

MANIFESTOS OF POLITICAL PARTIES: A GAP BETWEEN PROMISE AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: *In a representative democracy election occupies a place of paramount significance and can be defended as a means through which the political opinion of the public is shaped. Moreover, fair and periodic elections are the life blood of any democracy. But unfortunately, in our country owing to the dismal performance of political parties, in every election they try to misguide the masses. The party manifestos are either full of admiration and unrealistic promises or indulge in unnecessary intra-party criticism. Owing to lack of ideological-pragmatic division among various parties, Indian politics has got personalised around the contenders of power. The electoral trend of all representative democratic system is that every political party before election release their election manifesto, which contains all sorts of promises. Neither the party manifesto contains a fix time frame or proper quantification of promises, nor do they reflect the realistic agendas which could be targeted within a given time. Selling promises and assuring to achieve them found to be the crux of manifesto of different political parties. In the present paper the researcher took a sincere attempt to evaluate election manifesto of Congress party in Meghalaya state legislative assembly in 2008 election. Being the only successful national party Congress has ruled the state for a long period since the very first general election in the state. But it has been observed that there is a gap between party's performance and promises made in all election manifestos.*

Key Words: *Manifesto, democracy, political parties, promises, elections.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Election Manifesto is a political document issued by a political party for use of prospective voters, poll analysts, competing parties and the general public. It contains party's point of view on current issues and situation prevailing in the country and at the international level. It is mostly based on party's fundamental policies and basic ideology enshrined in its constitution. It is a fine mix of these two elements.ⁱ

In western democracies where voters are approached only through mass media, manifestos have attained the status of 'essential reading'. The party returned to power follow its manifesto in letter and spirit. India has inherited many salient features of western parliamentary democracy and party manifesto is one of them. During Nehru days party manifesto was a sacrosanct document and Jawaharlal Nehru used to draft it with his own hands and so was the case of other political parties. The manifestos issued at the time of first three elections were very much like 'research papers' and were often cited in parliamentary debates by the party in power and the opposition. With the decline in the national party status since 1990s, coalition government have filled the space vacated by them and as a corollary manifesto is being replaced by the common minimum programme by the Front Parties in 1996. The second experiment was made by the National Democratic Alliance. This time it was titled as 'An Agenda for Development, Good Governance and Peace'.ⁱⁱ

Party manifesto is always proving to be the most effective strategy to convince the electorate in favour of the party. It is such device which is framed by the party to use as a powerful weapon to mould the public or electorate in gaining their support to come to power. In a democratic system the political parties are indispensable agent for reflecting the peoples' voice in the assembly or parliament. They are the chief link between the people and the representative machineries. In democracy they are the vehicles through which individual and group work to secure political power and if successful, to exercise that power.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a representative democracy election occupies a place of paramount significance and can be defended as a means through which the political opinion of the public is shaped. Moreover, fair and periodic elections are the life blood of any democracy. But unfortunately, in our country owing to the dismal performance of political parties, in every election they try to misguide the masses. The party manifestos are either full of admiration and unrealistic promises or indulge in unnecessary intra-party criticism. Owing to lack of ideological-pragmatic division among various parties, Indian politics has got personalised around the contenders of power.

In this work a significance amount of attempt is taken to have an impartial discussion on the party manifestos of Congress party for 2008 assembly elections to the Meghalaya legislative assembly. The researcher wanted to find

out how and why the Indian National Congress could able to remain in power for several terms since the very first general elections to the state legislative assembly. Is it that the party has fulfilled all the promises made in the manifesto or still there is a gap between promise and performance?

However, an impartial observation is done in the context of promise and performance about the manifesto of Congress party in the state. An even-handed study is done to evaluate the Congress Party's manifesto for the legislative Assembly elections in Meghalaya.

2. THE MANIFESTO OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS FOR ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS OF MEGHALAYA:

The very first part of manifesto of Indian National Congress reflects the ideology of the party with some amount of glorification of its own. The manifesto reads that, the Indian National Congress (INC) is different from other political parties so far its ideology is concerned. It has represented an ethos of respect for minorities and the myriad ethnic groups of North East India. It was the Congress Party under Indira Gandhi that conferred on Meghalaya the status of an autonomous state allowing the tribal leadership to take charge and chart out a more progressive destiny for the people. In an increasingly intolerant world where religion is used as a vote catching strategy the Congress Party is committed to the value of secularism which alone can hold this country together.^{iv}

North East India in general and Meghalaya in particular has a high percentage of Christians and people of indigenous faith who have co-existed in a spirit of mutual respect. A healthy respect for pluralist culture has been the hall mark of Meghalaya and this has been possible because the Congress Party has allowed full and free expression of all faiths.

Of the 36 years of Meghalaya's turbulent political history of coalitions, the Congress has always played the lead role in providing an anchor for different political parties to come together and thereby provide a stable government to the state. This requires a high degree of political sagacity which the Congress leadership brings with it through long years of service to the people of Meghalaya.

The Nehru-Gandhi family have a special affinity towards the tribes of Meghalaya and this has been amply demonstrated by the frequent visits that Indira Ji and Rajiv ji have made during their lifetime. This they did with a spontaneity that is rare. They made special effort to understand the strategic needs of people of Meghalaya. This bridge of human understanding is a tradition continued to this day by Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. The former visited Meghalaya in 2005 to familiarize her with the ongoing projects and schemes in Meghalaya, laying stress on the need to speed up their pace. In its five years in office the Congress Party has achieved significant landmark. It has laid the foundation for the Rajive Gandhi Institute of Management (IIM) which will bring national and international recognition for Meghalaya as an educational destination of choice, more so because of its salubrious climate.

Talking advantage of the boom of Information Technology (IT) and Information Technology Enable Service (ITES) that pushed the country's growth rate to an admirable figure of 9%, the Congress government under Dr D.D. Lapang had laid the foundation of the software Technology Park of India at the Mawlai Industrial Estate. This is expected to generate employment opportunities for the hundreds of computer graduates who would otherwise leave the state in search of a dream in some alien metro. The government has signed an MOU with National Association for Software Services Company (NASSCOM) for assessing the competency of local youth to take part in the job fairs held by software companies from time to time. This reflects the seriousness of the government in generating employment in the burgeoning private sector.

Understanding that jobs in the government sector have reached saturation point, the Congress Party has consciously desisted from promising jobs for youths in that sector but is looking at viable alternatives such as the IT and ITES sectors which have the potential to absorb skilled manpower.

In Garo Hills, the government has successfully implemented the National Rural employment guarantee scheme through viable self help groups. The present government is also credited with kick starting the International Fund For Agricultural Development (IFAD) funded Meghalaya Rural Development Society (MRDS) which seeks to address the challenges of rural livelihood through social venture capital. This project is moving on track and people in the project areas are feeling a sense of empowerment to be their won advocates. Under the present government, Meghalaya has made significant strides in Agriculture and Horticulture. The government farm at Dewlieh is currently supplying cut flowers, strawberries, and other exotic vegetables which are supplied to rest of the country and abroad. This is matter of great pride for Meghalaya for which the congress government must take credit. In the Indo-Thai Business Week held in October last year, the team led by D.D.Lapang and his team of officials exhibited a range of cut flowers, fruits, and vegetables which left a deep impression on Thai visitors and fellow north easterners.

The first phase of 126 MW Leshka project in Jaintia Hills is awaiting completion. By Christmas this year the leksha project will be on the roll. The project received a boost during the tenure of the current government.

In the last five years Meghalaya has carved a niche for itself in the world of music and entertainment. The state entered the Guinness Book World Records during the two consecutive Autumn Festivals, for the largest number of percussion instruments in 2006 and the highest number of guitarists in 2007. The Governments pro-active

promotion of the state as a destination for foreign rock bands such as Micheal Learns to Rock, fire House and recently the scorpions has put Meghalaya on the international music root. The state is now a favourite tourist destination showcasing its village tourism and actively promoting eco-tourism.

One feather in the cap of the Lapang Government is the surrender of the chairman of the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Councils. (HNLC), Julious Dorfang, thus giving body blows to the insurgent outfit and almost nullifying its cadres. Today Meghalaya can boast of being a peaceful state ready to march ahead on the path of progress and prosperity.

On all these counts the Congress Party can proudly say that it has provided a dynamic leadership despite being constrained by the politics of coalitions. If elected back to power with a thumping majority, the party would have better manoeuvrability to quickly and effectively implement projects that have been enunciated but have been kept in abeyance due to the lackadaisical attitude of coalition partners. As a custodian of customary laws and practices the Congress Party will seriously considered the demands of traditional institutions for greater empowerment and to be an arbiter with the Panchayati Raj ministry to look into their demands.

A conscious champion of women rights and women's empowerment the Congress Party under the present government launched the State Women's Commission. The commission is an answer to the pressing needs of the women in the state.

As a national party with a supportive approach of regional aspirations the Congress Party is best placed take the state on a growth trajectory through the active collaboration of the government at the centre led by Dr Manmohan Singh – a man with the vision and a mission of a 21st century reformer.

A number of schemes like 1.Housing scheme for the urban poor 2 Sewerage 3.Drainage 4. Water Supply 5.Upgradation of double way G.S Road into a four lane road and improvement of other state high ways being implemented for the benefit of the people of the state.

In the North East the people of region have shown their confidence in the Congress during the recent elections in the Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and this is a pointer towards the forth coming elections, 2008, in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura. It is a glaring example of how all regional parties in the state prefer to work together under the leadership of the Congress to get the state developed. During the last 58 months, the government of Meghalaya, with few stray incidents of disruption, could bring peace, by and large in the state, which paved the way for important developmental activities in the state.

2.1 Action plans for all developmental activities

(1) Creation of more jobs for employment.

Addressing the acute problem of unemployment among the youth of the state is a priority for the Congress during the next five years period. Schemes which generate maximum employment will be implemented on a priority basis. Emphasis will be laid on development of horticulture, livestock and agro-processing so that rural unemployment can be addressed to effectively, coupled with rural prosperity.

(a) Agriculture and Irrigation

Top priorities will be accorded to agriculture and irrigation. Financial assistance to small farmers is essential to enable the poor farmers to adopt new agriculture methods to yield maximum harvest. Till recently 1220 power tillers and 107 pump sets were distributed at a subsidized rates.

(b) Forests:

The tribal people of Meghalaya have always been respectful of their forests as they provide sustenance to them in many ways. The party will ensure that farmers should be in a position to plant more trees and cut only matured trees. This practice will ensure a good climate condition for the benefit of the farmers as a whole.

(c) Animal husbandry:

To popularize animal husbandry among the farmers to supplement their income which is found to be less most of the time.. This will also reduce the import of meat from outside the state.

(d) Horticulture:

The Congress party will propagate all out plantation of wide varieties of horticulture crops. This will bring about additional income to the farmers by way of export outside the state. Cultivation of potatoes and other vegetables will be accorded priority.

(e) Safe drinking water in the rural areas:

Safe drinking water is being provided to all villages of the state; however, more effort and fund have to be put in so that the rest of the village will be covered in the shortest time possible.

(f) All Round Development of the Rural Areas:

Since 80 percent of the state population is living in the villages, it is therefore, necessary to stress on priority basis the important of rural development so that rural life can be attractive to the villages and the educated will go back to live and work in our villages, only then we can expect the balance growth in the state. To achieve this objective there should be a growth centres all over the states, which will be connected with all weather roads, and to provide good health care, good educational institutions, essential commodities in such centres.

3. DIRECT AND INDIRECT EMPLOYMENTS:

Employment is being provided to all citizens, through industrial activities financed by the public institutions, transport facilities, private and public undertakings, construction works where millions of people are employed.
N.R.E.G.S.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is being implemented throughout the state, so that at least one member of family is employed for 100 days in a year.

4. BOUNDARY DISPUTE WITH ASSAM:

The Congress Party stands committed to solve the border disputes with Assam as soon as possible, and in a peaceful manner. This problem has caused, from time to time, misunderstanding among the people who living in those areas. This problem has to be solved permanently by the two state governments without forgetting the sentiments of the people living in the border area of both the states.

5. GENERATION OF ELECTRICITY:

Due to the recent setting of number of industries in the state there is an acute shortage of electricity in Meghalaya, which was once thought to be having surplus power. A number of small hydel projects have to be taken up to augment whatever source of hydel power is available in the state. Development and progress in all fields would remain standstill unless enough power is available in the state. At the same time thermal power projects have to be set up in areas where coal is available, for e.g. West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills and Jaintia Hills.

6. PROJECT FOR THE POOR:

The Congress party is committed to find out ways and means to help the poor people (B.P.L) in the state so that their condition would be improved. Employment is the only way out to arrive at a permanent solution to this problem, and a strong and stable Government would be in a position to bring about that solution to eradicate poverty from the state in the near future.

7. NGOS:

The Congress party is aware of the important role being played by the NGOs in the state and in the country as a whole. These nongovernmental; organizations as expected to play the role of watchdogs against the social evils and also those who are in power to exercise their powers with fair play and justice for all citizens of the state, so that communal tensions are reduced to a maximum extent and peace would prevail for the benefit of all. It is expected that the NGOs would avoid politics and remain neutral so that the government agencies can get the benefits of their experiences and apply them in their day to day functions. The Congress Party also welcomed practical and constructive criticism and would join hand with all those who are working to improve the lots of the poor and the down trodden.

8. SPECIALISED MEDICAL TREATMENT:

The Congress Party expresses its gratitude to the central leadership who are always trying their best to bring up- to- the date and specialised medical treatment closer to the people. The establishment of the North East Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical science at Mawdiangdiang is a boon for the people of the state in particular and north east in general. It is the only institute of its kind in the North East and would be deemed a university in connection with Medical College and upper speciality studies introduced in the Institute.

9. I.I.M:

Indian Institute of Management, one of the best institutes for higher studies in business management is being established in shillong for the benefit of the students who would like to pursue higher studies in the field of Business Management. Admission to such institute in India is very difficult due to tough merit test and limited seats available without reservation; therefore, setting up of such an institute is really a blessing for the youth of the state in particular, to enable them to get better employment elsewhere in the business world.

- ***Achievements of the State Government under the Congress Leadership:***

To name a few of the achievements of the state government during the last five years:-

(i) Shillong-Nongstoin Road declared as National Highway 44E. (ii) 4-laning of National Highway -40 from Jorabat to Umiam is being implemented. (iii) National Highway-51 Paikan Tura Dalu Road has been widened to two lane standard.

All state roads are being improved and maintained and effort is on to see that in the shortest time possible, all state roads would be upgraded to all weather roads for optimum usage, without forgetting to connect the unconnected villages with good roads.

- **Urban:**

Parking and shopping complexes were constructed and completed at Shillong.

- **Social welfare:** (i) A full Commissioner of Disabilities appointed (ii) State meritorious award were given to the students (iii) Disabled persons were given token grant of Rs 5000/- each for self-employment (iv) The Meghalaya State Commission for Women was made functional to look into specific cases of atrocities and harassment to women. (v) 420 women were trained for self employment (VI) Financial Assistants for medical treatments were granted to deserving old people.

10. THE ELECTION MANIFESTO OF CONGRESS: A GAP BETWEEN PROMISE AND PERFORMANCE:

While analysing the elections manifesto of Congress party it is found that there is hardly anything new in its manifestos for the voters of the state. Although the party had mentioned about specific achievements in each tenure, there is no deviation so far as policy issues are concerned. The issues of secularism, rural development, women empowerment, empowerment of traditional institutions, eradication of poverty and unemployment, communal harmony, systematisation of urban structures, etc., found place in 2003 election's manifesto. These are in conformity with the party's national commitments. For Meghalaya in particular, the party had focussed about its achievements in matters of highway projects, power generation, IIM, NEIGRIMS, NIT, peace process with HNLC and ANVC, Guinness book of records in the field of music, etc. Its commitments included more medical colleges, public private partnership in developmental projects, JNNURM buses for the state, peaceful solution of border dispute with Assam, proper urban planning, four-lane Guwahati-Shillong road, generation of employment opportunity, IT park, modernisation of agriculture, safe drinking water, all-round development of rural areas, etc.

The poll manifesto of the Congress Party for the election of 2008 was no doubt a high-sounding promise as it was in the 2003 assembly election manifesto. The fact remains here is that, since 1972 the party has been sharing power in ruling the state. Though all elections except the first one have experienced coalition rule, the volume of achievements by the party in accordance with party manifesto found to be a gap between promise and achievements.

While spelling out the programme of the party, Indian National Congress did not show a clear plan of action. One thing is commonly observed that, the party as always expects and also gets the central assistance in the developmental projects but half-heartedly implementing them. There is hardly any programme in the state which probably was done by the Congress-led coalition government on its own resource and strength without depending on central assistance. There is also no constructive resource generation by the government in the state and there is no sign of inclusive development in real sense of the term. It mostly appears time and again, what the party claims in the state as the fact of achievements are the blessings of central government for benefits of the people of the state. The state government under the leadership of the Congress seems to be less productive.

Like the 2003 election manifesto in 2008 also the Congress party only spelled out some vague pronouncements about jobs, environmental protection, peace and integrity. But the voters of Meghalaya seemed to expect something definite and concrete assurance from the Congress, which is not only the largest constituent of the ruling MDA in Meghalaya but also happens to be the largest constituent of the ruling UPA at the centre. After studying the manifesto of Congress it is understood that there was no inspiring political testament for the voters where one could have found several solutions to their multifarious problems. It is also interesting to find that the party spoke of certain projects not even undertaken by it but claimed unabashedly as having been its own success story. The poll manifesto of the Congress Party for the election of 2008 was no doubt a high-sounding promise as it was in the 2003 assembly election manifesto. The fact remains here is that, since 1972 the party has been sharing power in ruling the state. Though all elections except the first one have experienced coalition rule, the volume of achievements by the party in accordance with party manifesto found to be a gap between promise and performance.

The achievements highlighted by the Congress party are not so spectacular given its long stint in state power and its commitments are very general in nature. It was expected of a national party which rules for the longest period at both the centre and the state of greater development, better prosperity, more communal harmony, peace and stability in the state and permanent solution to long-pending issues.

11. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

After a thorough analysis of manifesto of Congress party and its promising words for the electorate in Meghalaya one specific development is being clearly observed that the people of Meghalaya have accepted Congress

down the line not for bringing development and meeting all the demands of the indigenous people but by being very familiar with the leaders belonging to the party and at the same time not getting a suitable alternative. The leaders of different regional parties have tried to create space in the electoral choice mechanism but failed to do so and got rejected by the voters. One of the pertinent reasons could be the regional parties failed to project their potential through the manifesto. And in addition the electorate were having a feeling that Congress is the only national party which could influence the policy framework of union government to meet their demands.

However, the gap between promise and performance of Congress manifesto is significantly understood as the party appears to be having more or less same wordings of its last two elections manifestos. Though the researcher found in his study that the political awareness of the voters of Meghalaya is not so high so far their level of participation is concerned but they have somewhat knowledge about the developmental project under taken by different governments in neighbouring states of north east region. The voting behaviour of the electorates of the state reveals that they expect the ruling party to bring into reality the promises which have been sold by the party through its election manifesto.

In the recent electoral trend which prominently found its presence in most of the states of India, stands as a lesson for Congress, to prepare head and tail to retain its position in the state. All effective steps should be taken by the party leadership to overcome the internal rift which found to be present among different party leaders in the region. A vigilant activity has to be launched by the party to strengthen the grass root organisation of the party in the state. The party also needs to materialise the promises through different comprehensive policy implementations. The coalition alliance of congress in the state should be taken into confidence to ensure qualitative development in the region. The party also required to contemplate on how to keep the regional parties out of the fray to capture power. All policy measures should be implemented to bring infrastructural growth and by providing employment to the local youth to win their trust. Lastly it is to be seen in future elections that the voters of Meghalaya are not just carried away by the issue of ethnicity and religion rather issues relating to development and prosperity should be given vital significance. The congress party which has been ruling the state since the inception of the state started having an apprehension of facing BJP as a strong rivalry in the coming election because the present electoral wave is in favour of the saffron party in mainstream India as well as in some of the big states of North Eastern region including Assam.

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