

India's presidency, 'this time for North East'

Mahbubul Hoque

Prathiba Devisingh Patil's term as President will come to an end this year and that will lead to another presidential election where unless some-thing dramatic happens, the UPA's candidate will win and become the next President of the Republic of India. Some of India's earlier Presidents such as Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Dr Zakir Hussain, and Dr APJ Abdul Kalam were charismatic, inspiring, and respected by the world. Indians are eager that the next President should be of the same genre that conforms to India's emergence as a formidable power in world commerce, trade, politics, and statesmanship.

In the 65 years after India attained independence, only one person from North East was able to occupy the Rashtrapati Bhawan from here. He is Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, who first served as a Minister for Agriculture, Industrial Development, Education etc in the Union Cabinet and then he was elected as the President of India in August 1974. Unfortunately he could not complete the tenure of his office and died in harness in February 1977. He was a multi-faceted personality, taking keen interest in sports, music, fine arts, and poetry.

Even though no other person from the North East became President or Vice President of India, there were many who held important positions at the national level and brought good name to the country and the region.

Prof GG Swell of Meghalaya was an MP and later served as India's Ambassador to Norway and Burma. He was elected the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha in December 1969 and served in that post until December 1970. In 1971, he contested for the position of the President of India as the joint opposition candidate but lost to Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma of the Congress Party.

Purno A Sangma, another charismatic personality from Meghalaya, after serving as Chief Minister of Meghalaya, then as a Union Cabinet Minister for several portfolios, became the Speaker for the Lok Sabha in 1996 and remained in that post until 1998. He brought many revolutionary reforms in the functioning of the Lok Sabha that won appreciation within the country and abroad.

JM Lyngdoh, again from Meghalaya, was made an Election Commissioner by Government of India in 1997 and elevated to the coveted position of the Chief Election Commissioner in 2004. He had won the Ramon Magasaysay Award in 2003 for excellence in Government Service.

Another luminary of the region, HT Sangliana of Mizoram, an IPS Officer came in the news for his daring acts in the State of Karnataka and a grateful people elected him as the MP from old Bangalore North Lok Sabha Constituency. A Kannada movie depicting his life as a super-cop became a smashing super hit. In 2009, Sangliana took over charge as the Vice Chairman of the National Committee for Minorities (NCM).

All this goes to prove that persons from the North East are capable and if they are given challenging responsibilities, they can always rise to the occasion and make India proud by their performance.

Since only one person from the region had served as the President of India during all this 65 years after independence, it is time that the country once again elects a President from this far-flung region and thereby strengthens the bond between the country and the region.

There are several names already doing the rounds. While some have suggested the name of Dr Manmohan Singh, an internationally renowned economist and India's Prime Minister at the moment, for the top honour, many have also proposed the name of Tarun Gogoi, the Chief Minister of Assam. Incidentally, Dr Singh is a representative of Assam in the Rajya Sabha. Both of them are capable persons no doubt, but removing them from their present posts may create such an uncertain situation in political circles that the ruling dispensation may well avoid it.

Among the other long, standing Chief Ministers of the region are Lal Thanhawla of Mizoram and Manik Sarkar of Tripura. Both have brought peace in their States and put them on the path of development. While Thanhawla may not be able to occupy the position as he has never been actively engaged in any major responsibility outside Mizoram, Sarkar's political affiliations may not bring him enough votes to win the election of the President.

SC Jamir of Nagaland had held the posts of Governor of Goa and Maharashtra but today perhaps his age is not on his side. He can contribute more as a grand patriarch in his home State, sharing his rich experience with the new breed of politicians of Nagaland.

One person, who however could be termed as a dark horse in the scene, may fit in the bill in all respects. He is none other than Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary, the Governor of Meghalaya, who originally is a son of Assam.

Wherever he has served, be it as an IPS officer of Kerala cadre, or as the Director General of National Security Guards or Border Security Force in Delhi, or be it as the Chief Information Commissioner of Assam, he has left an undeniable mark in all positions.

He is well read, a good communicator, physically agile, and has a grip over the pulse of the people of the country. Most important of all, he has a clean image a rare commodity today. There is no doubt that he would also be an excellent ambassador to project India's image abroad.

(The writer is Chancellor, University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya)