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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/10412>

DOI: 10.4000/15afi

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Smitana Saikia, "Maintaining Federal Autonomy in a BJP-dominant System: The Special Case of Nagaland in India's Northeast", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 34 | 2025, Online since 21 October 2025, connection on 31 January 2026. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/10412> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/15afi>

This text was automatically generated on January 31, 2026.



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Maintaining Federal Autonomy in a BJP-dominant System: The Special Case of Nagaland in India's Northeast

Smitana Saikia

- 1 In January 2024, the Nagaland government passed a resolution to counter the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central state's decision to seal off the Indo-Myanmar border because this entailed putting an end to the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in the northeastern borderland.¹ Having previously been reinstated by Prime Minister (PM) Modi as part of his *Act East* policy, the FMR allowed tribal residents living within 16 km on either side of the Indo-Myanmar border to travel up to 16 km within each other's territory without a visa or a passport.² For the Nagas, sealing the border would cut across the heart of what is regarded as their ancestral homeland, an issue at the center of Naga politics ("Nagaland Assembly passes resolution," 2024). This sentiment transcends party lines in the state, which is evident from the fact that the resolution in the state assembly was moved by the deputy chief minister who is a BJP member. Territorial claims by subnational elites are not uncommon in the borderland region of Northeast India.³ However, given the BJP's increasing tendency under Narendra Modi to centralization, and the party's tough rhetoric on questions of national security, territorial integrity, and illegal immigration, it is striking that Nagaland State's party unit openly opposed the central state's pronouncement on this matter. Furthermore, in a surprise move in December 2024, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) scrapped the FMR to introduce a new system of regulated movement whereby residents would be allowed to travel within only 10 km of the border (instead of 16 km), and both Indian and Myanmar citizens would require a border pass.
- 2 According to studies in Indian politics, the rise of the BJP under PM Modi's leadership since 2014 marks the advent of the fourth party system, one characterized by increased centralizing tendencies. Scholars of federalism (Elazar 1987; Riker 1964) link federalism

to the nature of a party system to argue that the emergence of a centralized party system in a federal polity provides few opportunities for regional/sub-national elites to influence federal relations vis-a-vis the Center. This is evidenced in the case of India with the federal encroachment of the BJP (ideologically, a pro-unitarist party) becoming more marked in the Modi era when the party emerged as the dominant party at national level. The party's consecutive decisive victories in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019 (and less decisive but still confirming it as the single largest party in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections), as well as many state assembly wins, coupled with India's "demos-enabling"⁴ feature of federalism (Tillin 2019), have enabled Modi's national government to undermine federal intergovernmental relations and to exercise unilateralism in key policy decisions.

- 3 This politywide scenario prompts us to examine how and why the State of Nagaland has remained somewhat immune to and resistant to the BJP's centralizing agenda. More importantly, the examples above call for a review of why a dominant politywide party like the BJP has adopted politically and ideologically compromised positions vis-à-vis this small peripheral and financially dependent state. Scholars have pointed to the latest federalism trends in India, yet there are notable lacunae in the literature concerning the specific dynamics of federal relations between Modi's BJP-led government and Northeast India, particularly in the region's predominantly Christian and tribal state, Nagaland. This case is especially significant given its relative bargaining power within the emerging BJP-dominant party system. Furthermore, this discussion is of added importance due to the constitutional asymmetry granted to Nagaland under Article 371 A, thus making it a special case not only within the larger federal structure but also within the Northeast itself. While the Indian Constitution has recognized over time many forms of asymmetry,⁵ Article 371 A (along with Article 371 G for Mizoram and the now abrogated Article 370 that attributed constitutional asymmetry to the then State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)) grants certain plenary powers to these state legislative assemblies such that, unless the latter decide, no act of Parliament regarding Naga socioreligious practices, and no laws governing the ownership and transfer of land, may be extended to the state.⁶
- 4 In this context, while primarily referring to secondary resources, the paper argues that Nagaland emerges as a special case within the BJP-dominant party system due to, inter alia, its constitutional asymmetry, low dependence of state co-partisans on the dominant BJP, as well as the latter's ideologically malleable stance on federal autonomy. The prevalence of these conditions in Nagaland, this paper demonstrates, is a result of the historically specific route the Nagas took, in other words, the Naga movement for independence based on claims of Naga's "unique history" and "distinct identity," followed by political concessions granted to the Nagas by the Indian state. The paper begins with a brief theoretical discussion on the relationship between federalism and party systems, and uses Sharma and Swenden's (2022) framework to examine the conditions in a federal polity that determine the relationship between the two. It then outlines the historical context of the Naga nationalist movement that played a key role in determining "negotiated and shared sovereignty" between the Indian state and the Nagas. In the final section, the paper examines in the Nagaland context the three conditions outlined by Sharma and Swenden to explain the state's capacity for federal bargaining within the newly formed BJP-dominant party system.

DOMINANT PARTY SYSTEMS AND STATE CAPACITY FOR FEDERAL BARGAIN: A MODEL

- 5 This paper uses Sharma and Swenden's (2022) framework as a heuristic based on federal centralization and the party system in India, to examine the unique case of Nagaland in the current BJP-dominant party system. This framework underscores the causal mechanics that enable a dominant party to centralize power in relation to the states. Building on existing literature about federalism and party systems, Sharma and Swenden argue that there is no direct relationship between a dominant party (in the specific context of India) and centralization but a relationship that is mediated by three key elements: (a) the nature of constitutional guarantees to states to preserve shared and self-rule, (b) the structure of the dominant party (centralized/personalized vs. decentralized), and (c) the nature of the dominant party's ideology (unitarist vs. pro-state autonomy).
- 6 If all three elements are geared toward centralization—in other words, if constitutional guarantees for state autonomy are weak, if the party's internal structure is centralized at national and subnational levels, and the politywide dominant party adopts a unitarist ideology—, then the emerging federal system is likely to be a highly centralized one. According to this scenario, they argue, the central state's intergovernmental interaction with other states (both congruent and opposition-led) will likely be one of either "tacit cooperation," where "expectations of the actors converge in a superior-subordinate type relationship" (Sharma and Swenden 2022, p. 2) or "imposed cooperation" where a stronger party at the Center can coerce parties at subnational level into adopting or adjusting to a national stance on a policy.
- 7 Sharma and Swenden show that the BJP under Modi, characterized by a majority government at the Center and in many states, and a centralized (and personalized) style of governance, fits the scenario discussed above (Sharma and Swenden 2022).⁷ There are many instances that indicate that Modi is tightening his grip on states: from demonetization, abrogation of Article 370 and stripping J&K of statehood; management of the Covid-19 pandemic including its financial aspects; appointment of party veterans to the position of governor in states, unconstitutional interventions in state politics using Presidents' Rule, an ideological push for simultaneous elections at state and Center level as well presidential style elections, to partisan deployment of central agencies such as the Income Tax Department and Enforcement Directorate in opposition-ruled states. Sharma and Swenden explain that in a dominant party system, states governed by the opposition may resist central interference, but their efforts are weakened by their being outnumbered by states aligned with the ruling party. These congruent states, which are reliant on national leadership, are more likely to comply with the Center, thereby tipping the federal balance in the latter's favor (Sharma 2022).
- 8 Conversely, in the absence of any of these conditions, states can continue to engage in varying degrees of federal bargain despite the presence of a politywide one-party dominant system. In contexts where constitutional safeguards to uphold state autonomy are strong (through constitutional asymmetry, judicial safeguards against federal encroachment, etc.), where co-partisans at subnational level do not depend on their national counterparts to win elections and/or where the dominant party espouses a non-unitarist stance, a dominant one-party system will most likely not be a centralizing one. Sharma and Swenden cite as an example the dominant Congress

