



Political Parties and the Contested Terrain of Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Political Parties constitute a foundational pillar of democratic systems such as India. Manipur, located in the North-eastern part of India shares national borders with Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, and also shares porous international border with Myanmar. The concept and practice of Citizenship is central to the identity of every nation-state and rights of the citizens. Manipur witnessed unnatural population growth after the merger of Manipur into India in 1949 due to migration from the rest of India and immigrants from Myanmar, Bangladesh etc. Such influx not only impacted socio-economic life but also influenced the demography and politics in Manipur. The paper examines the role of political parties in democratic governance and analyses how patterns of migration in Manipur have reshaped the contestation around Citizenship.

INTRODUCTION:

Elections encourage parties to respond to voters, and political parties channel citizens' policy choices (Downs, 1957). Political parties play a pivotal role in the Indian electoral system as they act as intermediaries between the State and voter. Voters, being the ultimate decision-makers in a democracy, are central to this process.

According to Cambridge dictionary, 'Mobilisation' refers to, "the act of organising or preparing something, such as a group of people for a purpose". So, voter mobilisation can be understood as the



process by which political parties encourage, persuade and influence voters to support their parties via different means.

Article 326 of the Indian Constitution read as ‘Elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assemblies of States to be on the basis of adult suffrage.—The elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than [eighteen years] of age on such date as may be fixed in that behalf by or under any law made by the appropriate Legislature and is not otherwise disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate Legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election’. The fact that the Indian citizens who reach the age of 18 and older are entitled to vote makes Citizenship the core focus of political participation and consequently of political party strategies. Citizenship is the legal, political status that makes the Citizen of a country that is assigned to an individual. In Indian Constitution, Articles 5 to 11 talks about who is the citizens of India who are not. Citizenship is typically view as a relationship between a State and its citizens as well as between members of society or between political parties. Since citizen form the voting population, voter mobilisation has become a common and essential phenomenon in India’s democratic process, particularly during election. It becomes an important task of political parties.

Another critical dimension influencing the dynamic of Politics in Manipur is the migration of people. There are two types of migration 1) Emigration- the outflow of the people, leaves one country or region and settles permanently at other country or region and 2) Immigration- the inflow of the people into a country or region . The political scenario has radically shifts when immigration occurs, especially from neighbouring states or countries. The political parties showed a great deal of interest to migrant populations, sometimes out of humanitarian concern, but often as a strategic means of garnering electoral support.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MANIPUR POLITICS:

Before 1947, the princely State of Manipur did not have a system of electoral governance. The first General election was held in 1948 under the provisions of the **Manipur Constitution Act, 1947**. However, following the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949, Manipur became a **Part ‘C’ State**, directly administered by the Government of India without a State legislature.



The introduction of **Territorial Council System** in 1957 marked the beginning of electoral politics in post-merger Manipur. The first election to the Territorial council was held in 1957, followed by the second in 1962. Subsequently, in 1963, Manipur was accorded the status of **Union territory** and the Territorial council was Upgraded to a **Territorial Legislative Assembly**, thereby expanding the scope of local governance and political representation.

A significant milestone in Manipur's political evolution occurred in **1972**, when it attained full statehood under the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971. Consequently, the Territorial Legislative Assembly was transformed into **Manipur State Legislative Assembly** and the first state legislative election was held in the same year. The election was held in three phases, two phases for the valley constituencies and one for the hill constituencies, reflecting the State's complex socio-geographical composition. Manipur has conducted twelve Legislative Assembly Elections, the most recent being held in 2022.

Over the decade, Manipur's electoral landscape have witnessed growing competition among various political parties, the rise of regional political forces and frequent instances of Coalition governments, which often define the nature of political stability in the State. The evolution of Manipur's political institutions thus mirrors the broader trajectory of democratic consolidation and regional assertion within India's federal framework.

In recent years, the constituency located along the international border have shown a significant increase in the number of registered voters, as observed in comparative analysis of the State Assembly Election till 2022. This demographic shift has raised concerns regarding the integrity of the electoral process. However, these areas have also faced serious electoral challenges. Reports have surfaced of kidnapping, harassment and intimidation among political workers and agents. The instructions of Election commission of India to produce Voter ID or other relevant government official documents before exercising their voting rights have not been followed properly. Allegations of fake documentation, where illegal immigrants are converted into Indian citizens through bribery and administrative manipulation, have also been made. Such practices are often believed to be politically motivated, as these newly documented individual becomes a voter base for certain Political parties.

