

Caste, Communication, Covid

Not just social strategies & digital tools, EC's campaign rules will also influence UP, Punjab polls

Badri Narayan



Every election in India appears as a new text, asking to be read differently, but most times we end up reading them in conventional ways. Social reality and people's aspirations are changing continuously. These changes make every election a new political text. And these days, realities, aspirations and expectations interplay with each other in ways that make electoral democracy more ambiguous.

This ambiguity is in part thanks to image management in this media-dominant overshadowing hard realities. So, it is tougher for political analysts to identify the issues and attach prefixes like 'main' and 'dominant'.

One main issue is that poll results in five states are going to build and strengthen perceptions that may work as catalysts for political parties' 2024 national election performances. This is true for BJP, Congress and regional parties.

BJP's poll machine

BJP is fighting UP armed with its huge and vibrant election machine - star campaigners, multiple strategies and micromanagement of community identities and aspirations. The party's strategies include trying to use Hindutva as a motivating power, claims on development and linking those to people's aspirations, forming a large social alliance, a strong cadre base and strong digital play.

BJP's social engineering efforts are being overseen by senior leader Dharmendra Pradhan and his team. These efforts include, strengthening interaction with forward castes, non-Yadav OBCs, most backward castes and non-Jatav Dalits. These groups had come through for BJP in recent elections. The party is also trying to make a dent in communities like Jatavs, who were not in BJP's focus in previous elections.

BJP is also seeking to turn poor voters across communities who have



been beneficiaries of welfare schemes into a voting community by establishing constant communication with them through its local cadres and party organisations. Part of the social strategy also depends on giving various OBC and marginal groups representation in organisation and electoral politics. Finally, in communities BJP hasn't been able to find an influential leader, BJP is forming alliances with some caste-based parties like Rashtriya Nishad Party.

SP emulating BJP

SP, of course, also understands that the master key of UP assembly elections will be with the party which will form the largest social alliance. So, SP, which has emerged as the main opposition in UP, is also trying to extend its conventional Muslim-Yadav alliance to non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits, replicating BJP's social engineering formula.

SP is therefore also in alliance with various caste-based political parties such as Apna Dal, Kamernawadi, Mahan

Poll results in five states are going to build and strengthen perceptions that may work as catalysts for political parties' 2024 national election performances. This is true for BJP, Congress and regional parties

Dal, Subhedeo Bhartiya Samaj Party led by OP Rajbhar, Gomdwana Ganatantra Party and many others. SP is naturally trying to mobilise all elements of anti-incumbency and exploit sources of dissatisfaction against BJP.

However, even though the media is looking at UP polls at bipolar, at micro levels, BSP may make polls triangular contests in various parts of the state. BSP, in fact, has all the potential to make this electoral contest triangular in a

complex state that is yet to be fully understood by election analysts. The Dalit-Bahujan politics may still have a future in UP, in the form of BSP.

Punjab's messy conflicts

Punjab, currently governed by Congress's Dalit CM Charanjit Singh Channi, is being seen by many pundits as another test case for Dalit politics in India. The state, of course, will also be an electoral test of the power of farmers' organisations. But the overarching theme of Punjab polls is mobilisational politics centred around internal conflict and inherent social contradictions.

Even not all farmers' groups are in agreement on fighting elections. The governing party, Congress, is riven by internal conflicts between CM Channi and Navjot Singh Sidhu. Conflicts are also visible in Arvind Kejriwal's AAP, which claims to be a fresh alternative.

There are plenty of inherent social contradictions. Dalits are an electorally powerful community, constituting around 31% of the state's population, but there are sharp intra-community divisions between Ramdasias-Ravidasias on the one hand and Valmikis-Majhabis on the other. They mostly vote against each other due to competitive jealousies produced by politics. These internal conflicts have prevented the emergence of Dalits as a powerful bloc. So, Congress's push via Channi may also get weakened by these contradictions.

Lastly, EC's Covid-related restrictions may have a big impact on campaigning and results. If big rallies are replaced at least partly by door-to-door campaigns and virtual, digital rallies, political parties that have the following attributes will be at an advantage - a strong cadre base, constant communication with the public, sophisticated digital infrastructure, which means good data mining of socio-economic and aspirational profiles of caste and communities as well as use of artificial intelligence tools.

The writer is Director, GB Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj.