

## **PULSE OF THE ELECTORATE IN HIMACHAL PRADESH**

### **I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The following survey based study through open ended interactive interview method was intended to capture the political mood of the voters of the state for the coming Assembly election to be held in November 2012. The actual survey was done from 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept 2012 to 30<sup>th</sup> Sept 2012 at various places in the state among various social constituencies like, the Poor, Women, Middle Class and Youths. The study aimed to capture the nuances of the voting behaviour within the context of factors like developmental issues, regional divide (upper and lower Himachal), caste, class, gender, anti-incumbency, price rise, corruption, unemployment etc. An especial emphasis was placed on the local dynamics in different regions to get hold of the nature of political logic prevailing in the state that will have a bearing upon the choice of the voters in the coming election. Guided by the above objectives the study was able to get a sense of some important general trend along with the merits and demerits of the leading political parties. The study, to some extent, was able to capture the preference of the voters according to the social constituencies like, the poor, middle class, women, poor women and youths. The major findings are as follows:

## II

### **GENERAL TRENDS**

- **NO STRONG ANTI-INCUMBENCY:** In contrast to the general trend in the state where anti-incumbency i.e., change of guard is like an iron law, the study found that this time there was a sense of indecisiveness with regard to their preference for any party. To be more precise, there was a sense of anger and mood for change but that was more against the sitting MLA rather than the ruling or the opposition party. Hence, Anti-Incumbency primarily is candidate-centric rather than specific parties.
- **DECLARATION OF CANDIDATES CRUCIAL FACTOR:** It was unanimously found that people are keeping their fingers crossed till the declaration of candidates by the political parties. They were generally non-committal towards any political parties and were unequivocally clear that they will decide their preference once they see the profile of candidates from all the parties. So, it will be the candidates rather than political parties whose merits and demerits will determine their winnability.
- **DISENCHANTMENT FROM BOTH PARTIES:** The study found a rampant sense of disenchantment from both the mainstream political parties among the voters. People frequently expressed their frustration against the perpetual dominance of BJP and Congress with role reversal as ruling and opposition parties alternatively. So many voters said that these two parties have made an understanding among themselves to rule them turn wise. Therefore, the bipartisan political dominance certainly has led to the alienation of the voters from the political system.
- **BOTH BJP AND CONGRESS TO BE BLAMED:** The voters across the social spectrum blamed both BJP and Congress for the problems like, Price rise, Corruption, lack of development. On a positive note, the study found a parity between the two when many voters gave equal credit to both the parties for whatever development that has taken place in the past.
- **CONDUSIVE ATMOSPHERE FOR THIRD ALTERNATIVE:** As a corollary to their disenchantment from the BJP and Congress, there was a desire to consider the third alternative in many parts of the state. But at the same time people were not very sure of the winnability factor of the third alternatives. Nevertheless, a desire to get

out of the two-party dominance system and to have a third option was very strong. In some way people wanted a third alternative to teach a befitting lesson to both: BJP and Congress. But, on the possibility of the desire being translated into actual choice, the voters again were non-committal.

- **STATE CONGRESS MORE FACTION RIDDEN THAN BJP:** From the response of general voters at various places, a clear picture emerged that state Congress was a divided house. The factional rivalry between Virbhadrha Singh and Kaul Singh representing upper and lower Himachal respectively was unmanageable as compared to that of state BJP. The fact that voters too were taking this factional factor into consideration has led to a dilution and weakening of otherwise very strong trend of anti-incumbency trend that state traditionally is accustomed to.
- **ON APPROACHABILITY FACTOR BJP TOPBRASS HAS AN EDGE:** On a comparative scale the image of BJP's P.K Dhumal is perceived to be more approachable as compared to that of Congress's Virbhadrha Singh. Dhumal is perceived to be a soft spoken; who mingles with the masses; who comes from the background of a professor and; who listens to the people. On the other hand, Congress leaders Virbhadrha Singh is perceived to be elitist, who doesn't mingle with the masses and who still is aristocratic in his attitude, someone who comes from the background of "Raja". Hence, the study clearly found that the soft and approachable image of BJP top leader, P.K.Dhumal, as compared to that of Congress's, Virbhadrha Singh, will go in BJP's favour.
- **DELIMITATION AND A SENSE OF CONFUSION AMONG VOTERS:** Since the delimitation of legislative assembly constituencies in 2008, it is for the first time that many voters are finding themselves in new constituencies leading to a sense of unsettling of the traditional political equation wherein their old political preferences are going to be changed. All this has led to a sense of confusion in the mind of a significant numbers of voters who would wait till the declaration of the candidates. Thus, delimitation has come out to be a significant factor in making the mood of the voters more inscrutable.
- **INSCRUTABLE MOOD:** In general people seemed either reluctant or unsure to express a clear political choice. So one of the crucial finding regarding the mood of the voters has been the "wait & watch" attitude. A large majority of voter themselves

are not sure regarding their preference according to political parties and therefore would make up their mind only after the declaration of the candidates as has been already mentioned.

- **CLASS NOT CASTE THE DOMINANT FACTOR:** Typical to the characteristics of hilly state, it was obvious that though caste is a factor but not the dominant factor in determining the political equation. Voters across caste were giving divided and conflicting opinion and similarly, there was corroboration in their choice across the classes. This feature places the state apart from other north Indian states like U.P, Bihar etc. wherein caste still enjoys a central place into the political choice of the voters.<sup>1</sup>
- **PRO- INCUMBENCY WORKING IN FAVOUR OF POPULAR SENIOR LEADERS OF BOTH THE PARTIES:** The study found that in the coming election there was a pro-incumbency factor working in the favour of many senior sitting MLAs (who are popular for their developmental and approachable attitude) from both the parties. For instance, Gulab Singh (BJP) from Jogindernagar, Kaul Singh (Congress) from Drang, Anil Kumar (Congress) from Mandi etc.. have a strong chance to get re-elected. Thus, people are not too enthusiastic for a change, they certainly are ready to give another chance to the performing MLAs irrespective of their political parties.
- **UPPER AND LOWER HIMACHAL DIVIDE MORE PROMINENT:** It was found that the territorial/topographic divide in the state was more accentuated than any other factor. For instance, a BJP supporter in ARKI (upper Himachal) constituency openly lamented the fact that the BJP C.M Dhumal has worked only for the lower Himachal as he himself hails from that part (Hamirpur) while the coming of Virbhadra Singh has changed the equation in favour of Congress at least in upper-Himachal

Similarly, in lower Himachal like (Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Palampur, Sundernagar, Bal etc) the study found that even if people were not very happy with the sitting MLAs, they certainly were relating with the BJP for the very fact that its C.M, P.K.Dhumal hails from the same

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<sup>1</sup> Though in certain areas like dharmashala in Kangra district people said that the sitting MLA and industry minister Kishan Kapoor will win primarily due to the numerical superiority of his castemen “Kolis”, though such scenarios were not very common.

part and that a special care has been taken for that part. More particular, people in lower Himachal related to Dhumal on regional ground and a frequent complaint against Congress in that part was on the ground that Congress leader Vir Bhadra Singh (who hails from upper Himachal) has an upper-Himachal centric politics wherein lower Himachal remains at the receiving end.

**This regional factor may contribute to BJP having a clear advantage in lower Himachal while Congress taking an edge in Upper Himachal.**

### III

## **PEOPLE'S MOOD TOWARDS B.J.P**

### **I. FACTORS THAT ARE WORKING IN FAVOUR OF BJP**

- **PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE RULING PARTY:** A significant section of voters, more particularly the middle class, acknowledged that the BJP government in the state has done some developmental work like many schemes for common people.
- **BETTER MANAGEMENT OF FACTION:** The internal factionalism between P.K.Dhumal and Shanta Kumar in the party are manageable leading to coordinated effort that the state BJP is putting up for the forthcoming election.
- **SOFT AND APPROACHABLE IMAGE OF P.K.DHUMAL:** The state C.M, P.K.Dhumal enjoys a soft image and also is perceived to be approachable by the common people and people in general appreciated his non-arrogant behaviour. This image of C.M will certainly be an advantage to BJP.
- **VISIBILITY FACTOR THROUGH PRESENTATION OF ITS POLICIES:** The presentation of its policies and achievements by the ruling BJP throughout the state is utterly impressive and well-coordinated. This is primarily through big hoardings and advertisements that seemed to have a positive impact upon the voters. That explains why at many places even if people were not satisfied with their BJP MLA, they had a somewhat good image of the government to the extent that they were ready to consider a better candidate (if BJP gives) from the ruling party itself. Further, the presentation and visibility of Congress as compared to BJP was utterly dismal.
- **BETTER IMAGE OF SHANTA KUMAR AND NOSTALGIA FOR ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE:** Another significant trend regarding the perception of different senior leaders from BJP that acquires importance was that apart from P.K.Dhumal, other senior BJP leaders from state and centre, SHANTA KUMAR and ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE, enjoy a considerably good reputation. The study was unable to find a parallel in the Congress.

## **II. FACTORS THAT ARE WORKING AGAINST B.J.P**

- **THE CONVENTIONAL TREND OF ANTI-INCUMBENCY FACTOR MAY BECOME CENTRAL:** Despite the fact that this time the anti-incumbency factor didn't seem to be very strong given the weakness of state Congress but the fact that people in general have a tendency to vote for the change keeps open the possibility of the change of guard in the state in case BJP fails to replace its unpopular but sitting MLAs. In other words, it is the lack of a better alternative that has weakened the anti-incumbency factor which doesn't mean people may not go for change once the profile of various candidates would be at their disposal.
- **RISE IN CRIME RATE AND DECLINE IN LAW&ORDER:** The study found that in the last five years during BJP rule there has been a rise in the crime rate leading to political murders and the situation of law and order in general has deteriorated. For instance in the last 10 days there has been more than 5 political murders in Hamirpur and Palampur that was frequently mentioned by the respondents as a negative factor against the ruling party.
- **NEPOTISM AND FAVOURITISM:** At many places people charged the C.M for favouring and promoting his family members especially the political career of his own son, ANURAG THAKUR, at the cost of other more deserving leaders. Similarly, other leaders are also were accused to indulge in favouritism while awarding contracts and other projects and schemes.
- **UNPOPULARITY OF MANY SITTING MLAs:** One of the finding that the study had was that people certainly were against many sitting BJP MLAs whose continuation will ensure their defeat leading to the weakening of the electoral prospect of BJP. For instance the perception of the sitting MLA, DILE RAM, from Nachan legislative constituency in Mandi district is too negative. Even BJP supporters confessed that his continuation will ensure the defeat of BJP from that seat. At the same time a better candidate from BJP will in all probability increase its chances of victory as Congress probable candidate Tek Chand too doesn't enjoy a good reputation. He can win only against Dile Ram this time but another candidate from BJP will have a better chance to win.

Thus, the continuation of such/same MLAs as candidate in the coming election will go against BJP's winnability factor.

- **HIMACHAL LOKHIT PARTY (HLP) FACTOR:** The newly formed HLP by some splinter group of BJP, that is going to contest all the seats in alliance with CPI and CPM will damage BJP more seriously than Congress as majority of HLP leaders would be the breakaway/rebellion faction from BJP.
- **THE RELATIVE MARGINALIZATION OF SHANTA KUMAR FACTOR:** One of the crucial finding of the study was that Shanta Kumar from BJP enjoys a clean and better image than the incumbent C.M, P.K.Dhumal. People at many places acknowledged Shanta Kumar's better credential. In fact one respondent at Old Manali who was a Congress supporter openly said that only factor that could have saved BJP was the projection of Shanta Kumar as the next C.M failing which the situation has become very dicey.



## IV

### **PEOPLE'S MOOD TOWARDS CONGRESS**

#### **I. FACTORS THAT ARE WORKING IN FAVOUR OF CONGRESS**

- **RULE OF CHANGE OF GUARD:** When the people have made it clear that their approach would be candidate centric rather than party centred they made that statement conditional by saying that change as a trend is as important as the development centric profile of candidates. In the coming days the present mood that is too dicey to interpret may tilt towards the logic of change of guard for the simple reason as many respondents themselves acknowledged the voters tendency for regime change though they themselves were not very sure. But this remains a strong albeit understated mood of the people at the moment.
- **SUPPORT BASE AMONG POOR:** Confirming to the national trend especially in north India, the support base of Congress among the poors across the social spectrum remains almost intact. The study found the majority of poors favouring Congress and their support was permanent.
- **ELDER GENERATION'S SOFT CORNER FOR CONGRESS:** The study found an important trend wherein a significant section of elder generation felt more related to Congress as being their favoured party since their youth days or college days and the same section credits Congress for laying down the foundation of whatever development that the state has witnessed. Congress is likely to have an edge over this elderly generation. So the generational factor will be an important factor in the forthcoming election.
- **PATRON-CLIENTELISTIC POLITICS:** The projection of Vir Bhadra Singh by Congress has a positive impact among the poor voters who still are structured in the framework of clientelistic politics for the reason that the image of Vir Bhadra Singh as an ex-Raja who will take care of its subject and who don't need any money for his personal profit as he already has ample of it: perceptions like that

among lower middle class and poor people will help Congress in the coming election.

- **PROJECTION OF VIRBHADRA SINGH AND THE REVITALIZATION OF CONGRESS WORKERS:** The heavy political weight of V.BSingh as being the senior most Congress leader has changed the political equation to the extent of revitalizing the hitherto disheartened Congress activists; a factor that will favour Congress.

## **II. FACTORS THAT ARE WORKING AGAINST CONGRESS**

- **FACTIONALISM MORE INTENSE:** The state Congress is more faction-ridden than the BJP that make it appear as a divided house. More importantly, the general voter is taking these factors in cognizance whereby they are not feeling very enthusiastic about the same. Most bitter rivalry is between Virbhadra Singh and Kaul singh who may work at cross purposes as was perceived by the voters.
- **NEGATIVE IMAGE OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT BEING DETRIMENTAL TO STATE CONGRESS:** The negative image of the Congress led central government as being corrupt and harbinger of price rise is proving to be detrimental to the electoral prospect of the state Congress. Hence the context of state election wouldn't only get determined by regional dynamics but by national dynamics too.
- **ALIENATION OF LOWER HIMACHAL PEOPLE FROM VIRBHADRA SINGH:** The people of lower Himachal feel not only alienated from Virbhadra Singh due to regional divide between lower and upper Himachal but they also have a grudge that for many years after the formation of the state, Himachal didn't witness a C.M from lower part; a fact that makes Congress under Virbhadra Sing catering to the interest of Upper Himachal.
- **LACK OF ENTHUSIASM IN CONGRESS CAMP:** People in general pointed out that unlike BJP the Congress leaders are not very aggressive in campaigning for a change. In fact the Congress leaders are not able to take advantage of the political situation by mobilizing people against the failures of the ruling party on anti-incumbency plank.

- **ARISTOCRATIC ATTITUDE OF VIRBHADRA SINGH:** The elitist and aristocratic attitude of Virbhadra Singh towards the masses has not gone well with the middle class in particular. They immediately draw a comparison between him and Dhumal. In that way the people don't feel related to V.B. Singh. This was a frequent complaint from many voters.

## V

### **PEOPLE'S MOOD TOWARDS THIRD ALTERNATIVE**

#### **I. FACTORS THAT MAY FAVOUR THIRD ALTERNATIVE**

- **VERY CONDUCTIVE ATMOSPHERE:** The political atmosphere is very conducive for the third alternative given a general disenchantment against both the mainstream parties. People expressed their desire to teach a lesson to the both BJP and Congress. In that sense third alternative may see a rise in its vote percentage.
- **PENETRATION OF NON-CONGRESS AND NON-BJP PARTIES:** HLP and their electoral alliance with CPI and CPM along with the penetration of state politics by parties like BSP, TMC etc demonstrates their rising popularity among the poor masses as well as the middle class.
- **BETTER PRESENTABILITY THAN CONGRESS:** The presentability of the third alternative is much better than that of Congress.
- **MORE REFLECTIVE VOTERS:** The general voters have become more reflective, as was clear from their non-committal and candidate centric response; they want to have a plurality of choice to get the best out of the political class.

#### **II. FACTORS THAT ARE WORKING AGAINST THIRD ALTERNATIVE**

- **DESIRABILITY vs. VIABILITY:** The desire of the state people to have a non-Congress Non-BJP alternative and the inherent popularity of the third alternative may not necessarily translate into their winnability for the following reasons:
- Third Alternative lacks a committed support base.
- Organizationally they are weak that creates a doubt in the mind of the voters regarding their actual political prospect in the state as an effective force.
- During actual voting time, as told by some respondents, voters have a tendency to vote for the party with winnability factor. This voting behaviour may go against the electoral prospect of the third alternative.

- Third Alternative is themselves a divided house and territorially scattered.
- Third Front reflects the shifting loyalties because significant number of the contestants would be the ones who would fail to get a ticket from the mainstream parties making it a centre of rebellion candidates whose background would be as tainted as that of candidates of mainstream parties. This lack of conviction as a strong alternative will ultimately go against their winnability. General voters thus desired for some third alternative but they themselves doubted their credential as a viable alternative.

## VI

### **A FIRST HAND REFLECTION OF THE MOOD OF THE VOTERS AS PER THEIR SOCIAL CONSTITUENCIES:**

1. WOMEN: In general pro-BJP due to women specific schemes of state government but more poor among them are angry for not getting the same benefits. The later will vote for the Congress.
2. POOR: Traditionally Congress Supporters but of late BJP is making inroads due to Shanta Kumar's targeted developmental works. Nevertheless, the non-Projection of Shanta Kumar may lead to BJP loosing that advantage. So advantage for the Congress.
3. MIDDLE CLASS: Significant section is pro-BJP but a majority of them are disenchanted due to the alternate but repetitive rule of the two parties. But more advantage for BJP.
4. YOUTH: Youths were more inscrutable to be interpreted about their choice. But its clear that they may be the harbingers of the qualitative change leading to the rise in the voting percentage of non-congress non-BJP alternatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The general atmosphere is very dicey. It's too early to say that which side the elephant would turn. Crucial factor remains the profile of the candidates. Voters in general are not taking any party seriously rather they will go by the candidate's background. But the fact that BJP is doesn't seem to be a victim of a strong anti-Incumbency factor takes one to infer that if the party replaces a great deal of candidate they its "MISSION RETURN" may materialize. Hence, it's the declaration of the candidate that will clear the air. The voters in the state have become too reflective to reveal their political card. But that itself is the nature of the political mood of the voters of the Himachal Pradesh to keep the political class guessing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Report is the collective outcome of **Sajjan Kumar** (Ph.D Research Scholar at Centre for Political Studies/JNU), **Manas Ranjan Barik** (Ph.D Research Scholar at Centre for Political Studies/JNU), **Ekta** (Ph.D Research Scholar at Centre for Political Studies/JNU), **Vikas** (Ph.D Research Scholar at SIS/JNU) and **Indu** (LLB/CLC/DU) who have done the field survey.