2019 Elections: Can the BJP pull off a Tripura in Odisha polls?

This article has been co-authored by Niranjan Sahoo, senior fellow, Observer Research Foundation, and Anshuman Behera, assistant professor at National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

Election fever was never so intense in Odisha as this time around. This sleepy state on the eastern coast is receiving unprecedented attention for a variety of reasons — but mainly owing to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s all-out efforts to breach this impregnable fortress.
Odisha is among the few states that clearly bucked the Modi wave in 2014 — the ruling party had the consolation of winning a lone Lok Sabha in Sundargarh.

That scenario is likely to change in 2019. After its unbelievable success in the Northeast, particularly Assam and Tripura, the BJP is aiming big to spread its wings in Odisha as a part of its ‘Look east policy’. While a popular and youthful Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, has been projected as an alternative face to Naveen Patnaik for quite some time, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP chief Amit Shah have made numerous visits to connect with the masses in Odisha. On paper currently, it looks like the incumbent Naveen Patnaik’s two-decade-old fairy tale dominance over the eastern state is under serious threat.

**The unstoppable juggernaut**

For the longest-serving chief minister of the state, Naveen Patnaik, the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls are being seen as an acid test to his
popularity and legitimacy.

The regional outfit that came up in 1997 has been in power since 2000 — a record in the state’s electoral history. The Biju Janata Dal (BJD), which began its political journey in partnership with the BJP in 1998 and joined the National Democratic Alliance government in 1999, has grown from a modest party to a dominant force in the state's politics. The 2014 simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were a verdict for the ruling BJD — not only did the party perform its best ever in Assembly elections, capturing a record 117 seats of the 147 seats, it cornered 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the eventful elections.

While the BJP could win one seat, the Congress, a longtime political force in the state, could not open its account.

Ever since, the BJD, under the leadership of Naveen Patnaik, has completely dominated the narrative in Odisha.

![Performance of Major Parties in Last 3 Lok Sabha Polls](chart.png)

Source: Election Commission
Source: Election Commission

Region-wise vote share of major parties (2009, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LS 2014</th>
<th>BJD</th>
<th>INC</th>
<th>BJP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS 2014</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Vote</td>
<td>Vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Share(%)</td>
<td>Share(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50.14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39.34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS 2009</td>
<td>BJD</td>
<td>INC</td>
<td>BJP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Vote</td>
<td>Vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lokniti
BJP’s Tripura Strategy

On its own, the BJP has never been a major political force in much of Odisha. The only visible presence that the saffron party has had in the last two decades is in the western part of the state. The party made significant gains (winning as many as 32 assembly seats in 2004) during its eventful partnership with the ruling BJD between 1998 and 2009. Post the 2009 breakup with the BJD, the saffron party was reduced to six assembly seats and could not open an account in the Lok Sabha.

While the saffron party’s fortunes revived to some extent in the 2014 polls, even a Modi wave could not improve the BJP’s performance significantly. It had to be content with 10 Assembly seats and a lone Lok Sabha seat. In short, the Patnaik Phenomenon has been able to limit the saffron footprint in the eastern state.

A rare window of opportunity came for the BJP during the crucial rural elections in 2017 — the BJP bagged an astonishing 306 seats out of 853 Zilla Parishad seats. This was a whopping 850% rise from the 2012 results when the saffron party could only claim 36 seats. Of course, a bulk of the BJP’s seats — 115 out of 306 — came from its traditional western districts. Nonetheless, this surprise verdict greatly enthused
the cadres and party leaders, including the BJP top brass, to use the opening to challenge the indomitable Patnaik.

For the BJP, another salvo came during the recent by-poll at the crucial Bijepur Assembly in 2018. While the BJD wrested the seat from the Congress, the saffron party emerged runners-up in a supposed Congress bastion — surprising its own leaders.

After this, there has been no stopping for the BJP.

