

## **CONGRESS A SERIOUS CLAIMANT TO POWER IN CHHATTISGARH**

The recently concluded Assembly election in Chhatisgarh in all likelihood is set to throw a surprise by bringing Congress at par with BJP as a serious claimant to power after 15 years. The Congress is having slight edge in Chhattisgarh giving it an opportunity to return to power.

### **VOTE SHARE & SEATS PROJECTION IN CHHATTISGARH**

<b>PARTY</b>	<b>VOTE PERCENTAGE</b>	<b>SEATS</b>
CONGRESS	41	43 – 45
BJP	40	40 – 42
JCC-BSP	11	2 - 3
OTHERS	8	0 - 1

**\*Margin of error +or- three percent**

This is the outcome of a pre-poll survey conducted by Hyderabad based political research organisation, Peoples Pulse, in the first week of November, 2018.

The report was compiled and prepared by Peoples Pulse senior associate Dr. Sajjan Kumar, a Ph.D from CPS, JNU and co-author of 'Everyday Communalism' published by Oxford University Press. The survey employed both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the people disposition.

Despite the popularity of Chief Minister Raman Singh, BJP seems to face a dissonance with the aspiration of the electorates. At a time when people across the region, caste and ethnicity wants to move ahead from the patron-client mode of politics, the heavy reliance of the ruling BJP on the same, especially in the case of the Tribes, has hit a plateau.

Congress on the other hand is yet to emerge as the popular choice. However, the ouster of Ajit Jogi from the party has ensured that the remaining Congress leaders like Bhupesh Baghel, T.S Singhdeo, TamradhwajSahu and Charandas Mahant have better managed their factional politics, thereby limiting the damage the grand old party has been incurring since 2003.

When we asked to rate the popularity of the chief ministerial candidates, the incumbent Raman Singh was well ahead with 38 percent. Ajit Jogi and Bhupesh Baghel followed with 17 and 16 per cent respectively.

## **BSP - AJIT JOGI FACTOR DAMAGED BJP MORE THAN CONGRESS FACTIONALISM**

While much speculation is about the damage the Ajit Jogi - Mayawati would cause the Congress, the field study indicates otherwise. Chhattisgarh has 10 Assembly seats reserved for the Dalits which is concentrated in the central plains lying between the tribe dominated southern and northern parts of the state. In the last Assembly election, BJP retained power for the third consecutive term in 2013 by having a spectacular performance in these constituencies by winning 9 of these 10 seats. The fact that Jogi-Mayawati factor is limited primarily to these seats indicate they are likely to damage the BJP rather than the Congress. It was also found that more Dalits are inclined towards Congress and JCC-BSP rather than the BJP on account of several factors like price rise and the SC-ST Act controversy.

## **SWING VOTERS HOLD THE KEY**

Another factor is the key category of undecided and neutral voters. The fact is a majority of those who voted for the BJP the last time were not sure of their choice ahead of polling. This indicates that BJP voters were likely to swing to Congress and other parties – a trend which doesn't augur well for the ruling dispensation.

## **FACTIONALISM COSTS BJP**

Another factor that is likely to dent the prospects of the BJP is the emerging factionalism within the party. BJP Rajya Sabha Member Saroj Pandey who have been vocal about change in the state leadership has been attempting to keep the CM's post open for 2018. Her apparent closeness to party president Amit Shah and corresponding perception that she has been instrumental in denial of tickets close to Raman Singh has sent a feeling among a significant section of the voters that the Chief Minister has not been calling the shots of late. This might demoralise party workers and sympathisers.

## **TRIBAL FATIGUE WITH RICE POLITICS**

The introduction of disbursement of rice at Rs 2/kg for BPL families covering almost all the tribal and Dalits along with a significant section of OBCs not only paid rich dividends to the BJP in 2008 Assembly election but also got incumbent CM nicknamed as ‘Chaur Baba’ (Rice Baba), especially among the STs facing acute poverty. After a decade of the rice scheme, the tribals wish to move out of ‘hand-to mouth’ welfare measures that treats them as passive sections who just need food without nursing aspirations about employment, among others. The new tribal generation shares the grudge that they are not part of the economic opportunity that the state claims to have achieved in the last 15 years. The failure of the ruling government to come out with alternative measures and establish a resonance with them indicates that it is likely to witness the desertion of a significant section of the tribes in spite of the knee-jerk measures like distributing free smart phones.

## **PRICE-RICE AND UNEMPLOYMENT HITTING BJP**

While a majority of the tribes and Dalits in the state are fatigued by ‘rice-politics’, the majority of lower middle class and other sections in the state are perturbed by price rise and unemployment. Simultaneously, a sense of relative deprivation is also there among these sections who nurse a feeling that the government caters primarily to the interest of tribes and Dalits and has effectively abandoned the rest. This is bad news for the BJP’s prospects in the central parts of the state.

## **TRIBE DOMINATED SOUTH AND NORTH CHHATTISHGARH TO FAVOUR CHANGE**

The Naxal affected Bastar division in the south and Sarguja in the north are likely to lean towards the Congress as there would be a direct contest between the BJP and the Congress. As mentioned earlier, majority of the tribes are fatigued with the approach being treated as just rice-needing sections, without other economic aspirations. The tribal youth are anguished with the lack of economic avenues for them wherein the issue of unemployment has emerged as the central factor. Price rice has worsened their woes. While the southern belt is affected by Maoists, in the northern Sarguja division, the takeover of the area by mining companies has alienated the tribes. They feel that the change is being forced on them even though they are excluded from benefitting from that change.

## **CENTRAL CHHATISGARH TO HAVE A SPLIT VERDICT**

The complexity and uncertainty towards the final outcome lies in the central plains where the contests are triangular in several seats. Therefore, Dalits and a section of OBCs would choose differently. Since this area commands maximum number of Assembly seats, the role of Dalits and lower middle class would be crucial. As pointed above, the Dalit vote would split between the Congress, BJP and JCC-BSP leaving the lower middle class to decide the final outcome. The fact that many of them believe that the incumbent government failed to check price-rise and provide employment, the Congress is likely to emerge as a better claimant among the three players in the region.

## CONCLUSION

In this wave less election there is neither strong pro-incumbency nor is the Congress capturing the imagination of those who are disillusioned and dissatisfied.

First, the tribe dominated north and southern region is preferring change. Second, the lower middle class are vexed with price-rise and lack of employment opportunities. Third, the Jogi - Mayawati factor is damaging the BJP more than Congress.

The Congress is well placed to emerge as the beneficiary and set make a comeback to power after 15 years without doing enough to earn that status in Chhattisgarh.

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