

Richer Houses, Poorer State Of Politics

N-E is following the worrying trend in rest of India by mostly electing wealthy legislators

Gilles Verniers and Ananay Agarwal



Elections in the North-East used to be an economical affair, compared to the rest of the country where parties and candidates tend to splurge vast sums of money to contest. The intensification of competitiveness of elections and the involvement of new parties in state elections have somewhat changed that feature of politics in the North-East. Here, we compare the average net assets of major parties' candidates and MLAs across the three states that just went to the polls.

In Tripura, the average self-declared wealth of MLAs has increased from Rs 26 lakh in 2008 to Rs 1.5 crore in 2023. In Nagaland, MLAs went from declaring an average of Rs 4 crore net assets in 2008 to nearly Rs 9 crore in 2023. The rise is even more pronounced in Meghalaya, where MLAs declared on average Rs 1.1 crore of assets in 2008, against Rs 9.1 crore in 2023.

This is not a proxy measure for how much parties spend in their elections in these states. But it shows that parties tend to recruit increasingly wealthy candidates. The question is to see whether certain parties are more responsible than others for these upward trends.

In Meghalaya, in 2023, the two main parties of the governing coalition, NPP and UDP, nominated on average wealthier candidates than their opponents (around Rs 10 crore of average assets for both parties). The 11 UDP candidates who won are twice as rich on average as the 34 UDP candidates who lost (Rs 15.2 crore against Rs 7.2 crore).

The variations are stark among MLAs of the same party as well. The richest UDP MLA, who is also the richest winner across parties, is Metbah Lyngdoh, from Mairang (ST) seat. He declared Rs 146 crore of assets against his party colleague Nujorki Sungoh, Mowkaiaw MLA, who declared merely Rs 18 lakh assets.

NPP winners had below average assets compared to NPP candidates, while the two BJP candidates who won

are among the richest candidates fielded by their party (one worth Rs 16 crore and the other Rs 13 crore).

In Nagaland, the NDPP fielded the richest candidates, and got elected the richest MLAs, on average. Among the three other parties, there isn't much differentiation. NPP and NPP winners, however, tend to be twice as rich as

are the only ones particularly abstemious in that regard. The wealthiest MLA in the new Tripura assembly is chief minister Manik Saha from Town Bordowali (Rs 13 crore).

What these data, which have an indicative value, reveal is that national parties, or more specifically BJP, are not solely responsible for recruitment of wealthier candidates. Regional parties contribute to that phenomenon as well, with the exception of Tripura. It is possible then the nomination of wealthier candidates by national parties encouraged regional and local parties to imitate them, in order to resist their competitive pressure.

It is more likely however that this upward trend reveals broader transformations of politics in the North-East, which has become more attractive for wealthier individuals.

We do not have a lot of reliable information on the occupational background of these states' MLAs. In Meghalaya, 38 of the 59 MLAs declared politics or social service as their profession. In Nagaland, 40 of the 60 MLAs declared the same. In Tripura, the count is 39 of 60. This dedication to social service and politics seems at odds with the evolution of the wealth of elected representatives in these three states. We know 'politician' or 'social worker' are often generic labels that obfuscate elected representatives' actual source of income.

For a long time an exception among Indian states, electoral politics in the North-East is now following a trend observable across India, which is the growth of a political class that is more and more elitist in class terms. This has an adverse effect on the representative character of assemblies, which tend to exclude the poor or even middle-class candidates.

The data shows that there are still variations and that non-wealthy candidates still succeed in getting elected in these three states. But they are fewer and fewer and it is becoming more and more difficult to enter politics and survive in it without personal wealth.

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QUICK HIKE TO MILLIONS

MLAs' average net assets in Meghalaya, Tripura and Nagaland (2008-23), in ₹crore

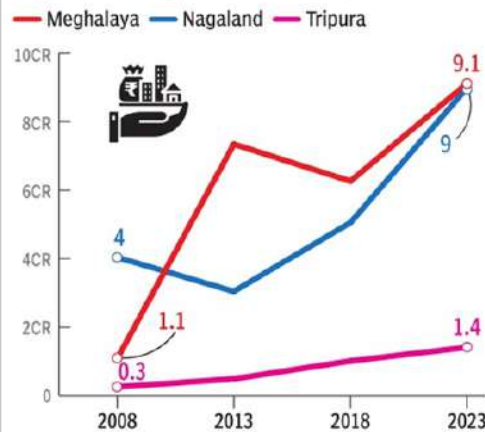


Chart: Trivedi Centre for Political Data | Source: ADR

their losing counterparts. Here again, there are variations. The Kohima Town MLA, Dr Tseilhoutuo Rhutso, is worth Rs 22 crore, against Rs 84 lakh of assets declared by Seyochung Sitimi MLA C Kipili Sangtam.

In Tripura, BJP and Congress candidates are significantly richer than their regional and local opponents. The six candidates of the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura