

Assembly Elections in India - The Myth and Reality of Congress Revival

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In the recently concluded elections to State Assemblies in Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh, the Congress has predictably managed to retain power in all the three states, triggering a growing media buzz regarding the revival of the Congress and the return of the old era of Congress domination.

A closer look at the poll outcome however reveals a number of holes in the story of Congress revival. In Haryana, the Congress tally has dropped from 67 to 40 while a resurgent Indian National Lok Dal finished a close second with more than 30 seats in its kitty. The dramatic revival of Om Prakash Chautala signifies nothing short of a huge backlash by the aggrieved electorate of rural Haryana. In Maharashtra too, the Congress- National Congress Party (NCP) combined tally fell one short of the majority mark and its vote share dropped by six per cent. The big news from the state is the rise of Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). More than anything else, it is the MNS factor which has helped the Congress by not only splitting the Shiv Sena vote, but also pushing a disillusioned electorate back to the Congress in search of some sense of safety and security from the MNS brand of divisive and aggressive politics.

The Congress would of course like to attribute its return to power to a 'positive mandate' from the electorate. But the ground reality in neither Maharashtra nor Haryana would endorse the Congress claim. Maharashtra is still reeling under the combined impact of agrarian crisis and economic recession while Haryana remains notorious for its retrograde and patriarchal social environment that continues to deny large numbers of dalits and women their basic human dignity and civil rights.

According to Maharashtra's state economic survey, three out of every eight residents are below the line. Every day since 2006, 1,800 people have lost their jobs. Regional disparity is quite glaring - per capita income in Vidarbha (Rs. 29,000) is only 40 per cent of the per capita income of a Mumbai resident (Rs 73,930). The corporate-builder-politician-bureaucrat nexus reigns supreme in the state even as real estate and share market have replaced the manufacturing industries of yesteryears as the biggest sources of wealth accumulation. Haryana too has a similar story to tell. Congress rulers in Delhi and Chandigarh keep showcasing Gurgaon as the shining star of economic boom, but beneath all the corporate glitter and gloss, there is little urban infrastructure and no industrial democracy in this hugely over-rated success-story.

By all accounts, the Congress win in these elections is more a victory by default aided by a weak opposition and the absence of any credible and consolidated Left-democratic challenge. Both in Maharashtra and Haryana, the BJP failed to make any headway - in fact, it suffered further erosion and this in turn has aggravated the chaos in the party. Also notable is the decline of the BSP in both Maharashtra and Haryana. The rise of the MNS in Maharashtra of course marks a major challenge to the working class movement in the state. In the 1960s, the Congress had facilitated the rise of the Shiv Sena to curb the Left trade union movement in and around Mumbai; four decades later the MNS is raising its head, once again with blessings from the Congress, giving a distorted and divisive expression to the popular anger against deindustrialization and joblessness.

As far as Arunachal Pradesh is concerned, election in the state continues to be viewed more in the context of border dispute and bilateral tension between India and China than as a reflection of the political situation and public mood in the state. Like most small states in the North-East, elections in Arunachal too are heavily influenced by money-power and bureaucratic manipulation. An NDTV correspondent covering Arunachal elections put the average amount spent by victorious Congress candidates at a staggering Rs. 5 crore per Assembly seat!

Far from returning to the old paradigm of Congress monopoly, Indian politics continues to evolve through the maze of multi-party competition. The forthcoming elections to the Jharkhand Assembly should provide further proof of this political diversity.

P.S.

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