Furthermore, elections in border constituencies have been marred by proxy voting and widespread booth capturing. Voters in these regions are frequently subjected to undue influence and false promises by Political parties during election campaigns. Consequently, a large section of the voter finds deprived of



the freedom to vote according to their genuine choice, undermining the democratic essence of the electoral process.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND INDIAN DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK

Political Parties are the lifeline of democracy and any debate on electoral reform must look at the role and contribution of political parties (M.Vijaya Kumar, 2013). They are the foundation of representative democracy which act as the vehicles through which citizens articulate their interests, participate in Governance and influence public policy. In India, **the Representation of the People Act, 1951** defines and governs the concept of political parties, which functions as a cornerstone of Indian democracy. However, their ability to sustain democracy depends on their internal democratic practices, ideological coherence and inclusivity. To either uphold or weaken the ideals of democratic principle lies in the Political parties.

India's multi-party system reflects the diversity and pluralism of its society. The Political parties in India consists of National Parties, Recognised State parties, Unrecognised state party and Regional party as well. Since India's first general election in 1951–1952, all political parties have periodically presented manifestos that outline their ideologies, political goals, seeking to align with the evolving aspirations of citizens in an effort to better reflect the socio-economic and political climate of the populace and to uphold the fundamental values of democracy. Yet, electoral competition in India often prioritises populism and identity-based mobilisation over substantive ideological contestation. This has led to concern about the erosion of democratic accountability and the weakening of issue-based politics.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF MANIPUR

Manipur's Unicameral Legislative Assembly consists of 60 Assembly constituencies. The Valley constituency consists of 5 districts and has 40 Legislative Assembly seats and Hill constituency consists of 11 districts and has 20 Legislative seats. The State is represented by 2(two) Lok Sabha seats (Inner Manipur Parliamentary Constituency covering 32 legislative assembly constituencies) and 1 (one) Rajya Sabha seat (Outer Manipur Parliamentary Constituency includes 28 legislative assembly constituencies). Manipur is a multi-ethnic communities consisting of several communities. Manipur's multi- ethnic composition significantly shapes its political culture. Its diverse ethnic landscape made Political parties frequently use ethnic appeals to win over voters Often, Political parties resort to appealing to voters along ethnic lines. Political parties employ ethnic appeal to mobilise the voters particularly in constituencies where identity- based solidarity is strong. The voter turnout varied between the valley and hill districts



of Manipur as we have witnessed in the recent Manipur Legislative Assembly election held in 2022. The main reason for this variation is due to the difference in political awareness and voter mobilisation by the Political parties.

POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION OF CITIZENSHIP DEBATES – Inner Line Permit (ILP) expansion and debates on NRC (National Register Citizens of India) –

Inner Line permit (ILP) is the official document issued to the citizens of India for a limited period while travelling to Inner line permitted States. The mechanism serves not only to monitor and manage the movement of domestic and foreign visitors but also to curb the presence of illegal immigrants in these protected regions. The ILP system was extended to the State of Manipur vide Order of President of India no. S.O.4433(E) dated 11/12/2019. In order to strengthen the effective implementation, government of Manipur under the ruling government constituted Cabinet sub-committee on 16 February 2023 to look into the issue of illegal immigrants in Manipur . Subsequent reports indicated the presence of undocumented Myanmar national (illegal immigrants) who had established new villages within Manipur's territory. Shortly thereafter, in May 2023 ethnic violence erupted in the State further complicating the governance and demographic concerns surrounding ILP enforcement.

However, a crucial question arises: Have the promises and commitment made by the Political parties truly been fulfilled after the electoral success? While the Political parties has spoken of implanting the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Manipur to curb illegal immigration, it remains unclear whether this is a concrete policy or merely a political slogan. Moreover, the eruption of ethnic violence in Manipur since may 2023 and the perceived silence or inaction of the ruling Political parties represents a significant setback, raising doubts about the government's commitment to peace, inclusivity and balanced development.

CONCLUSION

From the above study, we can conclude that Political parties, often exploit demographic changes to expand their electoral base, sometimes undermining democratic principles. Migration from neighbouring regions and the manipulation of citizenship documentation have reshaped the State's electoral map and intensified ethnic and political tensions.

True democratic ideal requires transparent electoral processes, responsible political conduct and effective verification mechanisms such as the NRC. Strengthening these institutions is essential not only for fair elections but also for ensuring peace, inclusive society and stability in Manipur's plural society.



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