

A Modi March

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Critics are worried about the rise of the BJP, the real alarm should be the fall of Congress **March seems to be Modi's month, witnessing his onward march**

It is not easy to analyse election results of five different States (Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur) in different parts of India (North, Central, Western and Northeast). The election results (with a thumping majority for the Congress in Punjab, the Bharatiya Janata Party in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and none having a majority in Goa and Manipur) are varied; it would be tough to weave a common narrative at the national level. Yet there are few trends, one could observe cutting across the electoral results from different parts of India.

BJP in UP & Uttarakhand and Congress in Punjab

Both the BJP and Congress have secured a fantastic win in UP and Uttarakhand, and Punjab, respectively. Both in terms of the number of votes polled and the number of seats won, there is a pattern in these three States. In Punjab Congress has won 77 seats out of 117; in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP has won 312 seats of 403, and in Uttarakhand, the BJP has won 57 seats out of a total of 70.

The performance of Congress in Punjab, perhaps is the only saving grace for the party, and also for Rahul Gandhi. In UP, the Congress has been wiped out—both in terms of number of votes secured and seats. Even the strong performance of the Congress in Punjab is predominantly linked to the anti-incumbency (against the ruling alliance of Shiromani Akali Dal and the BJP), than pro-Congress voting. But, nothing should take the credit away from Capt Amarinder Singh, whose contribution to the Congress win in Punjab is a dominant factor more than the impact of national leadership. Though the SAD-BJP alliance was in the doldrums, primarily due to a bad performance and charges of corruption, Amarinder Singh had to face a growing Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Punjab. The AAP has emerged as the second largest party, winning 20 seats and more importantly more than 23 percent of the votes polled. There was hype about the AAP; but at the ground level, the party could not convert this into votes.

For long Congress promoted loyalty-based leadership over performance. Many senior leaders have left and joined others, or started their own party. Senior Congress leader SM Krishna left. A former foreign minister and earlier the chief minister of Karnataka is the latest to leave

In UP, it was BJP all the way—winning 312 seats (out of 403) and more importantly securing close to 40 percent of the votes polled. Samajwadi Party, that has come second, could manage only 19 seats and around 21 percent of the votes polled. For the BJP this is no mean feat, given the electoral politics of the State with calculations and voting based on caste, class and religion. Though the infighting within the SP,

especially the family divide between the father and son Yadav affected the party's performance, the role played by the BJP, especially Modi and Shah, could not be underestimated. Modi, despite being an outsider, simply bulldozed the campaign.

The decline, nay fall of Congress in UP is dramatic. It could secure marginally above six percent of the votes polled in UP and a meagre three seats! Rahul Gandhi could take a dig at Modi, but did not come even close to mustering something like the latter's campaign. With the SP and BSP in a disarray, Rahul and Congress had an opportunity; but the results would show who the winner is.

The astounding success of the BJP in UP and the abysmal fall of the Congress has larger meaning for the national politics. It is small wonder that the BJP's strong performance in UP has shadowed its weak performance in three other States: Manipur, Goa and especially Punjab. Besides UP, the powerful performance of the BJP in Uttarakhand (57 out of 70 seats) and more than 46 percent of the votes polled is also primarily seen as an extension of its success in UP.

Goa and Manipur: Hung, yet...

And now for a quick look at the two States, Goa and Manipur with 40 and 60 seats, respectively. Though Congress has secured more seats, 17 and 28, respectively, it does not have the majority. With 13 and 21 seats in Goa and Manipur, the BJP has not done badly either.

The smaller parties hold the key, not only for government formation, but also for the running of the administration henceforth. The BJP seems to have won the confidence of smaller parties ahead of the Congress; though it will form the government immediately, in the long run, it will not be an easy task, as coalition politics sets in.

For the BJP, Manipur should be a part of a new trend for the party in India's Northeast. Earlier, it was able to defeat the Congress in Assam. The rise of the BJP and the decline of Congress in the Northeast has a larger political implication for the entire region.

