

## **Electoral Politics in Meghalaya: An Appraisal of Assembly Election 1978**

**B. Datta Ray**

Meghalaya as a State of Indian Union was born on 20 January 1972. It was carved out of the State of Assam. The first step in this direction was taken by creating the autonomous sub-state for the same territorial jurisdiction on 2 April, 1970. The All Party Hill Leaders' Conference was the architect of the Hill State movement and was mainly instrumental in bringing the Meghalaya State.

The second General Election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly was crucial. The three major contenders, the Congress, the APHLC and the Hill State Peoples Democratic Party were playing for high stakes. The Assembly election in 1972, the first after the attainment of statehood for this Hill State was won by All Party Hill Leaders' Conference on a wave of popular enthusiasm when the Hill State was formed. Captain Williamson A. Sangma, the then undisputed leader of APHLC and also the Chief Minister had no problem. He even gifted a few seats to the Congress in Garo Hills in 1972 elections. The picture in 1978 was different.

Ever since the creation of Meghalaya as a full-fledged State, the APHLC was the ruling party. Fighting the election on the basis of an understanding with the Congress in 1972 elections, the APHLC emerged as a single majority party, forming the Government. The Congress functioned as the Opposition but with a difference. It had the right to criticise the government in the House but was to vote for the Government, whenever it was so necessary.

While this relation between the two parties continued for some time, some shifts in the position were noticed since 1975. Several times since 1972, there were moves for a merger of the APHLC with the Congress. But it was only in November 1976 that a section of APHLC leadership headed by the Chief Minister Capt. Williamson A. Sangma decided to merge with the Congress.

In Meghalaya, the recognised Congress under Capt. Sangma was owing allegiance to the official Congress headed by Brahma-

nanda Reddy inspite of the fact that they joined the Congress in 1976 in response to the desires of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. That happened in Mendipathar, Garo Hills, a few days before the commencement of the A.I.C.C. session at Jawahar-nagar, Gauhati. The split in the Congress at national level had repercussion in Meghalaya. As many as 9 candidates belonging to Indira Congress contested in Meghalaya election. The Reddi Congress under Capt. Sangma set up 57 candidates in the whole state. Both the Congress parties were at dagger's drawn. Unlike 1972 Assembly election, the Congress under Capt. Sangma, the Chief Minister, had no poll adjustment with any other political party, regional or national. It now faced tough challenge from APHLC, the former ruling party all over the State and from HSPDP in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, with whom it had understanding in Khasi Hills District Council politics.

In the 60 member Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, the party position after the first general election in 1972 were as follows : The APHLC -32, Congress - 9, Independents - 19, out of whom 8 were HSPDP nominees. Subsequently some Independents joined the ruling party and there were a few cases of floor crossing in criss-cross manner.

The Mendipathar Special Conference of the APHLC held on 16 November 1976 was a turning point in Meghalaya politics where a major split occured in APHLC. The APHLC Chief Minister Capt. Sangma and a section of leadership decided to merge the party into Congress. This dissolution was challenged by the APHLC leaders mostly from Khasi Hills. The first ever Congress ministry under Capt. Williamson A. Sangma was installed on 22 November 1976. A reorganised APHLC under the presidentship of Modi K. Marak, a veteran Garo leader declared itself afresh as a regional party with a national commitment ; but its reserved election symbol 'Flower' was kept frozen by the Election Commission in February 1977. Only on September 11, 1977 the Supreme Court restored to APHLC, the reserved Flower election symbol.

Hopingsone Lyngdoh was expelled from APHLC in 1968 on the issue of acceptance by the APHLC leadership of the Government of India plan for a autonomous sub-state of Meghalaya as announced in September 1968. Mr Lyngdoh then formed his own party, the Hill State People's Democratic Party to achieve Hill State. He was defeated by APHLC candidate Prof. G. G. Swell in 1971 Parliamentary Election but the HSPDP, although not recognised at that time, captured 9 seats in the first general election to

Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Prof. Swell himself was expelled from APHLC in 1974 for his anti-party activities as he formed his own platform, Peoples Demand Implementation Convention in July 1973. The HSPDP represented a new awareness of the hill people. It had its immediate acceptance in tradition bound rural areas in Khasi Hills particularly in the west. The HSPDP in 1977 Parliamentary election had avenged its 1971 defeat by humbling the Congress, the APHLC and Prof. G. G. Swell's PDIC. Political events since 1968 produced its own compulsions.

The APHLC which appeared in the political scene 18 years back as a common platform for Hill State movement in North-East India, now emerged as a political party in Meghalaya undergoing through a number of convulsions. It is now the only political party which might broadly claim an all-Meghalaya party having its base in all districts except probably West Khasi Hills. The Congress had never organisational base in the rural areas in Meghalaya until the split in the APHLC when an important section of it under Chief Minister and Party President Capt. Williamson A. Sangma joined the Congress. The Congress in Khasi Hills is generally confined to urban areas and largely so in Garo Hills. The HSPDP is essentially confined to rural areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It has no organisational base in Garo Hills. Attempts were made from time to time for unification of APHLC, the break-way HSPDP and PDIC. PDIC owes its beginning to APHLC as well.

### **Election Manifesto**

Serving the interest of the tribal people and opposing the influx of outsiders in Meghalaya, besides untiring efforts in uplifting economic activities of tribals in Meghalaya in industrial and trading ventures were among the promises made by the HSPDP in its Election Manifesto. The manifesto reiterated that the party would spare no efforts in protecting border areas of the State against encroachment and would also strive for reinclusion of areas now falling outside the boundary of Meghalaya. Assuring protection of traditional customs on lands in Meghalaya, the Manifesto said that it would see that any land reform measures sought to be taken served the interest of the tribals. The Manifesto also pledged to wipe out the practice of 'benami' transactions in Meghalaya. The HSPDP manifesto added that the party would through constitutional means make effort to protect the autonomy of Meghalaya and guard against any Act of Parliament that might go against the traditional, cultural, religious and social customs of the tribal people of the State.

The HSPDP had made an issue of the Thirty first Amendment to the Constitution, ratified by Meghalaya Legislative Assembly which did away with reserved seats for Meghalaya and Nagaland for the scheduled tribes. Meghalaya being predominantly tribals, nontribals forming 20 percent of the population, there was no need for reservation for the tribals. The HSPDP sought to re-open the issue. The party feared that the demographic pattern could change for the worse, affecting vital tribal interests.

The APHLC Manifesto pledged to provide safeguards against influx and economic exploitation of the tribal people. At the same time, it pledged to maintain peace and harmony among all sections of the people and various communities inhabiting the State. The Manifesto highlighted the concern of the APHLC on the outstanding boundary disputes of Meghalaya with Assam. It reiterated to resolve to negotiate for the transfer to Meghalaya of certain contiguous areas predominantly inhabited by tribal people. The APHLC had pledged to protect tribal identity and preserve their language and culture. However, the HSPDP had expressed this more forcibly. The APHLC had pledged to oppose any proposal to ban on cow slaughter in relation to Meghalaya.

The Congress had in its Manifesto pledged to improve agricultural production by introducing modern methods of cultivation, to hold price line of essential commodities. It promised clean administration and emphasised to develop the tribal genius and their every day life. It also promised the rural areas more road, drinking water and electricity. Regarding the upliftment of border areas, the Congress had stressed that it would continue its efforts in strengthening co-operative movement specially to market produces of these areas for the benefit of the people.

The burning problem which Meghalaya is facing is the economic rehabilitation of the border areas with Bangladesh and in this issue, all political parties had pledged in their Manifestoes to fight for the cause of the border people.

Another issue is the protection of tribal interests as Meghalaya is predominantly a tribal state. All political parties agreed on it. Another similarity is the stress on safeguarding against the 'influx' of outsiders and economic exploitation of the tribal people. Most of the political parties had in their election manifestoes promised clean and just administration. Other important issues concerning common men are programme for improving the lot of farmers and the holding of the price line of essential commodities. Surprisingly enough there was not much thought over land reform issues. No

political party showed any awareness for the need of progressive socio-economic programmes for the men behind the plough. Every regional political party and the Congress wanted to protect the tribal way of life and custom. No body spoke of the dynamism of tribes in transition.

### **Election Scene**

All over the State, specially in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, people had an anti-congress attitude because of the major split it caused in APHLC in November 1976 and the Emergency history. Participation of Congress conventionalist in the election was a great set back to both the Congresses. In Pynthorumkhras, Laban, Laitumkhras and in some Garo Hills constituencies, they fought each other.

The Congress, the ruling party under Capt. Sangma faced a tough challenge from APHLC, the former ruling party for six years, two years in autonomous sub-State of Meghalaya and four years in full-fledged Statehood, both fielding candidates in all the five districts for the second general election held on 25 February 1978. The HSPDP was also formidable. There were five recognised parties with Candidates—the Congress with 57 candidates, the APHLC with 52, the HSPDP with 35, Congress (I) with 9 and CPI with 4 candidates to fight for 60 Assembly seats. In all there were 262 candidates including 105 Independents. The Peoples Demand Implementation Convention fought the Assembly election as Independents. It was recognised as a State Party only in September 1978 - long after the Assembly election. Their candidates swelled the number of independents in collaboration with Jaintia National Union in Jaintia Hills. The Janata Party had no candidate. In Pynthorumkhras constituency the two Independents Pranesh C. Biswas and Subhas C. Bhattacharjee had the backing of CPI(M) and CPI (ML) respectively.

TABLE - A

## General Elections - Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, February, 1978.

Sl. No.	District.	Total No. of seats	National Parties		State Parties			Independents	Total
			INC	INC(I)	CPI	APHLC	HSPDP		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	Jaintia Hills	7	Nil	Nil	Nil	2	3	2	7
2.	East Khasi Hills								
	(a) Shillong Sub-division	17	7	Nil	Nil	6	3	1	17
	(b) Ribhoi Sub-dvsn.	4	2	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	2	4
3.	West Khasi Hills								
	(a) Mairang Sub-dvsn.	3	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	3	Nil	3
	(b) Nongstoin Sub-dvsn.	5	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	5	Nil	5
4.	West Garo Hills								
	(a) Baghmara Sub-dvsn.	2	1	Nil	Nil	1	Nil	Nil	2
	(b) Tura Sub-dvsn.	15	5	Nil	Nil	6	Nil	4	15
5.	East Garo Hills	7	5	Nil	Nil	1	Nil	1	7
Total :		60	20	Nil	Nil	16	14	10	60

**TABLE - B**

**Valid Votes Polled by Political Parties vis-a-vis Total Electorate  
General Elections - Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, February 1978.**

Sl. No.	District	Total Electorate	Valid votes polled and percentage								
			National Parties			State Parties			Independents		
			INC	INC(I)	CPI	APHLC	HSPDP				
			4	5	6	7	8			9	
1.	Jaintia Hills	79,303	14,809 (18.67%)	Nil	Nil	17,075 (21.53%)	13,718 (17.29%)	14,803 (18.66%)			
2.	East Khasi Hills	2,01,700	31,267 (15.50%)	1,525 (0.76%)	1,851 (0.92%)	35,612 (17.65%)	28,400 (14.08%)	34,778 (17.24%)			
	(a) Shillong Sub-Dvn.	62,058	26,245 (16.19%)	1,162 (0.72%)	1,750 (1.08%)	30,910 (19.07%)	21,790 (13.45%)	27,422 (16.92%)			
	(b) Ribhoi Sub-Dvn.	39,642	5,021 (12.66%)	363 (0.92%)	101 (0.25%)	4,702 (11.86%)	6,610 (16.67%)	7,356 (18.56%)			
3.	West Khasi Hills	93,007	11,820 (12.71%)	Nil	Nil	10,506 (11.29%)	30,734 (33.04%)	6,404 (6.88%)			

