

Verdict 2017 – A Pre-poll Analysis

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The Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa that concluded on March 8 would be a crucial litmus test for major political parties in deciding their future status and identity in Indian polity. Almost one-fifth of India comprising around 17 crore electorate in 102 Lok Sabha and 690 Assembly constituencies cast their votes.

These elections, in many respects, will be a referendum to the policies and programmes of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government. Perhaps, it will be the first acid test at the ballot box for the Prime Minister's demonetisation drive of November 2016, which according to the BJP, would be endorsed by the poor and the middle class cutting across castes and communities, thereby helping the party to gain currency beyond its traditional vote bank. If the assessment of the party goes awry and the demonetisation drive misfires in the impending polls, the NDA/BJP would find itself in a shaky position leading to the slowdown of the aggressive reforms or policies of the government. Such an outcome would adversely affect the poll prospects of the BJP in its citadels like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, which are going to polls during the last part of 2017 and in 2018. This may sharpen intra-party squabbles and differences creating discomfiture for the NDA/BJP during the crucial election to the post of the President of India.

Besides demonetisation, issues like intolerance against minorities and Dalits at the instance of fringe elements in Sangh Parivar bodies, cross-border terrorism and Uri-Pathankot attacks, strains in domestic economy and scandals and scams involving ruling and opposition parties may prominently figure in the forthcoming elections. The NDA/BJP is hopeful of having changed the electoral wave to its advantage by highlighting the welfare and developmental programmes undertaken by the Central Government.

On the other hand, these elections are a life and death battle for the Congress. Having lost power in Kerala, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the elections offer an opportunity to the Congress to arrest the slide in its fortune. The party anticipates a backlash of voters against the NDA/BJP on issues like demonetisation, intolerance and internal security failures. If the strategy of the party fails to click in the elections, the grand old Congress Party, at the age of 132, will face a serious existential crisis.

While the BJP and the Congress are keeping their fingers crossed, the impending poll results are crucial for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). If the party, which is in power in Delhi performs well in the elections, especially in Punjab and Goa, its potential as a national party cannot be undermined. If the party flops, mainly due to its internal differences and contradictions as manifest in Punjab and elsewhere, its ambitions to emerge as a national alternative to the BJP and the Congress would be sealed. The election results would also decide the fate of

parties like the Samjwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which were virtually decimated in their home turf in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

More significantly, the outcome of the elections would have a decisive impact on the image and popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi, Delhi Chief Minister (CM) Aravind Kejriwal and Uttar Pradesh satraps like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati, who are the key players of national politics. Hence, these Assembly elections can be better described as a semi-final to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

The crucial question is to what extent the NDA/BJP can retain its 2014 impact among the voters. If it succeeds at marginally sustaining the 'Modi Magic' of 2014, the NDA/BJP is posed to repeat its impressive performance in states like UP, Uttarakhand and Goa, where it has a clear lead in more than two-third of the Assembly constituencies, on the basis of the last Lok Sabha poll results. The Congress was better placed in the states of Manipur and Punjab in respect of the lead position in the Assembly constituencies (Refer Table 1).

If we analyse the poll performance of major parties in the 2012 Assembly elections, the NDA/BJP was in a sticky wicket in these states, except in Goa. Majority of the voters in the country do not pledge allegiance towards any political party or alliance, but are decisively influenced by regional issues or political developments during the elections. Thus, the analysis of regional politics is a prerequisite to arrive at a proper perspective on election trends.

Table 1: Results of 2012 Legislative Assembly (LA) & 2014 Lok Sabha (LS) Elections

Name of state	Total electorate	Total seats		LS seats won by parties (2014)	LA seats won by parties (2012)	Lead in LAs (2014 LS)
		LS	LA			
UP	13.8 crore	80	403 (85)*	BJP – 71 (42.3%)# SP – 5 (22.2%) BSP – 0 (7.8%) INC – 2 (10.75%) AP – 2 (1%)	BJP – 47 (15%)# SP – 224 (29.15%) BSP – 80 (25.9%) INC – 28 (11.6%) AP – 1 (0.32%) NCP – 1 (0.33%) RLD – 9 (2.33%) PPI – 4 (2.8%) Ind – 14	BJP – 328 SP – 42 BSP – 9 INC – 15 AP – 9
Punjab	1.9 crore	13	117 (34)*	SAD – 4 (20.3%)# INC – 3 (33.1%) BJP – 2 (8.7%) AAP – 4 (30.4%)	SAD – 56 (35%)# INC – 46 (40%) BJP – 12 (7%) BSP – 0 (4.30%) PPP – 0 (5.17%) Others – 3 (7%)	SAD – 29 INC – 37 BJP – 16 AAP – 33 Ind – 2