system under Nehru.⁸ In this type of scenario, intergovernmental relations, the authors argue, may be one of “negotiated cooperation,” whereby parties both at national and subnational level adjust their policies, resulting in an explicit bargain or one of “contingent cooperation” where subnational governments are autonomous enough to choose whether they wish to support, act with restraint or outrightly oppose the Center’s policies.

- 9 With this framework as a heuristic, the paper demonstrates that Nagaland’s relative federal autonomy and its ability to defy centralization are made possible thanks to the second scenario discussed above. An analysis of the specificities of Nagaland’s politics shows that the presence at national level of a centralized party system has not augmented tacit or imposed intergovernmental cooperation; instead, Nagaland’s relations with the Center are marked by a greater degree of autonomy characterized by negotiated cooperation and at times even contingent cooperation. A review of the three key aspects outlined within the framework discussed above reveals that: (1) Nagaland’s constitutionally guaranteed asymmetry allows the state to actively oppose the Center’s policies that threaten tribal socioreligious practices; (2) the lack of dependence of co-partisan actors in Nagaland on the dominant party (BJP) prompts them to take a clear position in keeping with local sentiments, thereby maintaining an exit threat; and (3) the BJP’s lack of traditional electoral and ideological roots in this predominantly Christian state compels it to act in a non-unitarist way, by tolerating policy-based incongruence and strategically altering its views on key ideological planks of Hindu nationalism (anti-asymmetrical federalism, beef consumption, Christianity, etc.). The specific conditions of Nagaland in relation to the three key aspects underscored in Sharma and Swenden’s framework thus allows for a greater degree of state autonomy and federal bargaining within the politywide BJP-dominant system.
- 10 While using the three key aspects outlined by Sharma and Swenden as a heuristic guide, this paper goes beyond formal political processes of intergovernmental relations and party systems to capture the dynamic mechanics of Nagaland’s relative federal autonomy. By analyzing a multiplicity of actors that have strongly influenced formal politics in Nagaland, the paper adopts a view that formal structures of authority are imbued with informal power and patron-client networks of a particular society (Michelutti 2007; Hutchcroft 2001). As the following sections demonstrate, tribal society structure and the legal-constitutional recognition of customary laws according to Article 371 A in Nagaland make tribal apex bodies, such as Naga Hoho, powerful institutions outside of party politics, which shape the political agenda in the state.⁹ Furthermore, the protracted movement for Naga independence has created an expansive space for armed groups such as the Naga National Council (NNC) and various factions of the Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the Baptist Church, and its affiliated organizations, as well as civil society organizations to directly influence party politics in the state. Any analysis of Nagaland’s capacity for federal bargaining would be incomplete without taking into account these informal and non-state actors.

SITUATING NAGALAND’S FEDERAL BARGAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NAGA NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

- 11 As the Northeast is a landlocked frontier region surrounded almost entirely by international boundaries, its incorporation into the Indian Union has been fraught with

a complex push and pull of state-building processes. Federal relations with the Center have ranged from different regional elites' seeking secession from the Union to demands for varied levels of autonomy within India. The Center's response has combined counterinsurgency and force with creative federal concessions by establishing new tribal majority states in the hill regions (Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya were carved out of Assam during the period 1963–1987) and/or extending substate autonomy under constitutional provisions of the Sixth Schedule. While it may be argued that the Center's determination to create new states to accommodate ethnic diversity/aspirations is expressed as the will to strengthen federal order, Baruah (2007) labels this "cosmetic federalism"—necessitated by a national-security mindset of "stabilizing" a politically volatile frontier region—rather than a genuine interest in regional autonomy. Without independent sources of tax revenue, small states¹⁰ in the Northeast are predominantly "dependent on New Delhi for their finances (known as "special category" states, Bhattacharjee 2016), [and are] hence vulnerable to New Delhi's direct involvement in their affairs on a daily basis" (Baruah 2007:43). In Nagaland's case in particular, Kikon argues (2018:53) that lasting dependence on the Center has lessened the role of the Naga state elite to mere "managers" for New Delhi's agenda, causing a huge chasm between the state and the Nagas' actual concerns.

- 12 While Baruah and Kikon are right to underline an overall "compromised" model of state autonomy in the region, the discussion in this section reveals the complex nature of relations between the Center and Nagaland, one that highlights the existence of the relative bargaining power of state-level elites in the broader context of India's increasingly centralized federalism. Following Hausing (2014), the paper argues that Nagaland's relative bargaining power has to be situated in the contentious way the Naga hills were incorporated into the Indian Union. Hausing (2014:92) argues that Naga nationalists' claims for independence from India stem, *inter alia*, from the historical legacy of various arrangements of "shared sovereignty" that the British had instituted to separate these hills from the Assam plains,¹¹ and the fact that "the Nagas had never been integrated into Assam proper and had never been wedded to India's freedom struggle." The creation of the Nagaland State and the inclusion of Article 371 A (as a political compromise between India and the Nagas) that granted asymmetrical federal powers to it, thus "lay[...] down the foundation for having a flexible and a pragmatic understanding of a negotiated and shared sovereignty" (Hausing 2014:88). In this context then, the paper argues that Nagaland's special status within Indian federal architecture is a result of this "negotiated sovereignty," animated by ideas of Naga people's "unique" history and "distinct" identity, and their effective deployment as political resources by the state elite to maintain relative federal bargaining and autonomy within the BJP-dominant system.
- 13 Another significant way in which the Naga nationalist movement has cast a long shadow over state politics is through the coexistence of constitutional politics with parallel "government structures" of independentist outfits such as the NNC and the later NSCN-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM). As Wouters (2018:87) observes, during the period after the 1997 Indo-Naga ceasefire, the NSCN-IM "amplified its 'appearance' as a state" by "exerting governance, dispensing justice, and systematizing and expanding territorial control and regimes of taxation"; the NSCN-IM runs the Government of the People's Republic of Nagalim (GPRN) with departments and ministries similar to any modern state apparatus. More importantly, Nagaland sees the presence of what Baruah

(2020) calls “hybrid political regimes,” wherein state and armed nonstate actors are in an informal relationship, and the latter even lay claim to public and development resources. Various NSCN factions “participate” in elections by building alliances with politicians, and state elites often use their “support” to win electoral contests (Baruah 2020), even though they both propose a reciprocal antagonistic relationship in state political discourse (Wouters 2018). In the 1998 elections, for instance, the way Congress defied the NSCN-IM’s call for an election boycott because it was backed by the Khaplang faction was widely reported; likewise, the IM faction supported regional parties in siding with the BJP during the 2003 election in order to oust the Congress government (Bhaumik 2009).

- 14 The presence of an “insurgency complex” (Wouters 2018) in a state that continues to be seen by many nonstate armed and civil society actors as a “temporary arrangement pending a final [political] settlement” (Jamir 2002 cited in Wouter 2018:10), poses major challenges for political parties to find a firm footing in the region’s politics, even though such a party may have politywide power and appeal. It is in this context that the paper goes on to examine Nagaland politics in the current BJP-dominant system using the three key aspects outlined in Sharma and Swenden’s framework.

NAGA STATE POLITICS IN THE BJP-DOMINANT SYSTEM

- 15 Since 2014, the emergence of the BJP as a political alternative in New Delhi—and later in many states—signals the rise of a new hegemonic order in India. This “second dominant party system” represents more than just a numerical shift; it embodies a new set of “ideas and sensibilities” that adroitly sought to combine Hindutva with nationalism, development, and strong leadership under PM Modi (Palshikar 2019). Interestingly enough, the 2014 electoral and discursive dominance of the BJP has been built over time through what Hansen (1996) calls the vernacularization of Hindutva,¹² wherein the Hindutva discourse adapts to local political idioms of a region while retaining its core ideological tenets such as Hindu Rashtra. Similarly, Palshikar (2015) emphasizes the malleable character of Hindutva through the idea of “neo-Hinduism,”

It is “neo-Hindu” in the sense that it does not always follow religious orthodoxy but nevertheless resorts to it occasionally; it conveniently draws on Hindu religious tradition and symbolism, but moves away from the traditional culture and religiosity if tactically required. Rather than following only Guruji Golwalkar, it draws heavily on the nationalist vision of Savarkar.

- 16 Hindutva’s adaptability to regional idioms has also yielded unprecedented electoral results in the Northeast where the Indian state’s nation-building projects have historically faced strong resistance. A marginal party in all states of the region until 2014, the BJP has seen a remarkable increase in its vote share in both assembly and Lok Sabha elections. Commentators agree that the party’s growth in the region is a result of strategic alliances with and co-option of key regional actors (Jha 2017), and its ability to appropriate local symbols and fault lines (Longkumer 2021; Saikia 2021). This is coupled with a proposed development discourse which not only seeks to connect the Northeast with India’s growth story but also frames the region as an economic gateway between India and Southeast Asia (Datta, Saryal, and Saryal 2023; Longkumer 2019).

17 An important factor that created electoral impetus for the party in the Northeast is the formation of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) in 2016, which allowed the BJP to partner with regional parties across states. The aim of this strategically created political coalition was twofold: first, to be in keeping with the BJP’s mission to create a *Congress-mukt* India by pushing it out of the region, and second, for the BJP to establish a firm foothold in these states where it has previously had a fragile electoral base. With the help of NEDA, the BJP’s score went up from 8 seats in 2014 to 14 seats in 2019, and NEDA as a whole won 18 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in the Northeast; while the Congress, for the first time, was limited to 4 seats (Assam 3; Meghalaya 1) with a drop from 8 seats in 2014. Even more remarkable is the Hindu nationalist party’s performance in assembly elections where it was able to form governments in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Tripura with a marked increase in its total vote share in these states (see Table 1).

Table 1: BJP’s electoral performance in Assembly elections before 2014 and after 2014

| State | Percentage of Christians (2011 census) | Pre–2014 | | | Post–2014 | | |
|-------------------|--|----------|---------------------|-------|-----------|---------------------|-------|
| | | Year | Percentage of votes | Seats | Year | Percentage of votes | Seats |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 30.26 | 2014 | 31 | 11 | 2019 | 50.8 | 41 |
| Assam | 0.41 | 2011 | 11.5 | 5 | 2016 | 29.5 | 60 |
| Manipur | 41.29 | 2012 | 2.1 | 0 | 2017 | 36.3 | 21 |
| Meghalaya | 74.59 | 2013 | 1.3 | 0 | 2018 | 9.6 | 2 |
| Mizoram | 87.16 | 2013 | 0.37 | 0 | 2018 | 8.04 | 1 |
| Nagaland | 87.93 | 2013 | 1.8 | 1 | 2018 | 15.3 | 12 |
| Tripura | 4.35 | 2013 | 1.5 | 0 | 2018 | 43 | 35 |
| Sikkim | 9.91 | 2014 | 1.4 | 0 | 2019 | 1.6 | 0 |

Source: Election Commission of India (eci.gov.in), censusindia.gov.in, and adapted from Datta et al. (2023).

Table 2: Electoral performance of INC, BJP, and NEDA in the 2019 Lok Sabha

| States (Lok Sabha seats) | INC | | BJP | | NEDA | |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Seats | Vote | Seats | Vote | Seats | Vote |
| Arunachal Pradesh (2) | 0 | 20.69 | 2 | 58.22 | 2 | 58.22 |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| Assam (14) | 3 | 35.44 | 9 | 36.05 | 9 | 46.76 |
| Manipur (2) | 0 | 24.63 | 1 | 34.22 | 2 | 56.7 |
| Meghalaya (2) | 1 | 48.28 | 0 | 7.93 | 1 | 30.2 |
| Mizoram (1) | -- | -- | 0 | 5.75 | 1 | 50.64 |
| Nagaland (1) | 0 | 48.11 | -- | -- | 1 | 49.73 |
| Sikkim (1) | 0 | 1.13 | 0 | 4.71 | 0 | 48.64 |
| Tripura (2) | 0 | 25.34 | 2 | 49.03 | 2 | 53.19 |
| Northeast (25) | 4 | -- | 14 | -- | 18 | -- |

Source: Election Commission of India's statistical report on general election 2019 (<http://results.eci.gov.in/>)

- 18 However, Table 1 and 2 also indicate that the BJP's growth in the three predominantly Christian States of Nagaland (87.93 % Christians), Mizoram (87.16 %), and Meghalaya (74.59 %) have been less impressive in comparison with the other states in the region. As explained in the previous section, the Naga nationalist movement's persisting shadow over state politics makes it difficult for nationally dominant parties like the BJP to establish a political constituency in the region.
- 19 Despite governing the state in an alliance with the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), the BJP's political precarity has endured. The defeat of their candidate in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections prompted a "blame game" between the alliance partners; the NDPP openly accused the BJP of being anti-Christian and refused to share seats with the BJP for local urban bodies (Mazumdar 2024). The BJP thus faces another formidable challenge because of its Hindutva politics and its anti-religious-minority ideology. This is indeed a major hurdle for the party in the State of Nagaland because Christianity is central to the Naga sovereignty movement (as expressed in the motto "Nagaland for Christ") as well as to Naga identity in general. For Naga national workers, it is "not the Nagas themselves, but God who is the primary agent of the Naga Movement, and from which follows that it is every Naga's duty to resist their incorporation into 'Hindu India' and 'Buddhist Burma'" (Khamrang and Wouters 2022:225). Hindutva activists working assiduously in other states in the Northeast find it difficult to embrace Hindutva ideologue Savarkar's ideas, such as religious minorities should give up their religious beliefs in order to be readmitted into the Hindu fold and hence into *Bharatvarsh*, to the Naga context; This is because Naga nationalists use their Christian identity to claim their difference and to articulate their desire to be excluded from India (Longkumer 2021).
- 20 Furthermore, the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) plays a crucial role in both public and private life in Nagaland: It has the authority to influence law (such as the prohibition of liquor), to act as an election watchdog prescribing moral/ethical guidelines for candidates, and even to forbid election activities from being conducted on Sundays (Datta et al. 2023). According to this scenario, the Hindu nationalist party has traditionally struggled to establish a base in the state. It has won seats mostly in

eastern Nagaland, which comprises five districts that are regarded as underdeveloped in comparison to their western counterparts, the latter being inhabited by more “advanced” Naga tribes. It has also gained seats in Wokha dominated by the Lotha tribe who also feels marginalized and left out (Kumar 2023). The BJP’s growth, albeit slow, has been viewed with suspicion in Nagaland due to its egregious politywide deployment of Hindutva politics. The Church has been critical of the party regarding a number of issues: appointment of RSS members to the governor’s office, official promotion of yoga (citing that it is a Hindu practice) and the use of the *Bharat Mata* image in official documents (Datta et al. 2023). Especially contentious have been rumors of a beef ban and a potential amendment to remove the term secularism from the preamble to the Indian Constitution. The Church has openly declared a “veto” against the BJP in assembly elections and has urged voters to reject the party’s electoral juggernaut in order to protect their religious, cultural, and ethnic identity.

- 21 Given the political context outlined above, the remaining section of this paper delves into the ways in which the State of Nagaland has interacted so far with the dominant BJP. It examines the three conditions, which Sharma and Swenden (2022) argue, determine whether a dominant party will be centralizing in nature, namely: (1) constitutional and additional safeguards for protecting state autonomy are weaker; (2) the dominant party is internally centralized; and (3) it endorses a unitarist ideology. The analysis shows that these conditions do not yet exist in Nagaland due to its historical, constitutional, and sociocultural specificities, thereby forcing the BJP to adopt a non-centralizing attitude, which in turn leaves more space for the state to maintain relative autonomy.

Constitutional Safeguards to Protect Nagaland State Autonomy

- 22 From Sharma and Swenden we understand that a politywide dominant party’s capacity to centralize is greater when states have weak constitutional protection of their autonomy. India’s federal architecture bestows far-reaching powers on the Center in comparison with the states, creating what scholars call, a model of centralized federalism (Tillin 2019); in this context, however, Nagaland emerges as a significant exception. As part of federal concessions to tackle secessionism, Nagaland was created with special *de jure* asymmetry¹³ enshrined in the constitution via Article 371 A which, as Hausing (2014:87) points out, is “an innovative institution-building that entrenches *negotiated sovereignty* of the Nagas in matters pertaining to their religious and social practices, customary laws and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice, and ownership and transfer of land and resources” [emphasis added]. In Nagaland, a parliament law pertaining to these matters can be made inapplicable by a resolution passed by the state assembly. While the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution provides a degree of asymmetry to other tribes in the Northeast, what makes Nagaland a special case is that the legal principles under Article 371 A may be seen as a compromise reached between the Center and the Nagas as “equals,” based on the principle of accommodating diversity and recognizing the Nagas’ “unique” history and identity (Hausing 2022).¹⁴
- 23 The Naga legislative assembly has invoked Article 371 A on many occasions in order to oppose or counter the central government’s legislation and policies.¹⁵ In 2023, the assembly passed a resolution to reject the implementation of the Forest (Conservation)

Amendment Act, arguing that “land and its resources” mentioned in Article 371 A includes forestland over which the assembly has full legislative authority. The assembly was especially concerned with Section 1 (A) (2) of the amended Act which intended to reserve, whatever the case may be, forestland within 100 km of an international border for projects pertaining to national interest and security. This clause in particular, the Naga assembly argued, would be in contravention of customary laws over land (which vests ownership rights of land in Naga tribes) protected by Article 371 A (“Land and its resources” 2023). Likewise, the Government of Nagaland put up strong opposition to the Modi-led central government’s proposal to implement a Uniform Civil Code. Arguing that such a law was a direct threat to the Nagas’ customary socioreligious practices, the state assembly, again using provisions of Article 371 A, unanimously passed a resolution exempting the state from such a law. Furthermore, the NDPP, in a ruling alliance with the BJP in the state, warned that the UCC could derail the ongoing Naga peace process, undo the progress achieved over almost three decades of negotiations and disrupt peace in the state (Nagaland Post 2023). In response, India’s Home Minister Amit Shah assured a Government of Nagaland delegation “in no uncertain terms . . . that the Centre is actively considering for exemption of Christians and some tribal areas from the purview of the 22nd Law Commission’s exercise” (Kumar 2023).

- 24 The negotiated shared sovereignty crafted between India and Nagaland is not only used by state elites but is also deployed by powerful civil society organizations as a contravening tool against the Center. In 2017, the Naga People’s Front (NPF)-BJP alliance government’s decision to hold municipal elections under the Nagaland Municipal Act 2001 was strongly opposed by Naga tribal apex bodies for two reasons, namely taxes on land and the 33% reservation for women (the latter was in keeping with the—albeit much delayed—74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution of 1993). The government and the Naga Mothers Association (a women’s civil society organization that has played a crucial role in peacemaking in the state) were pitched against the tribal apex bodies, the latter saying that these two clauses interfered with Naga customary laws guaranteed under Article 371 A (Wouters 2017). Powerful sections of traditional Naga tribal bodies view land tax as an imposition of the Indian state, signaling the end of Nagaland’s total control over its land. For Nagas, preserving the traditional landholding system—where the community’s relationship to land is one of stewardship, and where the Naga identity’s triangular basis in God-Land-People—has been central to the Naga movement to sovereignty (Wouters 2017). Nagas, the tribal apex bodies claim, were never subject to any land tax because the land belongs to landholders and the community, not the state; similarly, reserving seats for the political representation of Naga women is also seen as foreign to the Nagas’ way of life.¹⁶ Finally, in light of the violent protests that ensued, the Nagaland government decided to nullify the municipal election results. Pressure from Naga tribal bodies and a poor handling of the crisis cost the then Chief Minister T. R. Zeliang his position in the government. Caving into pressure, the Nagaland assembly also passed a resolution to repeal the Municipal Act and resolved not to hold elections. The BJP state unit also took a cautious stand on the matter and suggested initiating a dialog with Naga tribal bodies and civil society organizations so that urban local body elections could be held within the “traditional Naga context” (Singh 2023).
- 25 As the discussion above shows, by using Article 371 A as a legitimate source of resistance to the Indian state’s imposition, the State of Nagaland and non-state actors

frequently remind India that the constitutional safeguard was not a gift, but that the Nagas had “earned” it (Khamniungan 2018) and that “this provision is the only bond of relationship between Nagas and Indians and nothing more” (Tunyi 2018:208). The Center under Modi, after abrogation of Article 370 in J&K, has assured the Nagas that Article 371 A is a “sacred commitment” between the Indian state and the Nagas and will not be compromised. The historical context of the Indo-Naga conflict, culminating in a form of “negotiated sovereignty” through asymmetrical arrangements, supports Sharma and Swenden’s observation that constitutional safeguards for state autonomy can serve as a strong federal counterbalance within a centralized polity.

Low dependence of state co-partisans on the nationally dominant BJP

- 26 The second condition, according to the Sharma and Swenden model, which determines the likelihood of centralization by the dominant party is intraparty dynamics between center and the states. Since 2014, a more centralized form of federalism has emerged, marked by PM Modi tightening his grip on the party both in the central government and across BJP-ruled States. A particularly striking feature of this period is the nationalization of state-level elections. Modi became the central figure in these contests, effectively transforming them into “mini-referenda” on his leadership. This strategy reinforced his image as India’s invincible and inevitable leader (*Modi nahi toh kaun/ If not Modi, who?*) (Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Jaffreot and Kalyankar 2017). A presidential-style modus operandi came at the cost of regional leaders within the party, eroding and weakening the party’s state-level organization.¹⁷ However, Nagaland again emerged as an exception, as the state has been largely immune to “Modi magic,” despite his spectacular ascendancy in national politics. In Nagaland (and districts inhabited by Nagas in neighboring states such as Assam), the vote for the BJP in assembly elections has mostly been driven by the hope that Center-state party congruence would help expedite the ongoing Naga peace talks to reach a political solution for the protracted Indo-Naga conflict (Longkumer 2019).¹⁸ The BJP’s presence in the ruling alliance in the state and its victories in 12 out of 60 seats in the last two assembly elections (2018 and 2023, with approximately a 15% and 18% vote share respectively) has thus more to do with local political dynamics than Modi’s hegemonic political influence.
- 27 In this context, for the Hindu nationalist party that has no ideological resonance in the state, Naga politics presents complex challenges. Christianity aside, electoral and democratic processes in Naga society are deeply embedded in local clan, village, and tribe affiliations (Wouters 2018). Voters’ behavior is not so much determined by “ideological” issues as by the “authoritative presence of village, tribal and church councils” leading to building a “consensus” and to “collective village” voting, i.e. the village decides (and announces ahead of the election) which candidate to vote for (Wouters 2018:9).¹⁹ In the post-statehood political structure of Nagaland, constituencies were delimited based on tribal identities, thereby prompting representatives to cater to their respective groups by diverting state resources and even distributing money at the time of voting.²⁰ Since constituencies are very small, political relations between representatives and voters are created by affective interpersonal family and clan relationships. The embeddedness of the state party system in the tribal social structure

of Naga society makes it difficult for national parties to get a firm footing by using issues of national import. In the past, the Congress was also compelled, in post-statehood politics, to adapt to the local social realities of tribal and religious affiliations to establish itself as a viable political force, causing the “regionalization” of a national party.

- 28 As a new player in Nagaland politics, the BJP faces significant challenges in establishing an organic support base in Naga society and the Naga psyche. Furthermore, unlike the Congress, the BJP is seen as ideologically opposed to religious minorities. The party is well aware of its limitations in Nagaland and has therefore crafted strategic alliances with regional parties such as the NPF and the NDPP, and projects itself as a secular party. But even within the party, many (publicly unfolding) internal disagreements between state and national leadership demonstrate that Modi’s BJP is far from creating an internally congruent party in the state. This is because, as Longkumer (2019:288) observes in the Northeast in general but also particularly in Nagaland, “[T]here are no deep ideological anchors for the BJP . . . While their counterparts, the RSS, are highly inventive and effective in certain regions of the Northeast [Assam, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh], the BJP is still a nascent force in terms of accruing political capital.”²¹
- 29 In PM Modi’s two terms of office, the BJP state unit in Nagaland has vehemently opposed a number of key national policy decisions (or ideas); these include the central government’s decision to end, as previously discussed, the Free Movement Regime between India and Myanmar, as well as the BJP’s promise of the Uniform Civil Code, a core ideological issue. Similarly, state leaders of the party have distanced themselves from Modi’s attempt to use the controversial Naga historical figure of Gaidinliu, whom Christian Nagas dislike for her opposition to proselytization and the Naga separatist struggle; in doing so, they have reiterated their avowed Christian-Naga identity. The state unit has also denounced the hosting of a *Gau Mahasabha* event, with the state party chief stating that the event had “nothing to do with the Nagaland BJP. It is imperative to address this issue in the context of Nagaland’s socio-religious and cultural fabric.” The event did not receive permission from the NDPP-BJP alliance government which cited that, as a Christian-majority state, beef is eaten by a majority of the population (“Beef-eating Majority State” 2024).
- 30 Furthermore, the enactment of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), which provides specific communities facing persecution from neighboring countries with a fast-track procedure to obtain Indian citizenship, caused such a stir in the BJP-Nagaland unit that 22 senior members decided to join the opposition party, NPF. The mass defection took place despite assurances that CAA provisions would not apply to states like Nagaland, which are protected under the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system that regulates the entry of non-resident Indian citizens and foreigners into the state for a limited period of time. The BJP’s own minority unit president in the state was of the opinion that CAA would encourage the settlement of illegal immigrants in Nagaland, thereby undermining the Nagas’ control over their own land (and by implication, their distinct cultural identity). As this case illustrates, the state unit’s minimal reliance on the BJP’s national leadership to mobilize voters enables it to shift allegiance to other political formations more easily. This fosters an enduring environment of “soft exit threats” (Sharma and Swenden 2022), thereby increasing the bargaining power of state-level elites in their negotiations with the central government. Given their independent

support bases, state-level members of national parties are thus motivated to take a strong pro-regional/local stance, even when this conflicts with the position of their national leadership.²² On the other hand, due to the absence of a traditional political base in the region, the BJP's national leadership is heavily dependent on regional Naga leaders and its allies for electoral gains, forcing the party to adapt to Nagaland's cultural specificities and even to strategically revise many of its core ideological issues. This reverse dependence limits the likelihood of a politywide dominant party, the BJP, from enforcing centralization vis-a-vis Nagaland.

The BJP's adaptation of unitarist ideology in Nagaland politics

- 31 The last condition that Sharma and Swenden's framework defines as being key to centralization is the presence of a unitarist ideology in the dominant party. While Savarkar (1949) defines the Hindu Rashtra in territorial terms—"a unitarian nation from Kashmir to Rameshwar, from Sindh to Assam," for Deendayal Upadhyaya, another key ideologue, *Akhand Bharat* represented a sacred geography, a single civilizational unit comprising regions under the influence of a Sanskritic culture. Interestingly enough, even though Hindu nationalism has strongly supported a unitary and centralized model, the RSS (and its political affiliates Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later the BJP) have shown mixed responses to the question of federalism (Adeney 2005). In fact, decentralization for administrative efficiency (*janapadas*) is desirable from this perspective as a potential tool for undermining state autonomy. However, federal restructuring based on ethnic criteria is regarded by Hindu nationalists as politically destabilizing. Political rhetoric aside, electoral considerations have compelled both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh to accommodate the linguistic reorganization of states, and linguistic identities have been deployed for political gain (Adeney 2005). Likewise, despite ideologically rejecting the idea of India as a multinational federation, the BJP has supported demands for new states and has participated in their creation during the coalition era to secure electoral advantages. It is this ideological malleability of the dominant party that is at work in Nagaland.
- 32 Shortly after coming to power at the Center, the Modi-led BJP government signed a framework agreement with the NSCN-IM in 2015. Although the Naga rebel group has renounced its demand for independence from India, it continues to demand a separate flag and a constitution as "constituent parts of [Naga] sovereignty" (Barman 2024). While the Indian government has not accepted these demands, there are ongoing attempts to address the NSCN-IM's call for a Greater Nagalim, which would incorporate the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam and Manipur. This is a highly contentious issue as both states are staunchly opposed to any restructuring of borders. However, the BJP's party chief from the Assam unit alluded to the fact that certain disputed areas on the Assam-Nagaland border may be transferred to create Greater Nagalim (Longkumer 2019). In 2019, the draft agreement between the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) and the Center's interlocutor seems to have taken into account "equal rights and benefits" for Nagas in other states, but it is not yet clear if any of these areas would be integrated into Nagaland (Tripathi and Singh 2019). Despite the BJP's flexible policies on regional autonomy, it finds itself on a slippery slope leading to competing territorial politics in the Northeast: Granting territorial autonomy in the form of Greater Nagalim could create a political shift in Nagaland in favor of the BJP, but could make it pay a high price in other states in the region. At present, the party has maintained a form of

status quo, which is evident from the delays in finalizing the details of the framework agreement.

- 33 Given the BJP's precarious position in Nagaland, the party aims to "nurture strongholds" (Kumar 2023:124) in the eastern, more underdeveloped districts of Nagaland. After claiming that this subregion has historically and deliberately been neglected by Kohima, six minority Naga tribes have grouped together to form the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) to demand a separate State of Frontier Nagaland which would be made up of four eastern districts of the existing state. In 2011, the ENPO issued a statement about the Frontier Nagaland State being "something like going back to the earlier arrangement when the entire area was under the erstwhile Tuensang Frontier Division of NEFA" (cited in Wouters 2018:207). While the BJP aims to capitalize on these grievances and has even managed to secure assembly seats from these eastern districts (Barman 2024), matters came to a head when, on December 4, 2021, an Indian Army team allegedly killed 14 civilians from the Konyak tribe in Oting village in eastern Nagaland, mistaking them for militants (Sayantani 2024). The ENPO declared a "non-cooperation" initiative regarding all activities of the Indian Armed Forces, including Army civic programs, national celebrations, recruitment campaigns in these districts, and it demanded that the security forces personnel responsible for the killings be brought to a civil court for trial ("ENPO temporarily withdraws," 2022). Despite the BJP's attempt to appease the situation,²³ the ENPO in 2024 decided to boycott the general elections as their demand for a separate state of Frontier Nagaland had made no headway. Interestingly enough, this boycott benefited the Congress party because the latter ended up winning the only Lok Sabha seat for Nagaland. Thus, the BJP's attempt to create local strongholds by capitalizing on autonomy movements shows the party's ability to adapt to the region's specific conditions. However, as the above discussion illustrates, despite shedding its unitarist ideology, the BJP's base in Nagaland continues to be fragile and dependent on many local variables.
- 34 The BJP (and RSS) expansion into the Northeast hinges on the vision of *Akhand Bharat* (greater, undivided India), a central tenet of Hindutva. In its current form, the BJP is attempting to integrate the Northeast, a region that has historically remained on the margins of the "Hindu imagination" (Longkumer 2019) into the heart of India. Its way of achieving this goal is not via a staunch unitarist policy (as seen in its approach in J&K), but by actively engaging with politics of institutional autonomy.²⁴ By upholding Nagaland's constitutional asymmetry and responding to the ENPO's demands for autonomy, the BJP has adopted a pro-autonomy strategy to slowly make inroads in a region where it faces formidable challenges and where its presence remains precarious. Having to adapt to the state's rules of political engagement prompts the nationally dominant BJP to alter its unitarist ideology, thereby significantly reducing its ability to centralize.

