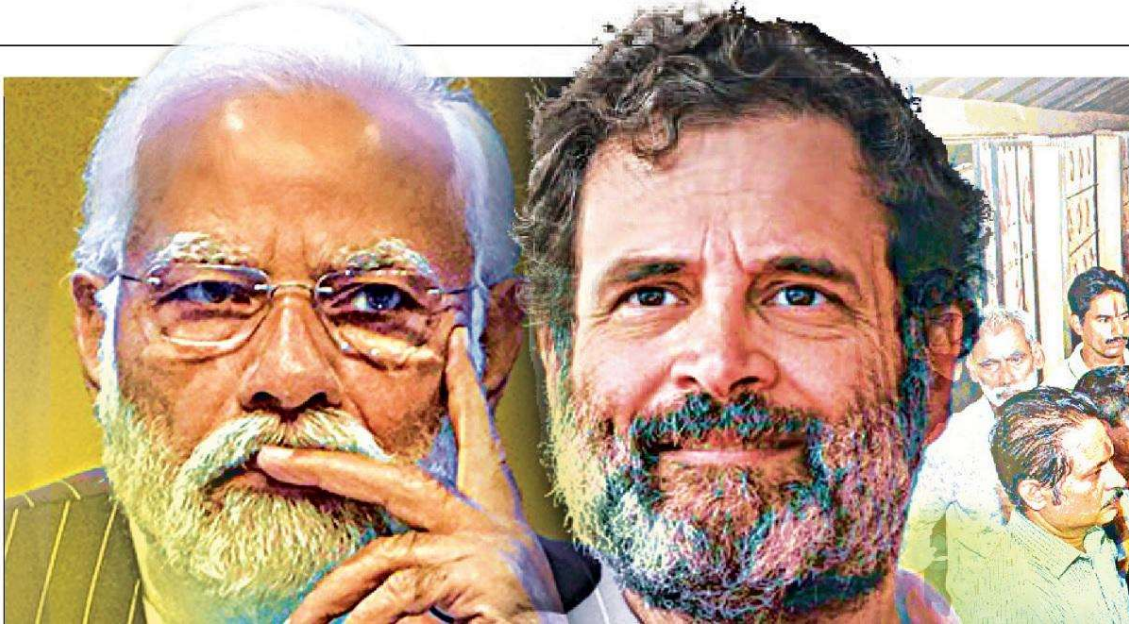


Karnataka Assembly elections: The dissolving political equations



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Opinions are now afloat that the Karnataka Assembly election results are just straws in the wind suggestive of how the outcome of the 2024 parliamentary elections will be like. The Congress, caught amid crises, has got a shot in the arm from the election results. However, the party faces a Herculean task ahead, that is, it has to encore the current victory in the elections to be held in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana, and others. The BJP, too, which has learned the most unforgettable of lessons now, is confronted with the challenge of changing its strategies in several matters.

Importance to Sons of soil

It is doubtful if the Congress could have clinched victory as it has in the Karnataka Assembly elections, had it not given much importance to its state leaders. It has not erred where the BP has done. In all matters ranging from the selection of candidates to campaign strategies, the Congress had given unfettered freedom

to Malligarjun Kharge, son of the soil in Karnataka, and national president of the party. Though senior Congress leaders Siddaramaiah and D. K. Shivakumar have all along squared off with each other, they did not choose to display their differences in public during the election. Videos of both rubbing shoulders with each other during the electioneering went viral, shared as they were extensively. Yet the contest between them in ascending the throne must have, by any means, been averted. It is noteworthy that both extended their support to the resolution passed at the party MLAs' meeting, which vested Malligarjun Kharge with the power of choosing the Chief Minister.

As Rajasthan is preparing for the Assembly elections, the march launched by Sachin Pilot against the Congress government is a thorn in the flesh of CM Ashok Gehlot and the Congress as well. Nonetheless, Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa in charge of the Congress affairs in Rajasthan has said the party will strive to forge unity among its leaders in the state, as done in Karnataka.

Senior leader Digvijay Singh has insisted on the Congress using the same electoral strategy in Madhya Pradesh too, as used in Karnataka.

At the same time, it can also be said that the futility and boredom of showing off Modi's face in the public domain ad nauseam must have dawned on the BJP cadre. That is why it has been decided to give more weightage to the influential CM of Madhya Pradesh Shivraj Singh Chauhan in the next elections in that state.