(c) Mairang Sub-Dvn.	34,133	3,400 (9.96%)	Nil	3,732 (10.93%)	11,271 (33.02%)	3,661 (10.72%)
(b) Nongstoin Sub-Dvn.	58,874	8,420 (14.30%)	Nil	6,774 (11.50%)	19,463 (33.05%)	2,743 (4.66%)
4. West Garo Hills	1,56,278	39,403 (25.21%)	2,863 (1.83%)	22,457 (14.37%)	Nil	32,325 (20.68%)
(a) Baghmara Sub-Dvn.	17,316	5,373 (31.05%)	Nil	3,059 (17.68%)	Nil	1,107 (6.39%)
(b) Tura Sub-Dvn.	1,38,974	34,030 (24.49%)	2,863 (2.06%)	19,398 (13.96%)	Nil	31,218 (22.46%)
5. East Garo Hills	54,723	12,355 (22.45%)	1,059 (1.92%)	8,712 (15.83%)	Nil	5,660 (10.29%)
<b>TOTAL :</b>	<b>5,85,023</b>	<b>1,09,651 (18.74%)</b>	<b>5,447 (0.93%)</b>	<b>2,361 (0.403%)</b>	<b>94,362 (16.13%)</b>	<b>72,852 (12.45%)</b>
						<b>93,970 (16.06%)</b>

The Congress became the single largest party with 20 seats in a house of 60 members. Second came APHLC with 16 seats and the third HSPDP with 14 seats. There are 10 Independents including 2 from Prof. G. G. Swell's PDIC and one from Jaintia National Union. In the past elections to Lok Sabha, particularly during 1977 and also in elections held in the neighbouring States of Tripura and Nagaland, Independents were routed and cast aside by the electorates as they had no definite programme and policies. Only 4 Independents from Nagaland could get elected to the Assembly and none in Tripura.

No single party emerged after the election to claim absolute majority. The Congress with 20 seats suffered a major set back when its strong hold in the Garo Hills was badly moulded by the APHLC which secured there 8 seats. The Congress was also wiped out from Jaintia Hills when it failed to secure even a single seat and saw there the defeat of its strong man Edwingson Barch, the Agriculture Minister in Sangma Cabinet and his colleague B. B. Shallam. Understandingly it drew a blank in West Khasi Hills where the HSPDP took every thing. The Congress victories remained confined mostly to urban areas in Khasi Hills and Garo Hills.

The stand of Capt. Williamson A. Sangma and his followers in defecting from APHLC to Congress in November 1976 for a better deal had proved to be counter-productive and a failure of statesmanship and the credibility of Congress leadership came at a low ebb. The Congress split at national level had an adverse repercussion in the hills. The split shattered the prospect of Congress to power. The damage was irreparable.

The Congress went to the polls with built-in advantages, being the ruling party. Its greatest advantage was Capt. Williamson A. Sangma. The personality of Capt. Sangma is a big factor in Meghalaya election politics. In a semi-feudal society personality matters. Meghalaya is the only State where all-India level Congress leaders did not come for election campaigning. This may also be due to the fact that Meghalaya Congress did not like to highlight its linkage with a national party in the context of wave of regionalism in Meghalaya. Fortune of the Congress now fluctuated with that of Capt. Sangma. The Congress was moulded unexpectedly by the APHLC in West Garo Hills. This implies considerable erosion of the hold of Capt. Sangma in Garo Hills Politics. He had an unassailable authority in his Garo Hills. Those in the APHLC who refused to merge with the Congress maintained that the merger was without the sanction of the people. The Congress in this election

and earlier for the Lok Sabha in 1977 could not win and as such could not obtain a clear mandate in favour of the merger. This had demoralised the party. There was now a danger that the party may lose its hold and national character ultimately in the whole state because of the political climate in the rest of the country.

