised by the dominance of the ruling party. Apart from the ruling party, other parties also exist in the state. However, the influence of other parties is much less than that of the ruling party. The performance of other parties than the ruling parties has been poorer than the ruling parties. Except for a short period, three ruling parties – SJP/SSP, SDF, SKM- dominated the state's politics since its merger with the Union of India. Even the alliances of the opposition parties formed could not challenge the dominance of ruling parties. For instance, in the 2009 elections, two regional parties – Sikkim Nationalist People's Party (SNPP) and Sikkim Jan Ekta Party (SJKP) formed an alliance called United Sikkim Alliance (USA) against the ruling party SDF. But it failed to challenge the SDF. The ruling parties in Sikkim are generally personality-based. Regarding the place of personality (until P.S. Gole became the chief minister), Banasmita Bora identified two eras with two different personalities: first, era of Nar Bahadur Bhandari; his party Sikkim Janata Party (SJP) had won the first assembly election after the merger of Sikkim in India in 1975. It ruled the state from 1979-1994 (with breaks – 17 August till 18 October

1979 and 25 May 1984 till 8 March 1985, periods of President's rule in the state); and from 1985 to 1994, he led the government as the head of a new party Sikkim Sangram Party (SSP). The second era was represented by Pawar Kumar Chemling, who ran the government from 1994 till 2019. In May 2019, the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) became the dominant ruling party with P.S. Gole as the chief minister. The SKM was founded in 2013. Before the formation of the SKM, P.S. Gole was a member of the SKM and a minister in the state government of Pawan Kumar Chemling. His differences with Pawan Kumar Chemling led to his exit from the SDF and the formation of SKM. The SKM is an ally of the BJP.

The alliance between the SKM and BJP shows an ideological alliance between ethno-regionalism and Hindu nationalism in the state. Before forming or leading their own parties, the leaders were in the ruling parties that ran the governments prior to their exit from such parties. Pawan Kumar Chemling was in the Nar Bahadur Bhandari government but he resigned questioning Bhandari of lack of transparency and democratic process. Similarly, S.K. Gole the SDF and form SKM because of his differences with Pawan Kumar Chemling. The regional parties in Sikkim, like in other Northeast, are ethnic parties. The ethnic profile of the state influences party politics in Sikkim. Three ethnic communities – Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas play a more decisive role than other communities in the state.

10.5.4 Patterns in the other States

This sub-section deals with the broad patterns in other states' political parties and party systems than those discussed in the preceding sub-sections. In Arunachal Pradesh, there exist ethno-regional and national political parties. There is a porous relationship between the national and state parties in the state. The Congress founded its unit in Arunachal Pradesh on October 6, 1972 (Chaube 1972: p. 201). Apart from the political parties, independents also play an important role in electoral politics in the state. Generally, in the Lok Sabha elections, whether candidates belong to a party or are independent, they are supported by the government in the state. The parties, especially the regional parties in Arunachal Pradesh, are embedded in the local culture and traditions. The differences among the tribes, religious groups, and ethnicity get reflected in the nature of political parties. Nani Bath (2004) shows how an alliance between the regional parties formed on the eve of the 2009 Lok Sabha election failed to form a viable platform for the regional parties to challenge the Congress and the BJP. In this election, some regional parties such as Arunachal Congress, Peoples' Party of Arunachal (PPA), Nationalist Congress Party, Janata Dal (U), Lok Jana Shakti Party, and Lok Bharati formed an alliance called ADA (Arunachal Democratic Alliance). It was the first instance of alliance that occurred in the electoral history of the state. The alliance of the regional parties excluded the national parties – the Congress and the BJP. The ADA aimed to fight jointly both national parties.

However, generally (except on two occasions), the ruling party's candidate wins the election (especially the Lok Sabha election). Personality and leadership of the chief ministers, local traditional authorities, and traditional leaders exercise enormous influence on parties and their electoral performance in the state. In 2004, the BJP won both parliamentary seats in Arunachal Pradesh. The shift from Congress to BJP took place before this election. However, after the election, Gegong Apang switched back to Congress. Following the formation of NEDA, the different parties and leaders joined the alliance. In the relationship between the ruling party at the centre and in the state, the latter becomes a link between the centre and the state.

The first assembly elections were held in Nagaland in December 1964. The party system in Nagaland initially consisted of two parties - the Naga National Organisation (NNO) and the Naga People's Convention (NPC). The election of 1964 was contested by NNO, NPC, and the Democratic Party of Nagaland (DPN). The NNO was born out of the Naga Peoples' Convention that had led the movement for the Nagaland state. The party system in Nagaland suffered from dissensions. A new party in Nagaland emerged in the second assembly election held in 1967, known as the United Front of Nagaland (UFN). It challenged the NNO in this election. In the third general election held in 1974, the United Democratic Party secured 25 seats, while the NNO got 23 seats in a 60-members assembly. The NNO-UDF formed a coalition ministry in 1974 following the defection of 14 members from NNO to join the government. At this time, the regional party NNO transformed itself into a unit of Congress. In 1982, Congress formed a coalition government in the state. In the 1993 elections, Congress came back to power. Parties face a challenge from the insurgent groups such as NSCN (IM), which boycotted the 1993 elections (Nag 2003). After the formation of NEDA, the regional parties joined the alliance. The BJP extended its support to Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party, led by former Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio. In August 2021, in Nagaland, the opposition has ceased to exist. There exists (in 2021) only the ruling coalition government. The Naga People's Front (NPF) – the main opposition party, joined the government.

