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Northeast to the Centre

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The region has emerged as an important battleground in this election

WITH just 25 Lok Sabha seats, India's Northeast has been a largely neglected region in electoral terms. However, in the era of coalition governments, because of the expectation of a fractured verdict in 2014, it has increasingly received political attention. Traditionally, electoral battles in the region have been fought between the Congress and various state parties. Parliamentary seats are usually represented by the ruling party in the states.

In the run-up to the 16th Lok Sabha elections, the importance being assigned by the two main national parties, the Congress and the BJP, to the Northeast is underscored by the schedules of their star campaigners — Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi. The Trinamool Congress chief, Mamata Banerjee, has also followed suit and campaigned extensively in the region.

BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi's campaign in different parts of the Northeast has allegedly created a "Modi wave", as is perceived in other parts of the country as well. But the purported wave may be largely limited to the dissatisfied middle class and business groups of the region, who are expected to gain from Modi's economics, which is apparently focused on employment generation, and the creation of world-class infrastructure in the IT, power and

manufacturing sectors. For students and unemployed youths in the region, who are desperate for job opportunities, Modi has struck the right chord. His promise to create BPO jobs in the Northeast and eventually make the region an IT hub on par with Bangalore and Hyderabad is appealing. Modi's vision to harness the potential of the herbal, horticulture and agro-processing industries has also appealed to the business classes in the region. But the pro-Modi sentiment is also a function of the anti-incumbency prevailing in many states.

On the removal of AFSPA, national parties have remained silent, even though the issue is important in the Northeast.

The Congress, on the other hand, has been pushed to the lowest popularity level in its history because of the corruption scandals that engulfed the UPA government's decade-long rule at the Centre. Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi, who has maintained a distance from the day-to-day affairs of the UPA government, has enjoyed great popularity and appeals to the youth of the region. Yet, despite being the Congress's star campaigner, Gandhi's charm has diminished in the run-up to the elections. He is increasingly identified with the debacles of the Congress-led UPA government.

Nevertheless, for certain sections of people, particularly the underprivileged, Gandhi's "feel-good economics" is still attractive. The UPA is credited with having started as many as 80 Centrally-sponsored schemes. These schemes benefit the disadvantaged masses, primarily settled in rural areas. And this is expected to reflect in their voting behaviour.

Apart from the appeal of Modi and Gandhi, there are certain regional factors, which will determine the voter choices, and should be taken into account. Dur-

ing the last two decades, the nexus between politicians and insurgent groups, and their influence over the outcome of the polls, has played an important role during elections in certain states of the region. Powerful insurgent groups in Manipur, Nagaland and some adjoining districts try to interfere in the election process through their links with political parties and candidates, even though the state governments have asked groups that are currently negotiating for peace not to get involved with the elections. Black money, clan/tribe preferences and the use of muscle power are also important factors during elections.

But on the crucial issue of the removal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the national parties have remained silent, even though this contentious issue is very important in the Northeast. This may be why the BJP might not sweep the entire region even if it manages to make inroads.

Although there is a sizeable number of Muslims in Assam and Manipur, they are not a homogeneous group. By and large, they are inclined to vote for the Congress or All India United Democratic Front. This time, some Muslims are expected to break from tradition and vote for the AAP, AGP or even the BJP.

This troubled periphery of India, which has hardly played any role in the electoral calculations of the major national parties in the past 60 years, has become one of the battlegrounds for election 2014. This development is one giant step towards the integration of this alienated region with the rest of the country. Hopefully, this will prompt a change in the mindset of people who treat every shade of "otherness" with contempt. This election could bring the Northeast and the rest of the country psychologically closer.

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