CONCLUSION

- 35 This paper has examined the political dynamics that shape federal relations between the State of Nagaland and the politywide dominant BJP. Between 2014–2024, India saw the rise and relative consolidation of the BJP-dominant system under Modi's leadership. This period was marked by increased centralization and personalization of

power at the Center and also in relation to the states. The Modi government, through institutional and discursive changes (supported by the demos-enabling features of Indian federalism), has managed to undermine both politically and fiscally the bargaining power of states. In this context, Nagaland's federal trajectory poses interesting challenges to assumptions about Center-state relations in a dominant party system. Despite the BJP's gradual electoral growth in the state, Nagaland has not only managed to maintain relative autonomy but has also successfully defied central government policies. Using Sharma and Swenden's framework as a heuristic, this paper has shown that Naga exceptionalism within the current BJP-dominant party system is made possible because the three essential conditions that link party systems to the nature of federalism in a dominant party-system polity, are relatively weak in the Nagaland case. The paper situated the specific political conditions of Nagaland in the broader context of the Naga nationalist movement and the resultant compromises the Indian state reached with the accommodationist section of Nagas. Thus, the negotiated and shared sovereignty between India and the Nagas, constitutionally entrenched as Article 371 A, along with the Nagas' claim to a unique history and identity are used by state elites as political tools to facilitate federal bargaining. Furthermore, culturally specific factors have hindered the organic growth (and electoral success) of national parties, especially the Hindu nationalist party. As a result, the BJP has relied on strategic alliances with key regional parties, its own co-partisans in the state, and has had to tone down its aggressive Hindutva politics and actively accommodate these cultural specificities. These dynamics, combined with institutional asymmetry, enabled Nagaland to retain relative autonomy within the larger BJP-dominant system between 2014–2024.

- 36 Even as Nagaland emerges as a special case within Indian federalism, it would be worthwhile extending this analysis to other Christian/tribal-dominated states (each with local specificities) in the Northeast in order to examine the specific ways in which they interact with the BJP-dominant party system in order to glean comparative insight into Indian federalism. Mizoram, where the BJP is not in power, has similarly used asymmetrical powers under Article 371 G to resist the Hindu nationalist party's ideological position on the Uniform Civil Code, on eating beef, as well as on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA 2019). Likewise, the party faces tough challenges in Christian-dominated Meghalaya despite being a member of the ruling coalition government. Examining the BJP's strategic adaptations to the local realities in these states (and ways in which it deals with fundamental contradictions of being a Hindu nationalist party in these Christian states) and the response of state elites in relation to the national government could give fresh insight into the dynamic federal landscape in India, and how states can resist centralization imposed by a dominant party. On the other hand, this framework could be equally useful for examining the BJP's strategies and the nature of Center-state relations in other Northeast states such as Assam and Tripura where the BJP has adroitly combined Hindutva with local issues that animate state politics. Literature on federalism concerning Northeast India has been relatively scant and has mostly dealt with conflict management. While "subnational" conflicts have markedly shaped politics in the Northeast, any analysis must also extend to include the dynamic processes that govern the Center's relations with Northeast states in the broader federal architecture and politics of India. Furthermore, whilst acknowledging the heuristic power of Sharma and Swenden's framework, this paper makes a strong case for studying informal institutions to deepen our understanding of

intergovernmental relations in federalism studies by examining the dynamics of how nonstate actors influence state elites.

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NOTES

1. After Independence, India and Burma allowed citizens (hill tribes) from either side of the border to enter their respective territory without a visa or passport in order to acknowledge the transnational ties among groups living in the borderland. However, due to acts of insurgency, India gradually imposed numerous restrictions (obligation to possess a travel permit, entry only through three designated points and travel restricted to 16 km within the border) on the FMR (Das 2024).
2. The MHA's decision came on the heels of allegations made by the chief minister of Manipur, the neighboring state, that ongoing interethnic violence in his state has been fomented due to the free unchecked movement of arms and people from Myanmar (Choudhury 2024).
3. India's "Northeast" is a region made up of eight relatively small states connected to the rest of the country by a 22-km-wide stretch of land. The region has a distinctive demography with the largest concentration of Scheduled Tribe communities in the country, diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, and a substantial Christian population. The region has witnessed multiple armed struggles for autonomy and/or secession.
4. Stepan (1999) observed that India's federal makeup was more like a "demos-enabling" model in that the Indian Constitution imposes fewer checks on the Union government, and states did not have the same bargaining power as their American counterparts. For this reason, the Indian model is also often called *de-facto* centralized federalism.
5. The fifth and sixth Schedules that grant autonomy to certain tribal regions, Article 370 for Jammu & Kashmir (now abrogated) and Article 371 A and Article 371 G for Nagaland and Mizoram respectively, as well as "special category" status for many states under Article 371 to address inter- or intra-regional inequities (Tillin 2019). Special Category States in the Northeast offer asymmetric plan grants and loans so that these states fall within the ratio 90:10 whereas, for general-category states, the ratio of grant to loan is 30:70 (Bhattacharjee 2016).
6. Article 371 G extends similar powers to Mizoram except for control over resources, which is granted only to Nagaland.
7. Sharma and Swenden also show that federalism under Indira Gandhi's dominant Congress (from 1967 onward) fits this scenario. Owing to strong competition from opposition parties at state level as well as defections in her own party, she ended up centralizing the party structure at the Center, she directly controlled party state units and interfered in and destabilized states ruled by opposition parties by using Article 356. Thus, Gandhi's centralization of the party structure and espousing of a unitarist ideology, coupled with weak constitutional safeguards to states in comparison with the Center, lessened the overall federal character of the Indian polity.
8. Having ensured the party's electoral future in the Center and the states, Nehru's government continued to assume a federal character whereby state units had a relatively large degree of autonomy, and the party ruled through powerful chief ministers.
9. In the context of Afghanistan, Murtazashvili (2014) shows that, despite the formal centralized structure according to the 2004 Constitution, governance in effect involved extensive power-sharing with informal, customary, self-governing organizations, leading her to use the term "informal federalism."
10. Nagaland's population was as low as 300,000 when the state was created.
11. These regulations (Inner Line Regulation 1873, the Chin Hills Regulation 1893, the Backward Tract 1919, and the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas 1935) were meant to separate from the plains any "backward tracts" and "excluded areas" due to the high cost of administering these sparsely populated hills, but also because colonial rulers saw these tribes as racially and "civilizationally" very different from plain dwellers.
12. Hansen (1996) argues in Maharashtra's case "that it was especially the Shiv Sena's translation of the Hindutva discourse into the dominant political idiom of Maratha valour and rustic virtues,

