



Small arena, big win

For the BJP, the import of its victory in Tripura goes beyond numbers

There is a reason that the Bharatiya Janata Party is disproportionately pleased with its performance in Tripura, which sends only two members to the Lok Sabha. From zero to 35 seats in the 60-member Assembly in five years is unarguably no mean electoral accomplishment. But having done this by beating the Left Front, its strongest ideological opponent, even if not the biggest political threat nationally, has given Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah a special satisfaction. Mr. Modi wanted a victory in Tripura to be celebrated as much as the victory in Uttar Pradesh, which sends the largest number of members to the Lok Sabha. Mr. Shah saw in Tripura a reason for his party workers in West Bengal and Kerala to be extremely happy. The BJP likes to imagine that the Left has wielded a disproportionate influence on political discourse, resulting in pushing the entire Sangh Parivar into a place of political isolation and unacceptability. It is true that the BJP's difficulties in finding allies for much of the eighties and the nineties had a lot to do with the Left, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which propped up an effective secular platform for regional parties opposed to the Congress. If the BJP kept its core Hindutva issues on the back burner during the Vajpayee years in government, then it was in no small measure due to pressure from its allies who were earlier part of a Left-backed grouping that treated the Congress as the biggest enemy and the BJP as beyond the pale. The real story in Tripura is of course the collapse of the Congress vote-bank. Clearly, the anti-Left, anti-incumbency vote, which includes the tribal vote, has moved completely to the BJP. A tie-up with the Congress, therefore, would not have been the answer to the Left's loss in Tripura, where it ruled for 25 years. What it needs to do is win back some of the tribal votes that the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura spirited away to the BJP.

The BJP has something to cheer about in Nagaland as well: it won 11 seats and is in a position to form a government with the support of its ally, the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party, a breakaway group of a former ally, the Naga Peoples Front. The smaller northeastern States, heavily dependent on the Centre for funds, have a tendency to back the party ruling at the Centre. Like the Congress earlier, the BJP is currently the beneficiary. In Meghalaya, the Congress managed to emerge as the single largest party, but the BJP, with two members, is helping the National People's Party form the government. After being denied in Manipur and Goa last year, when it could not form the government despite being the single largest party, the Congress actively pursued alliances, but with little luck. The Northeast is in no position to help any party win the battle for the Lok Sabha, but the winner of the battle for the Lok Sabha is in the best position to win the Northeast.

Avoid trade wars

Throwing free trade out of the window will make Americans and everyone else poorer

World leaders did well to avoid protectionist trade policies in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008. After all, they had learned their lessons from the global trade war of the 1930s which deepened and prolonged the Great Depression, or so it was thought. American President Donald Trump last week announced that his administration would soon impose tariffs on the import of steel and aluminium into the U.S. for an indefinite period of time. The European Union, one of the largest trading partners of the U.S., has since vowed to return the favour through retaliatory measures targeting American exporters. The EU is expected to come out with a list of over 100 items imported from the U.S. that will be subject to scrutiny. For his part, Mr. Trump has justified the decision to impose protective tariffs by citing the U.S.'s huge trade deficit with the rest of the world. He explained his logic in a tweet on Friday which exposed a shocking ignorance of basic economics. He likened his country's trade deficit to a loss that would be set right by simply stopping trade with the rest of the world. International trade, like trade within the boundaries of any country, however, is not a zero-sum game. So the trade deficit does not represent a country's loss either, but merely the flip side of a capital account surplus. This is not to deny that there are definitely some losers – for example, the U.S. manufacturing industry which lost out to competition from countries such as China due to increasing globalisation. But throwing free trade out of the window would only make Americans and everyone else poorer.

Despite the global backlash, it is unlikely that Mr. Trump will walk back on his decision, especially given its populist resonance. Steelworkers in key States in the U.S. played a significant role in Mr. Trump's election win in 2016. In fact, these are the only people who will benefit from the steel and aluminium tariffs while American consumers as a whole will pay higher prices for their goods. Mr. Trump's desire to appeal to populist sentiment also explains why his protectionist turn comes in the midst of steadily improving economic growth. With Mr. Trump's tariffs not going down well with the EU, it will be important to see how China and other major trading partners respond to his opening salvo. They can take a leaf out of the books of major global central banks which have shown enough maturity to avoid using currency wars as a means to settle disputes. Instead of retaliating with more tariffs, which could cause the current dispute to spiral into a full-fledged global trade war, the U.S.'s trading partners must try to achieve peace through negotiations.