Moreover, the new government is known as Nagaland United Government (NUG), with Neiphiu Rio as the chief minister. The National Democratic Progressive Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and NPF resolved to form an opposition-less government to facilitate the "Naga Political Issue". In Tripura, until the formation of the BJP in 2018, the major political formations or the dominant parties included the Left Front and the Congress. Besides, the political parties of the indigenous people, such as the Indigenous People's Front (IPFT), The All India Trinamul Congress, along with some other parties, formed part of the party system in the state. Mizoram, Mizo National Union (MU) emerged as a party with a strong social base, gaining 21 out of 36 seats in the 1972 elections. In the 1987 election, which was held after the Mizo Accord, the Mizo National Front (MNF) formed the government in the state. The party system in Mizoram in most parts of the state's electoral history has been marked by the presence of the MNF, the Mizoram People's Front, and Congress. The main focus of the

party politics in the state generally remains on the ethnic and developmental issues in the state. In Manipur, the BJP addresses issues relating to the culture of the Hindu communities and tribal communities. In September 2016, Radhabinod Koijam, the former Manipur Chief Minister who belonged to the Congress, and Okran Joy Singh, the Manipur People's Party (MPP) leader, joined the BJP. In May 2016, the four NPF legislators in the Manipur Assembly joined BJP.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) Elaborate upon the characteristics of the party system in Northeast India.

2) Discuss the nature of the party system in Sikkim.

3) Discuss the nature of the party system in Meghalaya.

10.6 LET US SUM UP

Political parties and party systems are among the important agencies of empowerment of people. Three types of parties exist - national, state, and state parties as defined by the Election Commission of India exist in the states of Northeast India. The state parties are the regional parties. Regional parties generally address ethnic and regional issues in their respective states. Some states have dominance of the ruling party. The national parties in Northeast India change their political strategy according to the local context in the states. Although the regional parties focus on regional issues, they are influenced by the national parties that control the central governments. Congress, most of the time before the rise of the BJP, exercised influence on the regional parties and the state governments. Since 2014, the NEDA has become the dominant political alliance heading governments in all states (in 2021) of the region. Political parties in Northeast India developed in three phases from the 1920s. The first phase, which existed in the pre-Independence period, saw the emergence of Congress as

the principal Congress party. The second phase (the late 1940s-1960s) was marked by the dominance of Congress. Towards the end of this phase, the dominance of the Congress was challenged by the local political leadership, especially in the hills of Assam. The third phase of the political parties and party systems was marked by the emergence of several ethnic and regional parties. The proliferation of political parties also marked this period. In this phase, the regional parties play a decisive role in the politics of the region, generally as allies of the national parties or alliances that control the central governments.

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10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Exercise 1

- 1) A Party system implies the number of political parties that exist in a political system. Based on the number of political parties, the political

systems can be termed the single party system, bi-party system, or multi-party system.

- 2) The party system in Northeast India developed in broadly three phases. In the first phase during the pre-Independence period, the party system first emerged with the establishment of the units of Congress in Brahmaputra valley in the 1920s, in Shillong in 1938. In the second phase (late 1940s-early 1970s), the party system in the region was characterised by the dominance of the Congress system. However, from the 1960s, Congress faced challenges from the leadership in the hills districts of Assam. By the late 1970s, several regional parties had emerged in different states of the region. In the third phase (the late 1970s-2021), the party system in the Northeast is marked by the emergence of several state-level ethnoreligious parties. Several of these parties form governments in the state, often in alliance or under the influence of the parties that run the central government.

Check Your Exercise 2

- 1) These characteristics of the political parties in Northeast India are as follows. The state parties are actually regional parties that focus on their respective states' social, cultural, and developmental issues. There exist relationships between the regional and national parties. The regional ruling parties generally work under the influence of the parties that rule at the center. The national parties such as the Congress or the BJP often adapt their strategy according to the local context in the region.
- 2) The party system in Sikkim is marked by the dominance of the ruling party. In the electoral history of the state after its merger with India in 1975, three parties SJP/SSP, SDF, or SKM, have been ruling dominant parties at different times. The parties in the state are personality-based and can be identified with ethnic groups.
- 3) In Meghalaya, the regional parties focus on the issues such as the protection of the identities of the local tribes, the ban on migration from other parts of India or neighbouring countries, and the state's economic development. Some of them claim to be regional parties with a national outlook.