In the Rajasthan unit of BJP, Vasundhara Raje Scindia, an important face of the Rajput community, has long been sidelined. She had had a rift with Modi right since the days he was CM of Gujarat and was cut to the quick when Home Minister Amit Shah had refused to accommodate her son Dushyant in the Union Cabinet. Now in view of the recent developments, the BJP high command will likely climb down to pacify her.

Challenges Ahead of Congress

The BJP leaders in states are used to taking orders, right or wrong, from their high command without a murmur of protest. But such a tendency is not common in the Congress. In spite of this unwelcome feature, the Congress has romped home to victory, bearing testament to the Gandhi family's growing clout with the party. In the constituencies covered by Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo yatra, 80 or 85 percent victory has been registered, hitting home his growing popularity as an emerging stable and strong leader. However, his future success lies in designing strategies in synch with the respective states.

Additionally, Congress takes initiatives and interest, more substantive than ever before, in welding together all opposition parties. Leaders including Sharad Pawar, Nitish Kumar, and so on, for their part, are also engaged in this endeavor. Yet all the same, leaders such as Mamta Banerjee much praise for the Congress on its impressive victory in Karnataka. At this juncture, her statement that she would support Congress wherever it is strong in the 2024 Parliamentary elections assumes significance.

Except for Puducherry, all governments in the southern states are dead against the BJP ideology. However, except in Tamil Nadu, the Congress too has no good rapport with the ruling parties in South India. The principal opposition party in Kerala is none other than the Congress.

K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR), Chief Minister of Telangana and leader of Bharat Rashtra Samiti, is trying to forge the third front.

In view of all these factors, the Congress had better-set right its relations with all regional parties in the states before the Assembly elections so that it has smooth sailing in the 2024 Parliamentary elections.

The mood of voters

Here afterwards, the BJP's wonted rhetoric of 'one nation, one language' and its attempts to impose a monolithic single identity on the country will no longer have a heft. Now it is left in a position wherein it has to tone down its stridency and keep a low profile in matters involving states' rights lest it should lose its electoral edge. Despite its rule at the Centre and its catchy slogan of 'double engine' (the advantages of BJP being in power at Centre and in the state as well), the BJP has lost power in Karnataka mainly because it has lost its credibility among the people. The most hardcore supporters of BJP too were all agreed that the Basavaj Bommai government was beset with corruption, as disclosed in the opinion poll conducted by Lokniti-CSDS. Another major goof-up on the part of the BJP was that tickets were given for contesting the polls to those tainted by corruption charges. Likewise, the rise in prices of petrol and cooking gas and the rising unemployment have had a major impact on the electoral outcome. Since these are national problems, the BJP can ill-afford to turn a Nelson's eye to them.

Socio-political equations

Neither the BJP nor the Congress is going to let go of its socio-political calculations. However, efforts will be strenuously made to design formulas hardly much damaging.

In the Karnataka political arena marked by caste and religion and heavily influenced by the mutts, the Congress has obviously grossed votes from all sections ranging from Vokkaligas, Krupas and OBCs to SCs, STs and Muslims. Even among the Lingayats supporting traditionally the BJP, 29 percent people have cast votes for the Congress.

Now Congress is planning to consolidate the Dalit votes in Telangana through its national president Mallikarjun Kharge.

In the wake of the hijab and halal controversies, Muslim voters were getting ready to vote against the BJP and vote not only for Congress but also for Owaisi, his party AIMIM and SDPI. But the

Congress managed to get the lion's share of the Muslim votes in one go (70 percent), promising a ban on Bajrang Dal and reintroduction of reservation for Muslims.

The BJP had already found in West Bengal that its religiously coloured campaign gave the party a great electoral setback. However, unwilling to learn lessons from the fiasco, the party used the same strategy again, this time in Karnataka, desperate to cling to power. But the Karnataka voters too have taught the party a lesson. The lesson is that the clarion call given by Prime Minister Modi, transcending his official boundaries, to the voters to cry loud, 'Jai Bajrangbali' after voting is anything but Constitutional and ethical.

Now we hope that there will be changes in Modi's campaign style. It will hardly be surprising if he apes Rahul Gandhi's style of reaching out to the people and sheds his usual style of conducting magnificent roadshows.

In all, the Karnataka Assembly election has brought about a turning point not only in politics but also in the overall electoral approach.

Translated by V. Mariappan.