With state leader Dharmendra Pradhan carrying the baton, both Modi and Shah have been making frequent trips to the eastern state. Between January and March, the PM made five trips to Odisha, covering strategic constituencies including coastal regions, and has announced many big-ticket infrastructure projects and amenities for the eastern state.

There is plenty of noise in many quarters about the BJP having adopted a Tripura-like strategy for an Odisha takeover. From its strategy and
optics, there are some resemblances with Tripura which the saffron party swept in 2018. Like Manik Sarkar, a four-time chief minister of Tripura, Naveen Patnaik is simple, honest and widely popular among the people of Odisha. Both are known for their popular and successful pro-poor welfare policies. And in both states, the main Opposition — the Congress party — experienced gradual decline.

Further, like Manik Sarkar, the BJD supremo is facing voter fatigue and questions over moving up policies beyond dal-roti. With rumours around Patnaik’s health, possible anti-incumbency and the rising popularity of Narendra Modi, the saffron outfit’s hopes of a repeat of a Tripura-style victory in the eastern state are rising.

The coastal Achilles’ heel

It is true there is discernible voter fatigue, especially among the core cadres and leaders of the BJD. This is indicated in not so-impressive crowd turnout in many of its election rallies, particularly in southern and western constituencies. The BJD, which did very well during the last polls in western Odisha, is not sure if it can repeat the same feat this time. The BJP, which has a traditional stronghold in western districts, has invested considerably for the last five years to wrest the initiative from the BJD. The nervousness of Patnaik in western Odisha was visible when the chief minister filed to contest his second seat from Bargarh’s Bijepur Assembly constituency.

Further, there is apparently considerable resentment among sitting MPs and MLAs over leadership and ticket distribution. Two sitting MPs, Balabhadra Majhi from Nabarangpur and Pratyusha Rajeshwari Singh from Kandhamal, revolted against the party leadership — and joined the BJP. A number of MLAs too have followed suit. This considerably adds to the BJP’s already decent base in western Odisha.

Yet, the western Odisha districts can barely help the BJP to repeat a Tripura-like feat — the numbers simply do not add up with the BJP’s ambition. Of the total 147 Assembly seats and 21 Lok Sabha seats, western Odisha adds a meagre 30 and 4 seats respectively.
The BJP’s real chance of toppling the BJD rests with its performance in the seat-rich coastal belt that contributes 11 Lok Sabha seats and as many as 70 Assembly constituencies. Traditionally, the coastal region is a known stronghold of both BJD and the Congress. The BJP comes a distant third. And there lies the catch.

Can the saffron party eat up the Congress core base — and challenge the BJD in its bastion?

As a warning for the saffron party, the BJD, for the first time in its two-decade electoral history, breached the 50% mark in the coastal belly in the last elections.

But the BJP’s hopes to break the iron grip of Naveen Patnaik and his political outfit in the crucial coastal region improved dramatically with recent developments, especially several BJD heavyweights from the region joining the party fold. Two party heavyweights and sitting Lok Sabha members, Arjun Sethi from Bhadrak and Baijayant Panda from Kendrapada, left the BJD and joined the saffron party, boosting its chances in the coastal region.

While Baijayant Panda was a long-time party face in Delhi and holds considerable influence, Arjun Sethi has dominated politics in the coastal districts for three decades.
Will the lotus now bloom? Baijayant Panda’s induction in the BJP was a huge boost for the saffron party. (Source: PTI)

An even bigger surprise for the BJP is the joining of Damodar Routray, a BJD heavyweight and a sharp political figure having considerable influence in coastal districts. Along with these heavyweights, the sitting MLAs from the coastal region, particularly Purna Chandra Nayak representing Dasapalla, Devraj Mohanty, Aska, K Narayan Rao, Paralekhamundi, Babu Singh, Bhubaneswar-Ekamra, Susant Nayak, Nilagiri and Congress MLA Prakash Behera, Salepur, have also joined the BJP in the last two months — adding to the party’s reach.

Will these recent developments help the BJP, which is tottering with just 18% vote share in the seat-rich coastal region? The leadership challenge (Dharmendra Pradhan is viewed as a non-coastal leader) that the BJP faced for a long time in the coastal belt seems to be taken care of with the joining of BJD heavyweights like Panda — a three-time MP from the coastal constituency.

An important industrialist, the family of Panda also has control over regional media in Odisha. Known as an intellectual face from Odisha, his membership in the BJP is showing good dividends for the saffron party. It was Panda who reportedly played a critical role in getting
influential BJD leader Damodar Routray to join the party fold and persuaded an important but disgruntled Bijay Mahapatra to stay back in the BJP. In addition, two important ports — Dhamara and Paradeep — which used to be under the control of the erstwhile BJD leaders (read Damodar Routray and Arjun Sethy) may shift to the BJP side — these additions are going to prove beneficial for the BJP that lacks a strong party organisation in the coastal districts.

**Reality Checks**

While these recent developments can boost the saffron party’s morale and deepen the party’s reach in key coastal pockets, the numbers do not back it.

As said earlier, in the coastal belt, the BJD created history by breaching 50% votes and won all the Lok Sabha seats with wide margins over its rivals. The BJD’s winning average in many of the 11 Lok Sabha seats ranged between 25% and 30% (Table 2). Further, while the BJD won all 11 Lok Sabha seats in the 2014 polls, the BJP was placed second in about four seats — and the margins of defeats were huge. This was no different in Assembly seats where the ruling BJD captured more than two-thirds of seats and the BJP was reduced to a handful. While the BJP did improve its vote percentage marginally in coastal region, it simply offers no competition to the BJD.

With all its fallings, the Congress still has better bench strengths and vote share in the coastal region.

What adds to the BJD’s repeat performance is its robust party organisation, proven election machinery and near-absolute control over media (strengthened further with the entry of Soumya Ranjan Patnaik, who owns several media joints and education entrepreneur Achyut Samant, the owner of popular Kalinga TV).
The Modi Factor: Narendra Modi’s popularity is rising in Odisha — especially in the seat-rich coastal region.
(Source: Reuters)

This apart, the chief minister has spent a lot of effort over the last two years to do an image makeover (to counter allegations of being inaccessible, for instance) by going top drive on social media and hosting sports leagues in Bhubaneswar. He also has done well to repackage some welfare schemes, including the farmer-friendly KALIA, to woo his core constituency.

The real surprise was the announcement of 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha seats — that may help his party’s chances among women voters who have loyally voted for his party.

Yet, there is plenty of hope for the saffron party and a lot of that comes not from the new joinees or the party’s local polls improvement alone. Hope is also emerging from an unexpected quarter — the rising popularity of Narendra Modi in Odisha including the coastal region. There seems to be a Modi Wave finally in Odisha, although the coastal state remained unaffected last time.
This is evident from massive crowds pouring into many of the rallies addressed by Modi and Shah in recent times. This has prompted some survey agencies like CVoter predicting a clean sweep for the BJP, wresting as many as 16 Lok Sabha seats. They link such a transformation to the weakening of the BJD party organisation, growing instances of corruption and double standards in terms of taking back the same people who were earlier removed from the party on charges of corruption and giving some party tickets, issues of medical negligence, leading to deaths of tribal kids, recent sensational rape and murder charges levelled against ministers and allegations of the chief minister being controlled by a handful bureaucrats, all denting the party’s appeal.

Yet, those who have been tracking Naveen Patnaik and his meteoric rise over the last two decades know well the man holds an uncanny ability to buck the trend.

He has faced many rebellions and desertions — and still won elections hands down.

Will he succeed this time?

He is facing a resurgent saffron party, backed this time round by many of his former lieutenants.

What is clear is that this time, the Odisha polls look wide open — and it is surprisingly difficult to say who will finally win the eastern state.

Also read: How Baijayant Jay Panda’s joining BJP brightens party’s prospects in Odisha