

Telangana Mood Report



MOOD OF THE PEOPLE

A Report on People's Opinions in Telangana in the Wake of Elections 2018

INTRODUCTION

People's Pulse, Hyderabad-based political research organization, has done an extensive field study of eight integrated districts (21 present districts) in Telangana to elicit people's opinions and gauge the mood of the people. This report presents preliminary observations and draws conclusions.

The research team of People's Pulse consisting of research scholars spent 15 days in the field, travelling 3,137 km, visiting more than 1,000 people in 102 villages (70 per cent of them were in the interiors and away from the main roads) to gain insight into the public mood and the prevailing election atmosphere. The study was done from **OCTOBER 3 TO OCTOBER 17, 2018**.

The team held focused and in-depth discussions with farmers, farm labour, women, youth, Minorities, Dalits, Backward Classes and communities from the forward castes. Detailed discussions were also held with employees, both from government and private employees.

The survey covered *Rangareddy, Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda, Khammam, Medak, Warangal, Karimnagar and Nizamabad districts (Rangareddy Vikarabad, Mahabubnagar, Jogulamba Gadwal, Wanaparthy, Nagarukurnool, Nalgonda, Suryapet, Khammam, Bhadrachari Kothagudem, Mahabubabad, Warangal Rural, Jayashankar Bhupalpally, Peddapalli, Karimnagar, Jagtial, Rajanna Sircilla, Nizamabad, Kamareddy, Medak and Sangareddy districts)*, spread across 44 Legislative Assembly constituencies.

The main focus of this study is to understand the peoples mood about the government dissolving the Assembly before nine months. As a result of this we had to focus on the alliances being attempted by Opposition parties, particularly the Congress, TDP, CPI and TJS, the mood about the TRS government's performance and the disposition of the voters towards their sitting MLAs. During the course of this, we gained insight about the popular leaders, the role of the BJP and the Bahujan Left Front.

It is important to mention that the present TRS government is the first after statehood was granted to Telangana, which was a decades long dream for the people. Alongside we dwelt on whether the aspirations of the people that their lives and fortunes would improve after statehood were met and if so to what extent.

The ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi is pretty strong in the perception of the voters. There, however, is a tangible weakening of that perception from before the dissolution of the Assembly on September 6 and after that. The feeling that the TRS is unbeatable is no longer there. The reason is that people have now suddenly found an opportunity to ventilate their feelings comprehensively after the 2014 elections. The two contributing factors for this is that the media failed to highlight or even report the issues that were playing on the peoples mind. The other is that the main Opposition party, the Congress, was singularly hopeless in bringing issues into the public domain and engage the people on those aspects. Despite all these, the fact remains that the only leader having a good pan-Telangana image is Mr Chandrashekar Rao. There is no leader anywhere around who can rival his standing.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE FIELD STUDY

- ❖ The first thing is that there is no support from the people for dissolving the Assembly. On the contrary people are upset and are openly questioning why Mr Chandrashekar Rao went in for early elections when they had given him a mandate for a full five year term.
- ❖ There is a general feeling that the government has not delivered what it promised during the 2014 elections. “It is only a government of words but not deeds,” was a commonly-heard refrain.
- ❖ People are not able to recollect many welfare schemes, though the government claims it has announced and implemented over 75 welfare schemes in the last four years.
- ❖ Even though recall value exists for about half-a-dozen welfare schemes, there are objections, apprehensions and suggestions for improvement that are outweighing appreciation.

- ❖ In most of the constituencies, there is a lot of anti-incumbency against sitting TRS MLAs. A good number of MLAs who have been re-nominated are facing protests from their constituents.
- ❖ While rooted politicians and MLAs with more than two terms have reputation and goodwill, newcomers and the first time MLAs have become notorious for not being available to the people and not responding to their issues.
- ❖ In a few districts in north Telangana, though the voters expressed their discontent, they wanted to vote for the TRS to give them another chance in power to prove themselves. Alongside they also harboured a fear that the programmes might be stopped midway if it doesn't come to power again.
- ❖ The creation of new districts has no effect. People don't know why it was done. Instead of simplifying administration and governance people continue to face hardships because of the new dispensation.
- ❖ Overall there is no governance to talk about at the grassroots level. There is no accountability among the employees. On the contrary a good section of them think they are a law unto themselves as they claim to have played the crucial role in the separate statehood movement. As a consequence corruption has reached high levels as the required checks and balances in administration have gone creaky.
- ❖ Such is the callousness of the administration, the lack of accountability and irresponsibility that even though the government unveiled several schemes the delivery systems failed. Subsequently, the beneficiaries were clueless on how to access a particular scheme. Thereby, the government failed to receive the required mileage.

ELECTION ISSUES

As the elections are almost eight weeks away when we were on the field, election issues have not yet crystallized and the popular opinion on issues was unclear. However, some significant issues are emerging based on the people's opinions on the performance of the government, their rating of the government in terms of implementing pre-poll promises, their assessment of the welfare schemes implemented by the government and local problems.

Though several welfare schemes have been announced and implemented in the last four years and almost every household has one beneficiary of one scheme or the other, recall value of those schemes is inversely proportional. Out of more than 75 welfare schemes implemented by the government, people are able to recall not more than half a dozen. But then people have different and critical opinions on even the schemes which reached them. In many cases they have suggestions to improve the schemes, suggesting that even though they are beneficiaries they are not totally satisfied. Some of these issues have the potential to become major election issues. The same issues may be used by the other contestants to dent the ruling party vote and even defeat the ruling party candidates. Thus it is necessary to go into the issues in detail.

RYTHU BANDHU: This is one of the flagship programmes of the TRS government providing Rs 4,000 per acre per crop in cash as input for farming. The scheme was announced by the government last year and the farmers have received one instalment. Though more than 58 lakh farmers received this benefit there are disappointments. While this scheme is applicable to land owners instead of actual cultivators, the major purpose of providing capital input is not completely fulfilled. At least 30 percent of the actual farmers in every village are not land owners but are cultivating the farm as tenants. This entire section is opposing the scheme. Their objection is that it is only providing additional income for the title-holders but not helping agriculture. Another major section, who have marginal land holdings of two acres or less say they get a meagre assistance while the large land holders of 10 acres or more are getting larger amounts. They say that the government could have set an upper limit for providing this scheme. Another major objection from the farmers was that they are juxtaposing this Rs 4,000 assistance with the rise in the prices of fertilisers and other agricultural inputs. They are drawing particular attention to the decrease of 5 kg in quantity and rise of Rs 400 in the price of complex fertiliser and saying whatever is being given with one hand is being taken away by the other hand. Farmers at several places demanded remunerative prices instead of Rs 4,000 per acre per annum.

CROP LOAN WAIVER: Though farmers treat this loan waiver as a boon, they also think that the way it was implemented did not provide them any benefit. As the government provided the assistance in four instalments, the interest on the remaining debt piled up and finally the farmers feel their crop loans remained intact. In almost all cases they immediately recall the loan waiver scheme by the UPA government in 2008 which was a one-time settlement that completely relieved them from debt. When the scheme was announced then, there were a section of farmers who already repaid the loans. To see that they feel they were not shortchanged the state government gave them an incentive for their prompt repayment. Now as the old loans are not cleared completely, farmers could not avail new loans.

UNINTERRUPTED POWER SUPPLY: Provision of 24-hour power supply was well received by farmers in several places and this was listed as one of the first achievements of the government. However, in some places where water table is low, some farmers said they never asked for 24-hour power. They explained it leads to more exploitation of water by the rich and those with larger landholdings thereby depleting water to the lesser large holdings.

IRRIGATION WATER: The irrigation projects, contemplated by the government have come to fruition only in some constituencies and people in the other constituencies are hopeful.

DOUBLE BEDROOM HOUSING: This is a much touted welfare scheme of the government in which it planned to build about 3 lakh double bedroom for the homeless poor. However, by the government's own admission it could complete only a little more than 9,000 houses by the time it went for early elections. The scheme has raised expectations and aspirations of the people and hence the disappointment was very visible. Almost in every village failure of this programme was on top of the respondents' minds. Out of the 102 villages the team visited, the scheme was satisfactorily implemented only in three villages. Even here, people complained that the homeless in the village did not get it, or even when the houses were constructed they were given to people having houses just because they were close to the ruling party leaders. There were even bizarre situations. The house was constructed on a land belonging to the owner but was allotted to another person. In some cases, the failure was justified by TRS cadres and sympathisers that there was no government land to take up this scheme. In some villages, people recalled the housing scheme of the previous Congress government where people were given financial assistance to build their own house on their own land and therefore found it better.

PENSIONS: Most of the old and physically challenged people in villages are happy about the increased pensions. However, some people expressed that the earlier method of disbursal was friendly towards them as they were given the monthly pension amount in the village post office. Now the pensions are being deposited in a bank forcing them to travel long distances and stand in queues to get their amount.

THREE ACRES TO LANDLESS DALITS: This is another important welfare scheme announced by the government where each landless Dalit family would be provided with three acres of land. This announcement reached almost all landless Dalit families in the state, but actually, by the government's own admission its implementation did not reach not more than 10,000 families out of about three lakh landless Dalit families. Except in one village out of the 102 villages surveyed this scheme was not implemented and people expressed their disappointment.

EMPLOYMENT: This was one of the major drivers of the separate state movement and during the 2014 elections the TRS promised reduction of unemployment by providing a job to each house. Even after the formation of the state the government promised to fill more than one lakh government jobs, but by the government's own admission it could not fill more than 26,000 jobs. Most of the educated unemployed youth are very angry with the performance of the government in this aspect and they may influence all the votes in their respective households. In fact, a youth said in his father's presence that his brother asked his father and all the other members to vote for TRS in 2014 and now will ask for voting out the TRS as he is still unemployed.

MISSION BHAGIRATHA: This is another prestigious programme where the government planned to provide drinking water to all the households across state. In fact the chief minister categorically said he would not seek votes if he did not provide water to each house. However, except in a couple of villages, *Mission Bhagiratha* drinking water has not reached households. In almost every village the team saw that pipelines were laid but water connections were not given. In several villages, people said they did not need such costly water in the first place as they had their own potable water systems in place. This say that instead the scheme should have been implemented in select villages which suffered the fluoride problem, instead of applying it to all villages.

MISSION KAKATIYA: This important scheme was taken up with much fanfare during the first two years, but now has kind of faded from the peoples memory. They say that these days only contractors have benefitted forcing some to sarcastically dub it '*Commission Kakatiya*'.

KALYANA LAKSHMI & SHAADI MUBARAK: In almost every village people recalled this government scheme and said eligible families received this financial assistance when the girl is being married. However, there are some complaints of corruption and misappropriation.

SHEEP DISTRIBUTION: This scheme to provide sheep to the shepherd community to financially empower them was implemented in many villages, but in most of the villages people said it was the brokers and sheep traders who benefitted instead of shepherds.

FISH DISTRIBUTION: This scheme was not much recalled by people though 90 per cent of the villages had tanks and other water bodies.

BATHUKAMMA SAREES: The government in a novel way announced and implemented a scheme which provided a sari to each woman during the *Bathukamma* festival. This scheme in the process provided relief to problem-ridden weavers by providing them work. However, almost all women the team met expressed displeasure on the quality of the sarees they received and said they felt insulted by the government.

RELATIONSHIP WITH BJP: The Muslim respondents felt the TRS has a covert relationship with the BJP and expressed their disappointment. There, however, was no major resentment as they chose to be indifferent to this.

SETTLERS FROM ANDHRA: In Khammam and parts of Medak and Nizamabad, settlers from Andhra play a significant role. In 2014 elections most of them voted for the TRS and even the ruling party provided space to the leaders from the section. However, during the 2018 election run-up, the chief minister in a couple of his speeches used highly intemperate language against N Chandrababu Naidu. As the speeches were fresh when the team was in the field, people from among the settlers took strong objection and said they may have to think twice about their support to TRS. Some settlers said the CM should not have spoken in that tenor. The settlers are more in favour of TDP and also questioned where the TRS would have been without the TDP.

OPINION ON LOCAL MLA: Most of the people were more concerned about the behaviour, relationship and performance of their own MLA than the overall performance of the government. Those MLAs who maintained good relationship with them, who were helpful and who brought welfare & development schemes to their village were seen as better leaders, irrespective of their party affiliation. In this way, most newcomers, particularly first time MLAs of TRS were dismissed as non-performers.

PEOPLES RESPONSES

POSITIVE

- ❖ 24 gantala current evaru ivvaledu, modatisari KCR ichchadu
- ❖ Neella gurinchi evaru aalochinchedu, adi KCR ghanata
- ❖ Naalugellallane anni ayipotayaa?
- ❖ Malla raakapote ippudu sagamlo unna panulu aagipotayi
- ❖ Cheppinavi konni cheyaledu, kaani cheppanivi chesaadu
- ❖ Government bhomi ledi ganukane double bed room illu kattaledu
- ❖ Bhoomi dorakaledu ganukane Dalitulaku bhoomi ivvaledu
- ❖ Kalyana Lakshmi & Shaadi Mubarak has very positive results. It helped us conduct marriages grandly
- ❖ KCR kit is a useful program

NEGATIVE

- ❖ Tandridemundi, nadipedi koduke gada
- ❖ 4,000 ichchindu gaani, madnu kattaku penchindu gada
- ❖ Naalugu velu ichchi padi velu nokkutunnaadu
- ❖ 1 acre, 2 acres vaallaku nalugu velu chai beedilake ayipoyinayi, 50-60 acres vaallu laabhapaddaru
- ❖ Raithu Bandhu unnonike dakkindi, lenoniki ledi
- ❖ Raithu Bandhu adiginamaa, maaku gittubaatu dharalu iste chaalu, bichcham emi akkarledu
- ❖ 4,000 taaalimpuku ichchindru gaani kooragaayalaku ichchindraa?

- ❖ Koti aasalu, jarigindi ledu
- ❖ Maatala vyavahaarama gaani chetalu levu
- ❖ Mollodu kosindu, kaapodu tinnadu annatto, chenodu balisindu, chesinodu peekindu
- ❖ Batukamma cheeralu pandulaku kattataaniki koodu paniki raavu
- ❖ Manchineellu ichchedaaka votes adaganannaadu, ippudetla adugutunnadu?
- ❖ Pipes company ki laabham, Bhageeratha neellu vachchedi ledu
- ❖ Ooriki rendu baavulu tavvite saripoyedaaniki Mission Bhagiratha enduku?
- ❖ Edo gimmick cheste tappa tirigi raadu
- ❖ 2014lo kaaryakartalu leru, mana Telangana ani janam votes esindru. Ippudu kaaryakartalu unnaru gaani voters lo Telangana sentiment ledu
- ❖ Emi Bangaru Telangana? Bangaru rekulu kottindru, ippudu peekkapotunnaru
- ❖ Neellu eeyane techchindaa, antaku mundu unnave. Kaaluvala meeda poolu jallindu
- ❖ Amarula kutumbaalaku emi cheyaledu
- ❖ Annitlo velu pettindu gaani, edi poorti cheyaledu
- ❖ Nuvvu cheyyavu, nenu eyyanu
- ❖ Manduku paisaku vote padadu
- ❖ Mundara deepam petti, venukaku mokkinattu
- ❖ Ye okka pani cheyyale. 1 per cent chesindu, 99 per cent cheyyale. Anni vaalla dike chesukunnadu
- ❖ Mammalni ammukuntunnadu, malla geliste pooraaga ammukuntadu
- ❖ Modati rendu samvatsaraalu choosinam, ippudu vyatirekam ayinam
- ❖ Pathakaalu kaaryakartalake andinayi, prajalaku kaadu
- ❖ Bhoomi lenodu bhoomiki baruvu annattunnadi prabhutvam

- ❖ Lopallopala udukutunnadi
- ❖ Mochetiki bellam raasi naakamantunnaduate
- ❖ Memu maadigalamainam, vaallu redlu, patella ayindru
- ❖ Evaru vachchi chesedi emi ledu, andaroo okate
- ❖ Podu lands being cultivated for generations have been snatched away in the name of Haritha Haram
- ❖ Singur waters are diverted for Hyderabad depriving thousands of farmers their irrigation needs
- ❖ Despite the promise of reopening Nizam Sugar Factory within 100 days, nothing was done in four years
- ❖ The promise of providing enhanced reservation to Muslims and STs was not kept.



PEOPLES PERCEPTION ON POLITICAL PARTIES

TELANGANA RASHTRA SAMITHI

The biggest strength and the largest weakness of the TRS is KCR himself. With an unimpeachable knowledge of Telangana, he is an excellent communicator, again the likes of are not on the political landscape of Telangana. Since the party's inception in 2001 till 2014 the party had no core vote and one of the reasons for this is that KCR repeatedly said the TRS is a party with a single agenda - separate statehood for Telangana. On this plank alone he ran the TRS.

After coming to power in 2014 the TRS managed to create a kind of core vote through individual benefits and KCR's belief that reviving caste based professions (kula vruthulu) like distribution of sheep and fish. The other shade of individual benefits is gifts like Ramzan Tohfa and Bathukamma sarees. Alongside the promises that different communities would have their respective bhavans or buildings in Hyderabad and in districts has some acceptance among those respective communities.

This had his benefit as the TDP began fading away as a political force and even as a political entity. It's important to mention that the core vote of the TDP was the Backward Classes and today a significant number of them have migrated to the TRS.

The sitting MLAs, including those who crossed over to the TRS are a huge problem for the party. Out of the 44 Assembly segments the team visited, disappointment with the government was almost all pervasive. A few constituencies were an exception. Though the Opposition candidates in the respective segments were not finalized by the time of the visit, a majority said they would prefer whoever the Opposition proposes against the sitting TRS MLA. In some constituencies the TRS sitting MLAs have slender winning chances if the Opposition candidate is too weak or the anti- government vote splits among the candidates.

This being so KCR encouraged an entirely self-centric kind of politics and governance. Everything revolved around him and no other leader or minister was in public eye. People say that in the last two years, particularly in 2018, he started projecting his son, KT Rama Rao. The other two leaders who enjoyed visibility were his daughter Mrs K Kavita and his nephew Harish Rao. At the same time most of those who were with him since 2001 and took on various responsibilities for his sake and for the statehood movement were neglected. Today they consider themselves as second class citizens and openly say that this is not the reality they worked for. On the other hand those who crossed over from other parties enjoyed the pride of place and this caused heartburn not just among those who were sidelined, but from the hardcore pro-statehood activists and sympathizers on the field.

KCR is the only campaigner for the TRS and at the risk of repetition, he is the communicator and is the only leader having a statewide appeal. Now the biggest challenges for KCR are four issues rolled into one. He needs to reason and convince the people why he needed to dissolve the Assembly nine months ahead of time. He needs to explain why double bed room houses for the homeless were not built and an action plan for its implementation if he is voted to power. He needs to explain why he failed to set targets employing youth in government jobs. Finally and just as importantly, he needs to inform under what circumstances he made the promise that he would not seek votes if tapped drinking water is available in every household.

These gain prominence for the basic reason there is a section which believes that the works that KCR has launched midway would be stopped if he loses power. He has to establish a connection with such belief and the last three issues. Frankly from what we saw on the field there is no other way. The so-called sentiment is non-existent.

Now there is another perception among the people. They are of the belief that the elections were advanced only to pave the way for his son, KTR, to become the chief minister. So, KCR has to stress that he is not leaving the state unless all the good work that he has initiated for the people is completed. Another challenge he created for himself is making fresh promises. He has thrown himself to the accusation why he did not implement them when he was in power. And in any case fresh promises by a ruling party seeking another term in government are not viewed kindly by the people. KCR has to literally pull a rabbit out of the hat to deal with this.

He has to drive home the point that he was sincere in his efforts to see that all those would come to fruition by the time he calls for elections. But then all he needs is another term to complete the deliverables. This challenge might well be met effectively as he has the communication skills and most importantly, the people are not hell bent to throw him out.

The biggest problem KCR created for he is that he totally and irrevocably neglected the party. Today if there are TRS leaders are at the village level it is because they can't adjust with the Congress, they TDP is nowhere and many find the BJP without a future in Telangana. They are not with the TRS because of KCR's efforts, rather ironically despite the lack of his efforts. The general feeling is that these leaders happen to be with the TRS only because the party is in power.

Over time party sympathizers, particularly those who worked for the party's victory in 2014 discovered that KCR is no longer interested in them or their political aspirations or their future. KCR, who is a excellent communicator, no longer has a connect with his own party workers. Today they say that when they are countered on issues by the local village folk, they are unable to tackle it. The truth is they don't speak, unless they are in a group. What is palpable is the lack of connect with KCR has deprived them of the conviction to counter criticism. They have understood that their leaders, the party's second level leaders, actually have no presence with KCR. This has crystallized into a peculiar situation where they just don't have the passion to drive the party to victory.

To compound matters those who are moonlighting in the party, have evolved into a kind of political brokers. They play favourites and unless one curries their favour, one is not in the scheme of things in the hierarchy. So the TRS has shifted from the control of the party leaders to the play ground of brokers, whose self-interest is paramount. This has further caused a situation where a good number of party workers do not find working for the party a meaningful venture.

A TRS village level leader said the party never ever paid people to attend their meetings. But this culture is now rampant. He pointed to a few meetings which KCR addressed and said it is a fact that people are paid Rs 200 to be ferried to the public meeting venue. His summarized that once the party begins paying people for their attendance, it is proof that the leadership has lost its relationship with the second rung leaders.

The problem for the TRS comes from another angle as the people believe that Harish Rao has been neglected. They feel that he was with the party since day one, but is not being given the importance he deserves. Interestingly, while people are vocal in their criticism about the family rule, people own Harish Rao because they are extremely sympathetic towards him. One person asked why he is subjected to humiliation when his experience and political acumen could be put to use.

CONGRESS

The immediate thing that comes to the peoples mind when one mentions the Congress is that the party never reflected their concerns. There is a unanimous feeling that the Congress has been a miserable failure as the main Opposition party. To add to this is the perception that every other leader is projecting oneself as the next chief minister or a place in the Cabinet and therefore they are not united and not cogent. The other unanimous thing is that when we talked about the Congress, most of the time the question we faced is who would be the leader. The other response was dismissive as they asked who the alternative is for KCR.

Yet, when we visited the constituencies we found strong Congress leaders. Further the core vote of the party is largely intact. The overall feeling of the average voter is that the Congress can be downright foolish, but could make sense. This is the reason why Congress leaders find listeners in Telangana.

It is strange that the party is yet to hit the ground as in election mode as it was not found working in a majority of the constituencies we visited. So understandably the party workers are openly stating that their leaders are yet to return from Hyderabad.

The Congress today is deriving its strength from the anti-incumbency against sitting TRS MLAs. In fact people told us that under the circumstances they don't have any other alternative but a Congress candidate. The Congress has one more reason to be happy as the voters who drifted to the YSR Congress have returned to their fold. The YSR Congress polled 3.36 percent of the vote in 2014.

The main Opposition, the Congress has an equally important challenge. Of critical importance, perhaps too critical, is that it does not yield too many seats to the TDP, CPI and TJS. The reality of these parties' strengths and weaknesses should not be lost on the Congress leaders. If they are arm twisted into giving disproportionately high seats to their partners, then the electoral game would be in tennis terms return to 'deuce', both the TRS and alliance would be equal footing. That would half the battle lost for the Congress. To put it simply, the contest in 2018 would essentially be bipolar - TRS vs Congress.

The other challenge for this formation is whether they would stick to the issues, narrate a positive agenda and thereby establish a robust connects with the voter. They have already slipped once. KCR used highly intemperate and objectionable language against the potential allies - Congress and TDP. The Congress warned him against repeating such language. Instead of stopping there, leaders of all standing and no standing began abusing and calling him names literally on a daily basis. This is an example of how KCR succeeded to having them fall into his trap. He used awful language and watched the peoples issues almost fade away from the electoral picture. KCR is certain to try a different trap. The Congress needs to learn from one week ago that there is a difference between reaction and response. What it now also needs to know is that there is a world of a difference between offering response or ignoring the irritant.

The Congress and their allies have not yet taken their election promises to the people so far. There are only 50 days left for the elections. The main promises of loan waiver of Rs 2 lakh to farmers, doubling of pensions, unemployment dole, etc need to be taken to the grassroots swiftly and aggressively. They also have to factor how much people believe in these promises, for instance do farmers think waiving Rs 2 lakh is feasible. Here they have to come together and convince that this is their basic aim and speak about their track record of waiving loans earlier.

The biggest apprehension among the people with the Congress is that they would fight among themselves for power and posts and thereby push their needs and their concerns down the priority list. They have to endeavour to send across a message that they are united as they are bound by a sense of purpose in 2018.

BJP

People do not find BJP as a serious contender in this election. Therefore the BJP president's claims that they would improve is not reflected on the ground. In reality, the BJP does not form part of the political discussion. Voters are no longer enamoured by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Majority of the people recall the difficulties they had to face during demonetization. Now, people are pointing to GST saying it is the root of all evil. Add to this the spiraling petrol and diesel prices is further making things messy for the BJP.

The BJP might have ruined a good opportunity to truly strengthen them in Telangana. Despite being in power at the Centre, they failed to aggressively deliver a scheme in Telangana and thereby allow the state unit to showcase themselves. The BJP would do exceedingly well if they protect their share of five seats as protecting their 2014 vote of 7 percent seems unlikely.

LEFT PARTIES

The CPI and CPI-M are no longer on the political landscape. Their traditional strongholds were Nalgonda and Khammam and even not a single person was heard talking about them. These parties seem like relics of the past and have receded in public memory. The CPI-M state secretary did a padayatra of more than 3,000 kilometres. Set aside the fact that people are not talking about it, most people do not remember hearing it at all. The CPI-M floated the Bahujan Left Front, which is nowhere to be seen. The CPI is attempting to ally with the Congress and the TDP. If they achieve any representation because of this, they owe these parties a deep debt of gratitude.

The Jana Sena and YSR Congress have no presence and any pretence from their about their potential could be dismissed at face value.

MIM

MIM is limited to the Old City and is a friendly party with the TRS. The appeal of the Owaisi brothers is limited to Old City and their friendship with the ruling party might have helped the Muslims not being antagonistic to the TRS. Despite this, Muslims in fair measure support the TRS as the efforts of KCR in wooing them have paid off. The Muslims, however, do not consider the MIM as the torch bearers of their community.

TELANGANA JANA SAMITHI

There is a lot of respect for Prof Kodandaram who floated the Telangana Jana Samithi. People are of the firm belief that he was one of the main torch bearers of the separate statehood movement and that once statehood was achieved Chandrashekar Rao sidelined him.

Despite this the fact that he has floated a political party and has morphed into a politician has not registered itself among the people. The earlier assessment that he would be able to dent into the hardcore pro-Telangana vote is not evident now. It is fairly certain that his impact in the 2018 Assembly elections would be less than minimal. He would be doing himself a dis-service if he ventures into electoral politics now.

Having said that, the Opposition alliance once it fructifies should utilize him as one of the main campaigners, given the stature he enjoys. His ability to articulate the government's failures would in itself be one of the potent weapons in the hands of the Opposition.

MAHAKUTAMI FACTOR

There is total acceptability for Mahakutami. In reality it has created an image that everyone is coming together to take on KCR and the TRS and is therefore formidable. But the fact is the alliance derives its strengths predominantly from the Congress and the TDP, particularly in Greater Hyderabad. Also there is no perception at all the TDP is an “Andhra party”. People are refusing to accept the opposition to the Mahakutami because of the TDP. They immediately point out that the TRS was part of the similar alliance in 2009. An important point is that people don’t have objection with the presence of an Andhra party, as Telangana now is a separate state and nothing would change that reality. Even if there is a feeling that the TDP indeed is an Andhra party, the presence of Prof Kodandaram nullifies it.

When the Mahakutami comes about the one and only issue is the transfer of vote. Each party which is part of the alliance has to have full trust in the other partners and this has to trickle down to the cadre quickly. Alliances require sacrifices and each of the partners should talk to their party men about this. If the purpose of the alliance is to defeat the TRS and KCR and the allies are sincere in it, such challenges are easier to meet.

SETTLERS FACTOR

The settlers play a very important role in Greater Hyderabad, Khammam, part of Nizamabad and part of Nalgonda districts. A good majority of settlers are unhappy with KCR. They offered no reason for this disaffection. One thing is for certain - their wholehearted support to the TRS in the GHMC elections is simply not there now. This is certainly an alarming situation for the TRS, as settlers play an important role in about 30-35 Assembly constituencies.

CASTE MATRIX

Caste continues to play a key role in the elections. In the 2018 edition we found that the Reddy community is dead against the TRS government. Almost everyone from this community seems to want to play a role in bringing the Congress to power. The Reddy community which has been nursing a sense of loss after losing power in 2014 is now feeling that they are being discriminated against. They are going to play a vital role in 2018 given the fact that in several villages they continue to control local politics.

Dalits are ill disposed towards the TRS government and the promised three acres of land being ignored comes quickly to their mind. This is more pronounced in the Madiga community. Tribals too are unhappy as different sects like Lambada, Gond and Koya feel that they have never felt more neglected than they are in TRS rule.

A fair majority of Backward Classes are happy with KCR. Most of them were former TDP voters. They find flaws in the delivery of sheep to Yadavas, but they are happy that the good intent was there. Only the Most Backward Classes feel that their concerns were not attended to by the TRS government.

A fair majority of Muslims are happy with KCR. Even though the promise of 12 percent reservations was not delivered, Muslims feel that their interests are being taken care of by KCR. The talk that KCR is soft towards BJP and Narendra Modi has not percolated down and Muslims are largely indifferent to it.

Other forward communities like Brahmins, Vyshyas, etc are favourable towards KCR and TRS and a fair majority of them would back them in these elections.

LEADERSHIP

A finding, which would be an indicator of what comes next, is that when we asked who next leader is after KCR, the near unanimous answer is Harish. A belief that he is being discriminated against, humiliated, sidelined and underutilized is dominant. Almost everyone sympathizes with the situation he is in, though Harish never uttered a single word. When we asked another if there was an alternate to KCR, majority of the people replied that Harish is the alternative. When we persisted by asking that KTR could be the CM, again the majority openly rejected it and said Harish is the right leader. There is no dispute that he has the appeal and importantly has already established a connection with people, without even saying a word. That in itself is eloquent about his potential. An auto-driver, who saw him driving past, asked us if we could stop him. When we asked why, he replied that Harish talks to people well. People see him as accessible, friendly and helpful. Those in his home constituency of Siddipet love him for it and that is why many are expecting him to post a one lakh victory margin over his nearest rival. Back in Hyderabad his home in Jubilee Hills minister's colony is easily the most sought after address among all TRS leaders after Pragati Bhavan.

Revanth Reddy, presently in the Congress, comes up next even if not in the same league. He is an accused in the cash-for-vote scandal and worse he was caught on camera offering a huge suitcase of money. People are uninterested in that episode. Another fact is he has launched several personal attacks on KCR and his family. Even here people are uninterested. With such a baggage it is shocking that his ratings as a leader far surpass any of the leaders who are presently at the helm of affairs in the Telangana Congress. A case in point: at some places people did ask what Revanth would be if the Congress comes to power. Maybe his time is right as he is attacking KCR and TRS at a time when their anger is focused on the TRS and the government.



CONCLUSION

In the election battle now only the ruling party has fielded its nominees to take the battle to the rival camp. But the nominees of the rival parties have yet to step into the arena. Who they would be is also not known. This is of crucial importance as we found that candidates play the most important role in an election.

So, before the candidates of all parties are unknown, it's unfair to make a fair prediction about the outcome of the election.

Now two facts need to be mentioned. One, there is substantial disenchantment against the TRS sitting MLAs. Two, at the same people are not hell bent to throw out Chandrashekar Rao. While the anger against a majority of the sitting MLAs can be attributed to various reasons, the fact that people are not totally against KCR is largely because there is no other politician who is able to rival his image in Telangana.

In most of the assembly segments the people expressed strong resentment against the local sitting TRS MLAs, even as the same people expressed confidence in KCR. At several places we found people saying that their MLA is certain to lose, but KCR is sure to form the government. How much KCR would be able to project this contest as for he might lessen the anti-incumbency against the MLAs?

KCR, actually, is the only politician having a across-the-state image. In normal electoral contest the leadership matters. Here the incumbent CM KCR is head and shoulders above his peers on his rivals.

When compared to the 2014 elections there is no *'Telangana sentiment'* that favoured the TRS. Against that backdrop this is an election that would judge largely on the basis of the government's performance in the past four and a half years.

This being so the fact that there are beneficiaries of one government scheme or the other in almost every household. Given this KCR and TRS are heavily banking on their support to seek another term in government. From what we have seen in many elections beneficiaries never vote en masse to the ruling party, as their decision is based on several factors, including a sense of well being and happiness.

Here it should be borne in mind that people believe that welfare schemes are a given, irrespective of which party comes to power. When they rate the TRS government on its various schemes the response is neither overwhelmingly good nor overwhelmingly bad. People say its performance in this sphere is okay.