The All Party Hill Leaders' Conference came second in the Assembly election with 16 seats, but to a certain extent salvaged its position by winning 8 seats in Garo Hills where it contested in 20 constituencies. It made a dent in the West Garo Hills, the home ground of the Congress. The APHLC fought on two fronts against Capt. Sangma and his followers who changed horses at Mendipathar, Garo Hills in 1976 and against HSPDP nearer home in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The protracted unity talk between it and the HSPDP failed. There was reported suggestion urging the two to disband and merge into a new regional party. The APHLC leaders stressed the need to reactivate the Flower symbol of the party after what had happened since Mendipathar and the Supreme Court judgement restoring the Flower election symbol to it. They held that the absence of Flower symbol led to their defeat in the Lok Sabha election in 1977. The APHLC had built up the grass-root cadre with this symbol over the years. It fought now the Assembly election to re-establish its identity. The APHLC was not demoralised by its defeat in the Lok Sabha election which it attributed to systematic false propaganda concerning the religion and culture of the tribal people by the ruling party, the Congress, and the confusion caused by another false propaganda that the APHLC had ceased to exist since Mendipathar Special Conference and had the support of the Janata Party, which would curb the freedom of religion and abolish small states like Meghalaya.

The Khasi Hills remained the vital testing ground for APHLC which had no alibis this time. It could win only 6 seats in 29 constituencies in Khasi Hills. It drew blank in Ribhoi, Nongstoin and Mairang sub-divisions. These six seats are in Shillong Sub-division of East Khasi Hills. In Jaintia Hills it secured 2 seats out of seven.

The APHLC suffered a big defeat when its party President Mody K. Marak was defeated by Congress candidate Singjan Sangma from Tura constituency and also the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly Dr. R. S. Lyngdoh who was dislodged from Nongkrem constituency by a wide margin by Dominic Roblin Nongkynrih of PDIC. The performance of PDIC which could be termed drab by winning only 2 seats had earned for itself the distinc-

tion of killing a APHLC giant. The APHLC wave in Khasi and Jaintia Hills is disappearing due to the failure of its urban based leadership. The APHLC had always an inherent problem of leadership with ambitious contenders claiming follower of their own.

The Hill State Peoples Democratic Party fared comparatively well by winning 14 seats in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Dr. B. Pakem, a young University teacher, the Vice-President of HSPDP in his maiden attempt won over his seasoned rivals. It also setup some candidates in Garo Hills. It made an inroad in Jaintia Hills by winning 3 seats out of seven. It won the same number in East Khasi Hills. All the eight seats in West Khasi Hills went to HSPDP. The voters are essentially of two types -one who votes for the party and the other for the individual, On both counts, the HSPDP gained. The charisma of HSPDP founder-President Mr. Hoping Stone Lyngdoh, M. P. had magic attraction in West Khasi Hills. The party programme was popular and forceful enough to catch the imagination of the rural masses in Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

The HSPDP is a growing force with rising ambition. It was formed by Mr. Hopingstone Lyngdoh who was expelled by the APHLC in 1968 over Hills State issue. Devotion to the cause of common mass gave him an image and a stronghold in West Khasi Hills. In 1972 election it contested 30 seats and won 9, (seven in West Khasi Hills, one in Mawlai township and one in Jaintia Hills). In 1977 Parliamentary poll the party swept the West Khasi Hills, struck the urban belt and generally eroded the traditional APHLC support elsewhere. Its understanding with Congress in Khasi Hills District Council affairs paid dividend. In 1978 quest for powers placed HSPDP in a bargaining position. They contested more seats than before and received better result. Other parties, the APHLC or the Congress will have to work with them. This is the compulsion of the situation. It is the party which has gained most in 1978 election to the Assembly. The HSPDP poll victories largely at the expense of the APHLC make it a force to reckon with in Meghalaya politics. Unlike the APHLC, which described itself as a regional party with a national outlook, the HSPDP is yet to define its attitude towards national politics.