rather than the *Ram janmabhoomi* agitation, that provided a crucial impetus to Hindu communal politics in the state.”

13. *De jure* asymmetry within a federal architecture refers to constitutionally guaranteed arrangements that institutionalize differential powers and rights of a constituent unit, and are based on principles of difference and recognition.

14. The Naga case is also exceptional in comparison with the now abrogated Article 370 that accorded powerful federal asymmetry to the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Even though J&K had similar plenary powers as well as a separate constitution, unlike Nagaland, its special status did not come from recognition of the majority Muslim identity of the state, but from the acknowledgement of unique conditions under which the state had acceded to the Indian Union (Tillin 2007). Furthermore, Article 370 was intended to be a temporary institutional arrangement pending the state’s full integration into India.

15. Hausing (2014) describes a tussle between the Indian government and Nagaland state government about jurisdiction over developing petroleum and natural gas before 2014. The Nagaland government cited Article 371 A to claim that all natural resources belonged to the state, while the Government of India cited the Seventh Schedule of India’s Constitution and Section two of the Mines and Minerals (Regulation and Development) Act, 1957, to regulate and develop mines and minerals including petroleum and natural gas as an exclusive right of the Union parliament.

16. Besides speaking for Naga women’s right to equal participation in public affairs, the pro-reservation Naga Mothers Association argued that, since municipal bodies do not fall under the purview of customary laws, reservations for women are not in contravention of customary practices protected by Article 371 A (Khamniungan 2018).

17. Sharma and Swenden (2018) point out that in such a scenario, “multi-level party congruence” can cause cooperative federalism (here, cooperation between center and state elites of the same party) to coexist with overall centralization of the polity. Such congruence ends up replacing intergovernmental federal mechanisms with intraparty channels, potentially weakening the federal architecture that developed over the coalition era of the last two decades (Aiyar and Tillin 2020).

18. Moreover, scholars have argued that small states in the Northeast, such as Nagaland, align with the party in power at the Center primarily due to their significant financial dependence on the latter (Jha 2017). The central government strategically uses development packages and grants—provided to “special status” states in the region in order to woo them. Notwithstanding the growing trend of increasing fiscal centralization under the Modi administration, the Center has increased the proportion of financial allocations directed to the northeastern states since 2014 (Bhattacharya 2023).

19. Using Michelutti’s (2007) vernacularization of democratic politics, Wouters (2018) observes that Nagas have adjusted democracy “imposed” by the Indian state to their tribal lifeworlds.

20. It is easy to view this as a sign of political corruption and of undermining liberal principles of individual autonomy. Anthropologists studying Naga society have taken a more complex (and culturalist view) of it. Tinyi and Nienu (2018), and Wouters (2018) argue that the widely reported “trade in votes” in Nagaland persists due to Naga tribal society’s communitarian idea of “village republics” where the commitment to provide for the well-being of the clan was built into traditional political leadership.

21. In fact, Longkumer (2019) points out that even in the northeastern states, where the BJP has achieved notable success, this performance has largely relied on the longstanding grassroots efforts of the RSS and its affiliated organizations, such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Kalyan Ashram.

22. This is also shaped by the fact that in Nagaland, formal political actors, including those belonging to national parties, often depend on armed groups for political preservation (Wouter 2018), and hence have to tow the regional/local line on an issue.

23. The BJP made a pacification attempt by having a woman candidate from Konyak tribe elected to the Rajya Sabha, which was followed by the ENPO's "temporary withdrawal" of the non-cooperation of the security forces.

24. An ideologically unitarist party like the BJP has historically been forced to operate within the "denationalised landscape" (Tillin 2018) of the coalition era of the 1990s and 2000s, when the pluralization of the party system had launched regional parties into national politics, thereby significantly influencing center-state relations. The BJP (and its predecessor Bhartiya Jana Sangh) has adapted itself to the idea of federal restructuring and has even supported statehood demands as a way of creating new electoral constituencies in regions where its presence was weaker (Tillin 2013).

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to explore the implications the changing party system in India has for the unique federal relationship with the Northeast State of Nagaland. Nagaland is granted *de-jure* federal asymmetry (omnibus article 371 of the Indian Constitution) that acknowledges Nagas' "unique" cultural identity as well as the historically specific conditions under which the state was incorporated into the Indian Union. Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has managed to create a political base, albeit small, in this state through strategic alliances as well as by tweaking its ideological moorings to fit a predominantly tribal and Christian population. Drawing on Chandan Sharma and Wilfred Swenden's (2022) framework on federalism and party systems, this paper argues that Nagaland's federal bargain—despite it being a small and heavily revenue-dependent state—persists in a BJP-dominant system because key conditions that typically enable centralizing behavior by a dominant party are weak or absent. These conditions include a highly centralized internal party structure, a unitarist ideological orientation, and weak constitutional safeguards for state autonomy. The paper thus posits that Nagaland's special status within Indian federal architecture needs to be understood in the context of the Naga nationalist movement animated by ideas of Naga people's "unique" history and "distinct" identity, which resulted in a political compromise of "negotiated sovereignty" between Nagas and the Indian state. State actors—and influential non-state actors—effectively use negotiated sovereignty as a political tool, enabling Nagaland to maintain a relatively favorable federal bargain and degree of autonomy within the BJP-dominant system.

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Keywords: dominant party systems, Center-state relations, asymmetrical federalism, Bharatiya Janata Party, Nagaland, Naga nationalist movement

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