The saffron breeze in the Northeast

Most regional parties prefer the BJP as their national partner, but managing contradictions won't be easy



SUBIR BHAUMIK

Of the three States whose Assembly election results were declared on March 3, Tripura was doubtlessly the most stunning. Tripura has been the safest Left bastion since the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front first swept to power in 1978. Only once since then, in 1988, did the Left Front lose to the Congress-TUJS (Tripura Upajati Juba Samity) alliance, but it returned to power in 1993. Since then it has been in power, with Manik Sarkar as Chief Minister since 1998. So for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to emerge out of nowhere and score a spectacular victory by getting a majority in the Assembly on its own is nothing short of a miracle. Beneath this surprise lies a cobweb of contradictions that the BJP's election managers, especially Sunil Deodhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's poll manager in Varanasi, seem to have managed so well.

The Tripura manoeuvre

By striking an alliance with the tribal Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) which demands a separate tribal State of Twipraland it wants carved out of the autonomous district council of the State, the BJP assured itself of a sweep in the 20 seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes. The IPFT has close

connect to the separatist National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), and the CPI(M) cadre is no match for the armed guerrillas who back the IPFT's young militant cadres in the remote hill interiors. But by not endorsing the Twipraland demand and by not giving the IPFT the majority of the ST reserved seats (11 contested by the BJP, nine by the IPFT), the BJP sent a clear message it would not be a junior partner to its ally, as in Jammu and Kashmir. That got the BJP much of the tribal backing, and also of Bengalis in rural remote interiors who saw support to the BJP as their safest security option.

Then by absorbing almost the entire Congress-turned Trinamool Congress leadership in its fold, the BJP ensured that it ran away with the 30% Congress votebank. In Tripura, the fight has always tended to be between the Left and the anti-Left. With the Congress decimated and seen as the B-team of the Left, with Congress president Rahul Gandhi avoiding any attack against Mr. Sarkar, the anti-Left voter had no option but to go with the BJP as it was seen as the only viable option to dethrone the Left. The middle class Bengali vote swung the saffron way because of the Left's poor track record in employment generation, forcing Tripura's best brains to seek jobs in Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Mr. Sarkar's refusal to meet the captains of IT industry during a 2015 Tripura Conclave organised to leverage Agartala's emergence as India's third Internet gateway did not go down well with Gendul, tribals and Bengalis alike.



RITU RAJ/KONWAR

That explains the BJP sweep in Agartala and other urban areas. So with the tribal vote and the middle class urban Bengali vote swinging its way, all that the BJP needed was a small swing in the rural Bengali vote.

While much of that remained behind the BJP in overall vote share, in the deep interiors dominated by the IPFT's militant cadre, the Bengali settlers seem to have voted against the Left, as it was seen to be no longer capable of defending them in the event of a resurgent tribal insurgency.

Fear of the unknown always haunts the rural Bengalis who have borne the brunt of tribal insurgency since the violence of 1980 – and a dominant BJP with a majority of its own was their best bet to tame the IPFT and nip the Twipraland demand in the bud. Politics is the art of managing the

contradictions. It now seems those who swear by Kautilya seem to handle it better than those who preach Marx and Engels, at least in India.

A bid for all three

The BJP parliamentary board has expressed the hope that despite not getting a clear majority in Nagaland and also the Congress emerging as the single largest party in Meghalaya, the BJP will form the government in both these Christian-majority States. Again, the BJP seems to have managed the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) – NSCN (IM) – to back its bid for power with its new found ally and the Naga People's Front (NPF) may join in as well, all apparently to pave the way for a final settlement of the Naga imbroglio. Failure to deliver a final settlement more than two years after signing the Framework Agreement would have normally jeopardised the poll prospects of the BJP, especially after it fell out with the ruling NPF, but party general secretary Ram Madhav's political engineering in triggering a successful split and then taming the main NPF and the NSCN is something that would have done Kautilya proud.

But now the challenges. In Tripura, the BJP has to deliver on its development promise – the new Chief Minister may do well to go for roadshows to attract big ticket investments to leverage the IT gateway and may consider, for instance, decommissioning the 10MW Gumti hydel project to reclaim thousands of acres of fertile tribal land that the project sub-

merged nearly four decades ago. While IT investments would appeal to the young, both tribals and Bengalis, the dam decommissioning may open the path for ethnic reconciliation which the Marxists overlooked at their own peril by trying to play the wild card of Bengali chauvinism.

In Nagaland, the BJP has to deliver a final settlement in a way that pleases most, if not all, rebel and political factions. This is no easy task in a very divided tribal society.

In Meghalaya, where the BJP appears to have managed to dethrone Chief Minister Mukul Sangma (who led the Congress to emerge as the single largest party), it would have to hold together a coalition of disparate regional players; ensuring the survival of such a coalition will not be easy in Meghalaya's 'aya ram gaya ram' politics.

Message for West Bengal

Most regional parties in Northeast now prefer the BJP as their national partner, and not the Congress which has a tribal base, but managing the contradictions will be a full-time task. Meanwhile, the Tripura results will definitely worry one Chief Minister in particular – Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. It is easy to see why she spoke of Left arrogance and Congress missteps in not aligning with her party in Tripura. She seems to know that she will be the next to face the saffron fire.

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New star in a crowded sky?

For all his challenges, Kamal Haasan appears to be in tune with Tamil Nadu's historical preoccupation with welfarism



NARAYAN LAKSHMAN

The timing of cinema superstar Kamal Haasan's entry into politics can be considered brilliant or too little too late, depending on the prognosis for Tamil Nadu's troubled polity.

The death of former Chief Minister and head of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), Jayalalithaa, in December 2016, on the one hand and the stepping back from active politics of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) supremo, M. Karunanidhi on the other have produced a leadership vacuum that has shaken the very foundations of governance in the State.

This has been manifested in the meltdown of the AIADMK into bitter factionalism and in the unleashing of a cycle of power struggles to control the reins of the party. At one point, three separate vectors of power vied for the party crown, led by Edappadi K. Palaniswami, O. Panneerselvam, and T.T.V. Dinakaran, respectively. Simultaneously, the fortunes of the DMK have slipped into uncharted territory, with the party's mantle going to Mr. Karunanidhi's son, M.K. Stalin, a capable leader per-

haps but one who has never before occupied the Chief Minister's seat.

In this regard, Mr. Haasan has timed his entry well, as he stood virtually no chance of winning while these titans of the Dravidian movement reigned. Had he delayed his entry further, however, he would have risked losing ground to another inimitable challenger, fellow actor and the mega-superstar, Rajinikanth. Mr. Rajinikanth, who announced his political entry at the turn of the New Year, carries the hopes of millions of his fans but may have ceded a palpable advantage to Mr. Haasan by not outlining a concrete policy agenda, identifying party members or charting a political strategy in terms of alliances.

Reforming governance

While this much is in Mr. Haasan's favour, the secular decline in governance quality that began at least as far back in time as the 1990s has accelerated. This places limits on how much transformation his potential campaign could aspire for. Essentially, the past few decades have witnessed the rise of a massive rent-seeking and extortion network built on a culture of goonda politics. This has permeated every corner of the government and led to capital flight, with numerous foreign companies choosing neighbouring States for their ventures.

This collapse in governance, re-



S. KESHAVMOORTHY

flected in the failure of the ruling party to execute government programmes efficiently and deliver relief to a State that has suffered multiple natural and man-made calamities, has been driven in large part by a patron-client relationship that governing elites enjoy with the governed. The result of last December's by-election in the R.K. Nagar Assembly constituency, which is acknowledged to have turned entirely on cash payments made to its electorate, is only one recent and disturbing illustration of how the polity has effectively been marketised.

Yet, while Jayalalithaa was alive and Mr. Karunanidhi was in charge, the two Dravidian parties had little trouble securing the mandate of the people in election after election. In part this was achieved through the sheer money-muscle combination. To a considerable extent the weight of 20th century history has been the wind beneath these parties' wings. The Dravidian movement was quintessentially an ethnic mobilisation of common Tamil men and

women who, in 1967, uprooted and overawed the Congress party's political networks that were based relatively more on patronage allocation through local elites.

Dravidianism redux

Mr. Haasan lacks a living, historical connection to this movement, unlike some of his potential rivals. It is true that Dravidianism no longer exists in its prior radical form. It has, at least since the 1990s, shed its anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindu, anti-Hindi and anti-North-India undertones in favour of a broad, inclusive strand of political accommodationism for all Tamils. Yet, there is a residual feeling of Tamil exceptionalism which motivates voting behaviour, and continues to present an opportunity to politically mobilise.

Despite this lacuna, Mr. Haasan does enjoy one inherent advantage that could yet help him project a close tie to the needs of the Tamil person: his worldview appears to be in sync with those of the forbearers of the Dravidian movement such as Periyar. First, he considers himself an atheist and a rationalist, which is the correct philosophical leaning for Tamil Nadu.

Second, his apparent leaning toward left-of-centre politics and a distaste for Hindutva suggests that he is in tune with Tamil Nadu's historical preoccupation with mass welfarism and that he has moved past his own Brahmin origins –

not unlike Jayalalithaa herself.

Finally, being equally comfortable in Tamil and English, he has left open the option to straddle the worlds of the elites and the masses in this State, an important asset for an aspiring leader.