In our study we found that major issues were unemployment, price rise, Minimum Support Price. The MSP is a major issue among the farmers and they are harbouring a feeling of hurt that the present dispensation is not giving them their due. This is because input costs have gone up significantly.

The Telangana agitation ran on three issues - *Neelu, Nidhulu & Niyamakaalu*. While *Nidhulu* addressed itself with the formation of the state, the issue of *Neelu* was seen in attempts like *Kaleshwaram and Mission Bhagirata*. So come, the core issue of *Niyamakaalu*.

The issue of unemployment is raging and there is widespread anger that the government failed to provide jobs. In fact the youth did not find the government making even basic efforts to provide jobs. The issue of unemployment is all the more because of people, particularly the youth, pinned high hopes on the TRS because of its slogans that jobs would be on offer when separate state is created.

The main 2014 election promises that are still prominent in public eye are double bed room houses, three acres of cultivable land to Dalits and twelve percent reservations each to minorities and tribals. After the election KCR announced Mission Bhagirata and went to the extent of saying that he would not seek votes till every household gets piped drinking water. To sum up, these have become the actual headache for the TRS and KCR.

Therefore how he addresses these issues have become so paramount that it almost defines the line between victory and defeat. In 2014 election people perceived him as a '*doer*', against the backdrop of Telangana being carved out as a separate state. Then his voice carried value and what he said was heard in good faith. That is no longer the case now. KCR is facing a trust deficit among the voters that he has not lived up to their expectations.

Further KCR has attracted a fair amount of the Backward Classes and Muslims, which contributes to its core vote now. But he has also alienated some major sections like the vocal and hardcore pro-Telangana activists and sympathizers. Those who were associated with the TRS since 2001 have now fallen silent. A lot depends of how he manages to woo them back. This is important even though there is no 'Telangana sentiment' now as the statehood dream stands realized.

But then KCR is a astute politician and an excellent communicator. He needs to merge these two attributes to convince the voters that he was sincere in his efforts and that there is a danger of most of his schemes stopping mid-way if he is not re-elected. The thrust towards victory would largely depend on how well he articulates this in these 50 days.

The field study shows that there is one thing that has to be kept in mind. In 2014, the TRS did exceedingly well in North Telangana and fought well in South Telangana. In the present situation TRS is facing a very uncomfortable situation in North Telangana and they are certain to lose seats in those districts. In South Telangana the TRS may retain their position.

Greater Hyderabad has emerged a key battle ground and would define the outcome of 2018 elections. The TRS then did badly here in 2014. Even the Congress did badly. Now the Congress seems to gain with the formation of its alliance with the TDP. This is because of the settlers are not happy with TRS for various reasons.

The Congress was over-confident in 2014. Even now the levels of confidence are bordering on over-confidence. Of immense importance is how much the people would believe their promises like loan waiver, doubling of pensions and unemployment dole. The advantage it has begun to enjoy is that it has created an image of a united Opposition making it look formidable.

The other advantage is now they are not facing the burden of anti-incumbency as in 2014 as then they were in power both the state and at the Centre for 10 successive years.

The alliance would function only if there is transfer of vote. The TDP, CPI and TJS are only recent allies and they have not worked together earlier. How much trust they inspire from one and other and how much and how fast this feeling is sent to the cadre at the grassroots would determine its success.

In the evolving scenario the TJS is a non-starter and the BJP is nothing more than hot air. In most of the constituencies there will be direct contests between the TRS and the Congress. It needs to be mentioned that the Left parties are far from formidable in their traditional strongholds. MIM would retain its grip in its stronghold in Old City.

The bottom line is that KCR is taken a huge risk by advancing the elections and made it riskier by re-nominating his sitting MLAs. Therefore he copes with the risk would count a lot in this election.

It's very pertinent to say that in these 50 days the campaign would evolve. Campaigns have a history in changing the very nature of the contest for power. For instance KCR built the 2014 campaign with swiftness that none imagined. Certainly the contest and the context of the election have changed, but the importance of mounting a campaign can never be discounted. Backing this up would be electioneering by the parties, the respective contestants and their cadre. Not that this adds to the flavour, people have a tendency to pick indicators from these about whom they need to pick and whom they need to drop on December 7.

In our field study we found that either for TRS or for the Opposition alliance (Mahakutami) led by Congress, it would be only negative vote either against or in favor. There was no trace of positive vote for or against any contestant. On the whole, this election does not seem to be cakewalk for ruling TRS as the party has been saying.

These elections are nothing short of a tug-of-war. In 2014 the difference in vote share between the TRS and the Congress was 8.5 percent. How this gap shrinks or expands would define 2018. On the ground it is a fallacy that the ruling party would get close to 100 seats. It is another fallacy for the Congress to think that the contest is all over, bar the shouting and all they need to do is wait for the swearing-in at the Raj Bhavan. On the contrary such beliefs could prove to be suicidal for the respective parties.





PEOPLES PULSE

an ear to the ground

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