From Hindutva to Moditva

Not many, especially the Modi critics, believed that the BJP would secure such a fantastic victory in UP and Uttarakhand, and be able to form governments in Goa and Manipur. The earlier losses, especially in the Delhi and Bihar State elections, according to Modi critics, punctured his image. Added to the above was the expected anti-Modi wave due to pangs of demonetization. But the results spoke differently.

It appears, demonetization was not a major electoral issue. Nor was the breast beating about the surgical strikes and a harsh strategy towards Pakistan. The recent elections in five States have certain common features relating to the BJP and Narendra Modi. If one consider the party's defeat in Punjab an exception (due to the anti-incumbency factor and the family politics of SAD leaders), a trend could be seen: the BJP expanding its presence in new areas, and deepening its presence in core areas.

Second, within the BJP, another trend has emerged: that of the rise and rise of Modi. He is no more a

leader from Gujarat. His performance in UP should be interpreted as one of the tallest BJP leaders today, perhaps even eclipsing Vajpayee and Advani. One could even extend this argument; if Advani had used the Hindutva project to take forward the BJP and himself, Modi seem to be evolving his own strategy: Moditva. And in the process he is building his own brand within the BJP.

The rise of Modi within the BJP is likely to become a factor in how the BJP's ideological allies, especially the Shiv Sena, and the BJP's ideological support base, loosely referred as the Sangh Parivar, looks. This rise will also assert Modi's position and even undermine BJP's non-ideological allies and regional Satraps from J&K to Karnataka.

The fall and fall of Congress

If the BJP is expanding its fortunes with Modi leading the charge, the opposite is taking place with Congress and Rahul Gandhi failing to stem the rot within.

Except the Punjab's, with every State election, Congress seems to be losing its bastion States, and even within the State especially those sub-regions that were traditionally known for Congress domination. For example, Amethi and around UP, has been a Congress fort electorally. Not any more.

One could make a rough comparison between the Pakistan Peoples Party in Pakistan and Congress today. The party is living on past glory, rather than present achievement or programme. The party is also living on the shadows of its former leaders; the new generation is unable or incapable of taking the party forward.

Rahul Gandhi has been working hard. Yet the results do not support the cause. Perhaps, the problem is elsewhere and the party needs to take a hard look at its internal organization. For long the party promoted loyalty-based leadership over performance. Many senior leaders have left the party and joined the others, or have started their own. The trend is obvious and is continuing even today, as could be seen from the latest departure of one of senior Congress leaders, SM Krishna. A former foreign minister and earlier the chief minister of Karnataka is the latest to leave Congress.

Though many people are critical of Rahul Gandhi's performance, the blame should go to Sonia Gandhi as well. She had a wonderful opportunity to rebuild the party, especially with Manmohan Singh being prime minister.

Though Modi's critics are worried about the rise of the BJP, the real alarm should be the fall of Congress. The party occupies an important political space in the Indian structure; its decline and fall will be difficult to replace. Who will fill this vacuum?

Next parliamentary election

Do the recent elections for the State assemblies forecast a trend, for the next parliamentary elections in 2019? One can make out a pattern. The Modi wave is continuing. As a national leader, perhaps, there is no one standing as tall as Modi is today. And this is likely to continue, despite the demonetization

problems. Perhaps, Brand Modi is being carefully built.

Second, the BJP is expanding its base all over, the only exception being South India. Especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the BJP has yet to have any meaningful presence; in West Bengal as well. Outside these States, one can see the expansion of the BJP, or partnering with a regional party.

The decline of Congress as a party, and an acceptable leader at the national level is an important political issue. A strong Congress leader is also important to keep the intra-party discipline within, as the party has always been known for its factional politics.

Does this mean, the BJP will win the next parliamentary elections? Given the current trends, the answer is likely unless Congress makes a remarkable revival, or/and regional parties come together at the national level to forge a strong third front.

Advantage Modi.

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