Between these countervailing forces that could either boost Mr. Haasan's bid for power or bring it crashing down, the ultimate outcome would hinge upon his ability to answer this: what are the most urgent needs of the common Tamilian today, and how can he signal that he is the best candidate to deliver on that need? Secondary questions that he will have to answer revolve around the nature of the party organisation that he will build up to make such political action a reality – in particular, whether it will have sufficient capacity in terms of resource allocation and if he will be able to establish an organisational culture that eschews rent-seeking.

From Mr. Haasan's perspective, Tamil Nadu must appear to be imbued with a Dickensian hue – the best of times and the worst of times – for political entry and aspiration. Yet, if he can adroitly manoeuvre through the inescapable obstructionism that the Dravidian incumbents will thrust onto his path, he may yet turn out to be the jolt of political uprightness that the Tamil Nadu ecosystem so desperately requires.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Setting foot in the NE

For a party that continues to ride on the unabated popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, together with its focus on the development agenda, the election results from northeast India are bound to be a shot in the arm for the BJP, especially as it has now extended its dominance into hitherto new territory ("BJP stuns Left in Tripura", March 4). The results will also end the politics of negativity engaged in by political adversaries of the BJP, as it is now clearly a pan-Indian party. Instead of engaging itself in thorough self-introspection over its failure, the Left's statements attributing the BJP's victory to "money and muscle power" and "foul play by the BJP and RSS" are most unfortunate. The underlying lesson of the verdict is that in the end, what matters to the common man is the ability of political parties to help

him with his basic needs and aspirations. The resentment against the Left Front government was mainly because of rising unemployment. Both the Congress and the Left need to strengthen themselves at the grass-root level if they are to remain politically relevant; castigating the BJP on 'secular-communal' lines has outlived its utility.

B. SURESH KUMAR,
Coimbatore

■ The Left appears not to have learnt any lessons from experience. The use of phrases such as "money and muscle power" and "fascist communal Hindutva" show that those in the Left have not stopped repeating the same argument, election after election. People cannot be fooled always by the claim that all except the BJP are saints, free of corruption, criminalisation and communalism. The Left should ponder over why it has been relegated to the present position; perhaps its

ideology and practices are no longer relevant. To start with, it should learn to support people-friendly policies. For the BJP, the party must not assume the victories to be the "people's mandate for anything and everything".

P.R.V. RAJA,
Pandalam, Kerala

■ In the front page report, "BJP stuns Left in Tripura" (March 4, 2018), the last paragraph reads: "Among the factors that worked in favour of the BJP-IPFT alliance were anti-incumbency, alleged corruption by the Left front government, and allegations that the CPI(M) worked for the benefit of only its workers and leaders." To my knowledge, during its coverage of the election, *The Hindu* has not provided any evidence of corruption. Readers expect the daily to adhere to fair and even-handed reportage. The correspondent cannot simply source his statements

about Left Front "corruption" to generalised "allegations."

MADHURA SWAMINATHAN,
Bengaluru

Adivasi lynching

The lynching of an Adivasi youth, Madhu, in Kerala, defies parallel in terms of its savagery and crudity (Editorial page, "The Adivasi in the mirror", March 3). In Kerala, the Adivasis are not treated as human beings but as a lesser species. They would have been self-reliant by now had the thousands of crores spent on their uplift since Independence been distributed to them directly. The discourse around Adivasis needs a sea change especially from the one about holding out aims to them.

AYYASERI RAVEENDRANATH,
Aranmula, Kerala

Being liquor-free

Like the enlightened women in villages in Rajasthan who are bravely leading the battle against liquor consumption,

there are also sporadic reports of women elsewhere in India who are fighting back ("Ground Zero" page - "Voting against alcohol", March 3). One does not need to be a scientist to know the ill-effects of alcohol and alcoholism and the ruin it causes. It is disturbing that many in the middle classes are now drinking. Celebrations on the filmisest grounds where alcohol is served have become a social norm.

PUSHPA DORAI,
Nurani, Kerala

Still a height

Our country is so obsessed with cricket that we are turning a blind eye to other sports ("Weekend Sport" page - "Leap of faith", March 3). Recently, much of India was cheering its U-19 cricket team. But did anyone spare a thought for our equally talented jumpers? They too deserve a chance. If India wants to emerge as a sporting nation, it should encourage and financially

support forms of sport where there is potential. High jump is one.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

Food for thought

As data in the Global Hunger Index show, our country has 'a serious hunger problem' and ranks 100 out of 119 countries. Many young children die as there is inadequate food available to them. Given such a situation, it was upsetting that thousands of litres of milk were used in rituals around the Gomateshwara statue at the Mahamastakabhisheka Mahotsav, in Karnataka recently. Perhaps the milk could have been distributed to poor children rather than being allowed to flow away. My intention is not to hurt religious sentiments. Certain traditional customs and rituals need to be looked at again.

HIMANSHU GAUR,
Faridabad, Haryana

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