A large number of candidates contested the Pyntorumkrah constituency in Shillong. Here as many as 4 All India parties, namely, the Congress, Communist Party of India, C. P. I. (Marxist) and C. P. I. (Marxist-Leninist) were locked in a bitter fight. The C. P. M., however, did not have an official candidate of its own here. It supported an Independent candidate. The

CPI(M-L) made its election debut in this state with only one candidate and sought the mandate of the electorate in Pynthorumkhrah constituency.

The three left parties, i.e. C. P. I., C. P. M. and C. P. I. (M-L) committed as they are to Left and Democratic unity fought each other in this single constituency where non-tribals are particularly overwhelming in number, splitting the left oriented voters. This split among the left parties helped the Congress candidate, a non-tribal himself, to emerge victorious. The Indira Congress candidate, a Joint-Secretary of INTUC, in this constituency could not split the Congress votes. Because of the peculiar composition and alignment in this constituency -it has attracted attention of many. The Pynthorumkhrah constituency where the largest number of candidates, nine in all, contested and where the leftist forces concentrated to make a base in Meghalaya, rejected all communists.

The age old tribal and clans affinities and kinsmanship became one of the unintended casualties of this election. The tribals who had always yielded to the wishes of his clan-knit community, expressed through the Chief, is now faced with a new situation where individuals have gone against kinsmanship. In a number of constituencies inter-party or individual rivalry had cut across family and clan relationship. That happened in Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills.

In the Assembly election as in 1977 Lok Sabha election, the economic issues, particularly, the problems of land reform did not get attention it deserved. The basic problems facing the common man are economic and not political. The central problem is that of mass poverty. The problem of poverty is primarily that of rural poverty, for more than 90% of the poor people live in the rural areas in Meghalaya.

The second general election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has changed the pattern of politics in the State. With no single party emerging as an absolute majority party, Meghalaya is now faced with the only alternative of a coalition government, the first of its kind to occur since the inception of Meghalaya in 1970 as an autonomous sub-state and a full fledged state since 1972. It was clear that no party could form the government. The Independents held the balance, but attempts to absorb them were overtaken by Tribal Youth Welfare Organisation. The HSPDP, the APHLC and the PDIC which had fought bitterly agreed to form a coalition. The coalition rests on the principle of parity which placed the HSPDP in a happy position. An unavoidable fact in this coalition is that it permits more than one combination. The initiative for

coalition was taken by the HSPDP calling upon all likeminded regional parties to form a coalition government. The Congress, being the national party did not qualify for participation in such a coalition.

The All Party Hill Leadders' Conference, the Hill State Peoples' Democratic Party and the Peoples' Demand Implementation Convention agreed to form a non-Congress coalition government having the following basic objectives of the new government, while agreeing in general to the programmes enunciated in their respective election Manifestoes :

- (i) to strenuously endeavour to protect and preserve the distinct identity of the tribal people, and also to pay special attention to their economic, social and cultural interests.
- (ii) to provide a clean and efficient administration, responsive to the needs and aspiration of the people.
- (iii) to make all efforts through constitutional, legislative and other measures, to provide safe-guards against influx and economic exploitation of the tribal people.

The Coalition Government in Meghalaya had a dramatic birth. It is too early to predict whether such a coalition of regional political parties with separate identities and ideologies would work. This coalition government is a "parallel convergence". Such step was taken to avoid President's Rule. With the elections to the three District Councils scheduled in 1978, it became difficult for regional parties to accept President's Rule when there was a prospect ahead for possessing District Council Administrations, the base for Meghalaya electoral politics.