

Saffron Wash? Not Quite, Not Yet

Why the regional thoroughbreds are the real winners in the assembly election sweepstakes

by Chaitanya Kalbag

The scene for India's regional politics was scripted by Conjeevaram Natarajan Annadurai in 1967. The screenwriter and playwright led his Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam to victory in Tamil Nadu (then Madras state), riding to power on resurgent Tamil nationalism and an anti-Hindi agitation.

The Congress, the party that dominated India's freedom struggle, has neither ruled Tamil Nadu since that defeat, nor Bihar in 26 years; or West Bengal since 1977. The last time a national party (Bharatiya Janata Party) ruled Uttar Pradesh was for 28 months in 1999-2000.

The Congress was turfed out of power in Assam with Thursday's state election results. The BJP's Assam win means it will rule a north-eastern state for the first time - but in coalition with two regional parties, the Asom Gana Parishad and the Bodoland People's Party.

Mamata Banerjee and J Jayalalithaa are unquestioned empresses of all they survey regionally. But a couple of boulders are sticking up through the avalanche. The BJP won three seats in West Bengal, up from zero in 2011; it still drew a blank in Tamil Nadu. The Congress won 44 seats this time in West Bengal, two more than in 2011. It won eight seats in Tamil Nadu, three more than in 2011. And it won the Union territory of Puducherry.

Let's look at vote percentages, because they show whether a party is really going up or down in popular support.

In 2016, the BJP's vote share in West Bengal shot up to 10.2% from 4.06% in 2011; the Congress's vote share also went up to 12.3% from 9.09%. In Tamil Nadu, the BJP's vote share stayed nearly the same (2.8% from 2.22%), while Congress's vote share actually shrank to 6.4% from 9.3%. Jayalalithaa's AIADMK had a higher vote share - 40.8% against 38.4% in 2011, but fewer seats (134 vs 150). In

West Bengal, however, Mamata's Trinamool Congress gained in vote share as well as in seats (44.9%, 211 seats against 38.93%, 184 seats in 2011).

Reign of the Regional Parties

Democracy works in wondrous ways in India's first-past-the-post election system. We should consider what happened in Assam. In the 2011 polls, the Congress got 39.39% of votes and 78 seats in the 126-seat assembly. The BJP got 11.47% and five seats (this went up to six after a by-election). This year, the Congress managed to get 31% of the votes, but its seats plunged by two-thirds to 26. The BJP actually trailed the Congress in vote share (29.5%) but its seats rocketed ten-fold to 60.

The BJP masterfully presented itself in regional clothing. Led by Sarbananda Sonowal, who will be the new CM, it kept up its drumbeat about protecting indigenous Ahom identity, promised it would throw out all illegal Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants, and also reached out to Assam's many ethnic groups, the mostly Marwari business community, and the (non-Assamese) melange working in its tea gardens. And let's not forget that the BJP won seven of Assam's 14 Lok Sabha seats in 2014, up from four in 2009.

Recollect, too, the incumbency and hubris billowing from three-term, 80-year-old Congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi.

Last August, Gogoi lost key lieutenant Himanta Biswa Sarma, who carries more than a whiff of scandal but is described as a modern Chanakya by bilious rivals. Gogoi was contemptuous about Sarma's exit, and also failed to join hands with Assam's biggest Muslim party, the All India United Democratic Front. AIUDF working president Aditya Langthasa told me the BJP successfully polarised Hindus and Muslims, and the Muslim vote in turn split between the Congress and the AIUDF. From 18 seats in 2011, the AIUDF, which had boasted it would be a kingmaker if there was a hung assembly, dropped to 13 seats, even though its vote share crept up to 13% from 12.57%. In fact AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal lost to a Congress rival.

In Kerala, the BJP cracked the door open, winning a solitary but first ever seat in the southern state. From 6.03% in 2011, the BJP's vote share rose to 10.5% in 2016, almost the same as in the 2014 parliamentary elections. But this time, the BJP astutely teamed up with a brand-new regional party, the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena which champions the Ezhava community. Launched last December, the BDJS contested 34 seats in the 140-seat assembly. It did not win a single seat but got 3.9% of the votes.

Kerala already has a multitude of parties but the BJP-BDJS alliance succeeded in hitting both the

victorious Left Democratic Front and the incumbent Congress-led United Democratic Front.

The BJP is justifiably exultant about Assam, but is India's map drenched in saffron yet? Not really.

Although there was some excited talk that the BJP rules 46% of India's landmass, and the Congress 11%, things are not so cut and dried. The BJP now governs nine states. The Congress governs six states plus Puducherry. Fourteen states, including Jammu & Kashmir where the BJP is a junior partner, and the capital territory of Delhi are ruled by regional parties.

Those regional parties that speak the language of development and grow their economies will win over and over again. For instance, the Biju Janata Dal's Naveen Patnaik is now in his fourth term as chief minister of Odisha. 'National' parties like the BJP and Congress may end up ruling only at the Centre. The Congress can hope to someday win back the Centre only if it subjects itself to major surgery and a leadership change, which seems unlikely any time soon.

For the present, despite the BJP's slightly overblown celebration of a Congress-mukt Bharat, prime minister Narendra Modi, who speaks often of cooperative federalism, probably sees the writing on the electoral wall. The empire has a habit of striking back. ■



The author is a former editor of Reuters Asia

Fourteen states and Delhi are ruled by regional parties. These parties that speak the language of development will win over and over again

NP AV

PC, Laptop
Tablet, Mobile

सुरक्षा

 92.72.70.70.50
98.22.88.25.66

india com
antivirus

FOR LEASE PLUG & PLAY BIOTECH PARK

75,000 sq. ft. Biotech Park inclusive of all infrastructure required for biotech research

Location: On New International Airport Road, Hebbal, Bangalore
Interested parties may respond to:

**vasants.vlf@gmail.com or
Call : 09845010100**