

# Negotiating Power and Identity: Party Alliances, Regionalism, and Political Realignments in Arunachal Pradesh

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the dynamics of alliance politics and party relations in Arunachal Pradesh. The emphasis is on the interaction between national political parties and regional parties. Situated within the broader framework of India's federal democracy and frontier politics, the study argues that the political trajectory of Arunachal Pradesh has been shaped less by ideological competition and more by leadership-centric mobilisation, strategic accommodation, and persistent alliance instability. Drawing on a qualitative and historical method, the paper analyses the evolution of party politics from the late 1970s to the post-2000 period, focusing on the Indian National Congress, People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh, Arunachal Congress, and the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The findings reveal that the early dominance of the Congress, while electorally decisive, was organisationally shallow, creating structural conditions for fragmentation and regional assertion. Regional parties emerged not as ideologically distinct alternatives but as instruments for negotiating leadership autonomy and political leverage within the federal framework. Alliance politics became a defining feature of the state's political process, with both the Congress and later the BJP relying on regional and breakaway formations to access power. These alliances, however, were marked by instability, frequent defections, and coalition breakdowns, undermining party institutionalisation and reshaping electoral behaviour.

It further demonstrates that regional parties in Arunachal Pradesh have experienced a cyclical pattern of emergence, decline, and conditional revival. In the contemporary context, their relevance lies primarily in their strategic role within alliance negotiations rather than in sustained electoral dominance. Overall, the study highlights how alliance politics in Arunachal Pradesh has normalised a fluid, leadership-driven mode of governance, raising broader questions about democratic stability and party institutionalisation in India's peripheral and strategically sensitive regions.

**Keywords:** Alliance Politics, Regional Parties. Leadership-Centric Politics, Electoral Instability, Centre-State Relations

## **Introduction**

Arunachal Pradesh as a state presents a unique political context with constant interaction between National and Regional parties through volatile dynamics. The geo-strategic sensitivity gives this state peripheral region the centre stage as far as the political scheme of things are concerned. With three

international borders and an adversary like China as a neighbour further complicates the matter. The rapid cross border infiltration along with local issues makes an intricate cobweb of interaction between local political aspirations, national party strategies, and international tactical considerations. The political administration of this land is an asymmetrical federalist framework; this makes an interesting case for study of regional political assertion in a strategically limited political space.

In order to understand politics in Arunachal Pradesh there is an ardent need to go beyond the conventional models of state level electoral competition. The political negotiations in the state base itself in a multi-layered political arena wherein local identity based politics, centre-state negotiations and diplomatic federal management coexist. In this context, political pragmatism is often leads to relationship between national political parties and regional political formations. Although national parties like the Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party have sought for the expansion of their political footprint in the state, they have frequently relied on alliances with the regional parties and controlled expansion and pragmatic accommodation for expression of local political legitimacy and regional relevance.

Being a landlocked zone for several centuries of its existence the historical data about the state is locked in the womb of oral narratives and historical ruins found in various parts of the state. The process of the evolution of the state has been a long and steady process. Before becoming a full-fledged state it has passed through the stages of being a Frontier Tract, Frontier Agency, Union Territory and finally the 24<sup>th</sup> state of Arunachal Pradesh. The collapse of the Ahom kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the first contact of the British with the people of this region. The Anglo- Burmese War which happened in 1824-26 made this region a more prominent space for the British to expand their territorial ambitions. The Inner Line Permit Act of 1873 marked a distinctive milestone in the political evolution of Arunachal Pradesh.

In the beginning of the post-independent years of India, the government maintained a status-quo as far as administration in the region is concerned. A drastic shift in policy came with Chinese aggression in the year 1962. The setback in the war was a stimulus for the government to rethink the 'go-slow' policy that the government had followed so far from the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Dying-Ering committee was set up to give recommendations for administrative policy suggestion to the central government. North-East Frontier Agency (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 gave a new political stature to NEFA. It was converted into a Union Territory in the year 1972 and renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. It was placed in the control of a Chief-Commissioner who acted as the representative of the President of India till 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1975. In 1975 the Pradesh Council was converted into Provisional Legislative Assembly. For the first time in the history of the state, a council of ministers was appointed and the Chief Commissioner of Arunachal Pradesh was promoted to the post of Lieutenant Governor. The 55<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment act, Arunachal Pradesh, 1986 led to the formation of Arunachal Pradesh as the 24<sup>th</sup> state of independent India.

With this backdrop the paper aims to study and examine the dynamics of party relations and alliance politics in Arunachal Pradesh. This will be attempted by studying the interactions between the national and regional parties over time. By situating state-level political developments within the broader framework of frontier politics and centre–state relations, the paper aims to demonstrate how the political trajectory of Arunachal Pradesh represents a distinctive model of state politics, shaped by the convergence of local, national, and international considerations.

This study uses a historical and qualitative method to analyse the various political dimensions of the state. The primary sources of this study are in the form of books, academic writing and various other

sources of study available in the public domain. It will take a descriptive and analytical approach to decipher the turn of events which have impacted the political events, alliances and electoral outcomes. Rather than focusing on statistical analysis, it interprets political development overtime. It limits itself to the study of political engagement of national and regional parties in Arunachal Pradesh pivoting on:

- Indian National Congress
- Arunachal Congress
- People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh
- Bharatiya Janata Party

The time period covers the late 1970's to the post-2000 phase.

### **Emergence of Regional Political Assertion**

In order to understand the emergence of regional political parties in Arunachal Pradesh it is imperative to keep the broader federal framework of India's democratic setup. The regional aspirations often find expression through the emergence of political party formations which often challenge or complement the national political structure. The early decades after the independence of India were dominated by the Indian National Congress and it was not very different in Arunachal Pradesh. However, this time was also masked by underlying tensions which were related to leadership autonomy, regional representation, and local governance, the inadequacy of the national party to incorporate this regional interest led to the articulation of the regional parties.

The distinctive trajectory of the administration in the state was a key socio political condition for the development of regional political assertion in Arunachal Pradesh. For much of the initial years of its formation, the state was under the direct administrative control of the centre. The transition to Union Territory status in 1972 and the subsequent recognition as a state in the year 1975 brought in sudden inflow of electoral politics in the state. It did not get the opportunity to gradually evolve into the electioneering process like other states in the country. Renowned scholars have pointed out that such rapid democratisation resulted in leadership driven mobilisation rather than stable party institutionalisation (Misra 63–65; Baruah 42–44).

The formation of People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh in the year 1977 earmarked the first assertion of regional political aspiration in the state. It was an expression of disagreement with the central party dominance over regional party control. The ensuing split of Arunachal Congress from Indian National Congress in the year 1996 following internal dissension within Congress further encapsulates how leadership conflicts, denial of organisational autonomy, and factionalism within national parties encouraged the proliferation of regional political formations. It is evident that in North-eastern part of India parties often arise not from the ideological divergence but from the struggles of legitimacy in leadership and greater control over political decision making (Das 91–93).

Pronounced ethnic plurality, strong tribal identities and deeply embedded customary governance systems reinforced the need for greater representation of its socio-cultural diversity through regional political platforms. National parties which were used to functioning in operations through standardised policy architecture, struggled to respond to micro-level socio-political realities. By foregrounding local identity, community leadership, and region-specific developmental priorities, the regional parties attempted to bridge this gap. Although politics remained pragmatic and accommodationist in nature, it is also a fact that regional political assertion was closely related to regional identity politics (Misra 118).

The increasing instability within national party units at the state level was another significant contributing factor to the rise of regional parties in the state. level. The late 1980s, experienced frequent leadership changes, defections and shifting legislative loyalties in Arunachal Pradesh. These incidents eroded public confidence in national party structures as there was a hasty weakening of organisational structure. Newspaper accounts of political developments in the state in that time period repeatedly highlight how moments of internal crisis within national parties created openings for regional formations to emerge or reassert themselves (*The Hindu; Indian Express*). Such patterns underscore the highly personalised nature of party politics in Arunachal Pradesh. Leadership influence frequently outweighed programmatic or ideological commitments.

What merits attention is that the very factors which enabled the fruition of regional parties also created hindrance in the path of their long-term sustainability. These parties remained dependent on alliances with national parties for electoral viability, access to administrative power, and political survival. This dependence became prominently visible during mass defections in the state during the 1990s and again in 2016. Consequently, regional politics in the state has intrinsically imbibed episodic and contingent quality, shaped by strategic calculations rather than institutional consolidation.

In summation, the emergence of regional political proclamation in Arunachal Pradesh has continuously been driven by a combination of historical marginality, leadership conflicts, socio-cultural diversity, and structural limitations within national party framework. Regional parties arose not in opposition to India's federal framework but as adaptive responses within the system. They were focused on recognition, negotiation, and political leverage. Their trajectory reveals both the possibilities and the inherent constraints of regionalism in a politically fluid and strategically significant border state.

### **Congress and the First experience with Regional Partnership**

The dominance of Indian National Congress in Arunachal Pradesh during the early decades of its formation was not only electoral but structural. S.R. Maheswari observes that in the then newly integrated regions of the country; Congress functioned as a system rather than a conventional party. It encompassed diverse interests under one umbrella (Maheswari 59). Arunachal Pradesh serves as another of the many examples wherein the existence of opposition was either weak or non-existent.

Despite this unchallenged dominance Congress did not develop a proper state party unit. The authority over the decision making of the party was limited to a few individuals who were closely aligned with the central leadership. Nani Bath opines that this centralised mode of functioning limited the development of mobility in local leadership. This became one of the factors in the growing dissent among party leaders who had political ambitions and sought for greater autonomy in the decision-making process (Nani 46-47). With the expansion of electoral participation in the state, these constraints became more visible.

With this context as the backdrop Congress entered into its first political partnership with the People's Party of Arunachal Pradesh (PPA). Formed in the year 1977, PPA became the first party in the state to highlight regional political narrative. The then leadership of Congress found it a better alternative to cooperate with PPA rather than work on internal democratisation and strengthening of its own party unit. With this alliance Congress got a partner which enjoyed local legitimacy, controlled influential leadership networks and political reach that the Congress had difficulty in replicating. While Congress continued its national political orientation, PPA concentrated on Local issues. This pattern continued with the advent of Arunachal Congress in the year 1996. The foundation of AC was also centred on the crisis of political assertion in Arunachal Pradesh due to leadership conflicts and organisational

breakdowns within national parties. Assembly records from the mid-1990s indicate that this period witnessed frequent negotiations, defections, and realignments, reinforcing alliance-based politics as a substitute for stable party institutionalisation (Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Bulletin, 20 Sept. 1996; 12 Jan. 1999).

A retrospective analysis of this settlement by Congress with regional parties Congress marked a significant departure from its earlier monopoly over state politics. Strategic cooperation replaced organisational consolidation, and negotiation supplanted ideological coherence. As Pakem observes, coalition and partnership politics in the North-East often functioned as mechanisms through which dominant parties managed political instability rather than resolved it (Pakem 65). In Arunachal Pradesh, this first experience with regional partnership laid the groundwork for the alliance-driven political realignments that would later become a defining feature of the state's party system (Bath 84; Talukdar 138–39)

### **Rise of Arunachal Congress and Leadership Centric Regionalism**

A shift in the electoral politics was seen in Arunachal Pradesh with the advent of Arunachal Congress. It underscored the change from accommodative politics to fragmentation within the INC. Unlike before the formation of AC was a result of internal split precipitated by the unresolved and often ignored leadership issues within the party (Bath 84). The erosion of internal consensus was apparently laid bare through this breakaway within the internal organisation of the INC. Central to this was the crisis among the party members regarding leadership. There was an increasing unrest among the two competing claims to political authority, control over legislative support and access to decision-making power.

Dissident leaders mobilised their support base within the Legislative Assembly to establish the Arunachal Congress, employing regional identity as a legitimising framework for what was fundamentally a leadership-driven realignment (Bath 50). The emergence of the AC thus underscored the dominance of personality driven politics over institutional party coherence. Refugee settlement issue also intensified the divisions with the leadership. Disagreements over the political solution of this issue became a precedent to lack of trust in the leadership at that time. Contemporary reports indicate that positions on the refugee question were strategically deployed to consolidate political support and to project the Arunachal Congress as a defender of regional interests and an alternative to the INC (*Eastern Panorama*, Oct. 1996; *Arunachal Times*, 15 June 1999).

However, even after its origin on the projection of being a party which would prioritise regional interest, AC could never cement itself as organisationally stable regional political party. It continued to exist under the shadow of its genesis as it continued to base its politics on leadership calculations, legislative arithmetic and alliance possibilities. Legislative records from the late 1990s document frequent negotiations and realignments involving the AC, reflecting its dependence on shifting coalitions rather than on sustained organisational consolidation (Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Bulletin, 20 Sept. 1996; 12 Jan. 1999).

In effect, the rise of the Arunachal Congress consolidated a pattern of leadership-centric regionalism in Arunachal Pradesh. Regional political assertion during this phase was articulated less through durable party institutions and more through leadership disputes and issue-based mobilisation. This development deepened political instability and normalised defections and alliances as routine features of the state's political process, reinforcing the fragile and contingent nature of regional party politics (Bath 84).

### **Alliance Politics and the BJP Factor**

A major shift in the party politics of Arunachal Pradesh was seen with the rise of BJP into power in the state. Unlike the national party which had preceded it, BJP had not exerted its dominance in the past. Hence, it had to depend on regional alliances and dissatisfied legislators from other parties to expand its footprint in the state. The growth of BJP in Arunachal Pradesh can be termed as an inorganic form of growth for this reason.

Arunachal Congress was at its peak at that time and therefore it acted as a key intermediary in this process when the BJP needed regional alliance partners. It was a win win situation for BJP as well because it did not need a significant investment in the political infrastructure of the party to grown in the state. These arrangements were once again driven by legislative arithmetic and short-term stability considerations rather than shared ideological commitments (Bath 84; Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Bulletin, 20 Sept. 1996). As alliance politics intensified, governance in Arunachal Pradesh increasingly depended on negotiated coalitions rather than single-party authority. Assembly proceedings from the late 1990s record repeated adjustments in support, shifting alignments, and coalition bargaining involving BJP-backed formations, underscoring the provisional nature of political authority during this phase (Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Bulletin, 12 Jan. 1999; 19 Jan. 1999). Alliances functioned less as stable governing arrangements and more as temporary mechanisms for sustaining legislative majorities *Arunachal Times*, 12 Aug. 1999).

Taken together, alliance politics involving the BJP did not introduce any new ideological direction in Arunachal Pradesh politics. Rather, it reinforced existing patterns of leadership-centric negotiation, coalition fragility and political fluidity. The BJP's role during this phase illustrates how national parties adapted to, rather than reshaped, the established culture of alliance-driven governance in the state, further normalising realignments and negotiated power-sharing as routine political practices (Bath 84).

### **Decline, Revival, and Contemporary Relevance of Regional Parties**

Considering the discussion made so far, it is not wrong to state that the trajectory of regional parties of Arunachal Pradesh has been one of decline, intermittent revival, and limited contemporary relevance. This is largely as a consequence of alliance instability and leadership-centric politics. Although, in the initial phases they showed a lot of potential, the lack of sustained effort to draw an ideological and sustainable organisational structure has led to their failure in growing as a concrete political entity. Their decline can be attributed to the overt dependence on the national parties. They functioned as negotiating instrument rather than acting as regional legislative platform (Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Bulletin, 1999).

In the contemporary context, the relevance of regional parties has become largely instrumental. Rather than functioning as enduring alternatives to national parties, they operate as strategic intermediaries within alliance politics, influencing coalition configurations during periods of instability. Overall, the cycle of decline and conditional revival highlights how alliance instability has weakened party institutionalisation, reduced ideological clarity and entrenched leadership-centric politics, reinforcing a fluid and negotiated political order in Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined alliance politics and party relations in Arunachal Pradesh with a special focus on the interaction between national parties and regional political formations as the centre of attention.

The findings reveal that the state's political trajectory has been shaped less by ideological contestation and more by leadership dynamics, strategic accommodation, and the persistent instability of alliances.

At the core of party politics in Arunachal Pradesh lay the early dominance of the Indian National Congress, It functioned as a hegemonic political force during the formative years of electoral politics. However, this dominance was not accompanied by strong organisational institutionalisation at the state level. The excessive reliance of the party on centralised authority and leadership accommodation created structural vulnerabilities that later facilitated fragmentation and the emergence of regional and breakaway formations.

Regional political parties initially emerged as mechanisms for asserting leadership autonomy and negotiating power within the federal framework. They did not emerge as ideologically distinct alternatives to national parties. The formation of the People's Party of Arunachal and later the Arunachal Congress reflected leadership disputes, organisational breakdowns, and issue-based mobilisation rather than sustained regional ideological movements. Regionalism in Arunachal Pradesh thus remained pragmatic and accommodative, oriented toward access to power rather than political transformation.

Alliance politics emerged as a defining feature of the state's political process. Cooperation between national and regional parties driven by entry into state politics was primarily shaped by electoral arithmetic and legislative convenience. These alliances were inherently unstable, lacking programmatic coherence and institutional depth. As a result, governance in Arunachal Pradesh became increasingly dependent on negotiated coalitions and shifting leadership alignments.

The electoral consequences of alliance instability were significant. Frequent defections, government changes without fresh mandates and coalition breakdowns weakened party institutionalisation and eroded public confidence in party-based politics. Electoral behaviour increasingly reflected leadership-centred calculations rather than ideological or programmatic commitments, reinforcing volatility within the party system.

Overall, the findings suggest that alliance politics in Arunachal Pradesh has normalised a fluid and leadership-centric mode of governance. Rather than stabilising the party system, alliances have often reinforced instability by prioritising short-term political accommodation over institutional consolidation. The experience of Arunachal Pradesh thus highlights the broader challenges of party institutionalisation and democratic stability in peripheral and strategically sensitive regions within India's federal polity.

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