Uttarakhand	73.8 lakh	5	70 (15)*	BJP – 5 (55.3%)# INC – 0 (34%) CPI – 0 (7.6%)	BJP – 31 (33.1%)# INC – 32 (33.79%) BSP – 3 (12.2%) UKD – 1 (3.18%) Ind – 3 (12.34%)	BJP – 63 INC – 7
Manipur	18 lakh	2	60 (41)*	INC – 2 (41.7%)# BJP – 0 (11.9%) NPF – 0 (19.9%) CPI – 0 (14%)	INC – 42 (42%)# TMC – 7 (17%) MSCP – 5 NPF – 4 (8%) NCP – 1 (8%) LJP – 1 (7%)	INC – 38 BJP – 3 NPF – 9 CPI – 9 AITC – 1
Goa	10.8 lakh	2	40 (1)*	BJP – 2 (53.40%)# INC – 0 (36.60%)	BJP – 21 (35%)# INC – 9 (31%) Ind – 5 (17%) MGP – 3 (7%) GVP – 2 (4%)	BJP – 33 INC – 7

Source: The Election Commission of India

*Figures in parentheses indicate the number of reserved seats

#Figures in parentheses indicate the percentage of votes polled

AAP: Aam Aadmi Party

AP: Apana Dal (UP)

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party

BSP: Bahujan Samaj Party

CPI: Communist Party of India

GVP: Goa Vikas Party

INC: Indian National Congress

LJP: Lok Janasakthi Party

MGP: Maharashtra Gomantak Party (Goa)

MSCP: Manipur State Congress Party

NCP: Nationalist Congress Party

NPF: Naga People's Front (Manipur)

PPI: Peace Party of India (UP)

RLD: Rashtriya Lok Dal

SAD: Shiromani Akali Dal

SP: Samjwadi Party

TMC: Trinamool Congress

UKD: Uttarakhand Kranti Dal

Uttar Pradesh

There is a common saying that the road to Delhi goes through Lucknow. Any electoral battle in this state assumes considerable political significance. The elections to the UP Assembly are all the more important, considering the fact that it is like a referendum to the controversial demonetisation programme of the Prime Minister. If the mammoth electorate of over 14 crore in the state gives a clear mandate to the NDA/BJP, the party can project it as the country's acknowledgement of Modi's demonetisation gambit. Hence, the BJP is trying its level best to repeat its 2014 show. Meanwhile, the SP, after a humiliating defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, is struggling to retain the reins of power in Lucknow. The desperate BSP is sparing no effort to return to power. The Congress, facing serious setbacks, is keeping all options open for its survival.

In any triangular or four-cornered contest in UP, the trump card, no doubt, are the powerful castes and the Muslims. An analysis of the electorate based on caste shows that the Other

Backward Communities (OBCs) constitute around 44 per cent of the total electorate, followed by the Dalits (21 per cent) and the upper castes (16 per cent). Nearly one-third of the OBCs are the Yadavs, who are socially and politically advanced. Among the rest of the OBCs, there are around 200 sub-castes, of which Jatvas and Kurmis are prominent. The Muslims, who account for over 19 per cent of the total voters, have uneven geographic distribution. Their major strongholds include the sub-regions of upper Doab, Rohilkhand, Awadh and the north of Poorvanchal. Around 20 districts and over 100 *tehsils* have a Muslim population of more than 20 per cent. The Muslim vote is a determining factor in more than 130 out of 403 Assembly constituencies.

Despite the Supreme Court ban on using caste and religion in the electioneering process, the major contenders in the fray were keen to woo the electorate exploiting caste and religion. The BSP finalised the initial list of candidates as early as 2015 and systematically built up its electoral base playing the Dalit–Muslim consolidation card. The party organised '*Bhaichara*' (brotherhood) committees in order to woo Dalits and the members of other castes, justifying such activities as part of the party's motto '*Sarvajanhitay, Sarvajansukhay*' (Welfare and Happiness of All). Senior zone-level leaders of various castes and sub-castes had been engaged in holding '*Picchhada Varg Sammelan*' (OBC Meetings). Satish Chandra Mishra, Rajya Sabha MP and the architect of BSP's strategy of social engineering, and Ramveer Upadhyaya, both upper-caste faces of the party, along with Uma Shanker Singh and Jaiveer Singh, senior Thakur leaders, were tasked to target upper caste voters in reserved constituencies. Similarly, Naseemuddin Siddiqui was assigned to woo the Muslim voters in eastern and western UP. The Backward and Minority Community Employees Federation (BAMCEF), an extension outfit of the party active among the government employees, had been involved in mobilising Dalit, OBC and Muslim employees.

However, the defection of two senior Dalit leaders, Swami Prasad Maurya and R K Choudhary, from the party raising serious allegations on the selection of candidates and seat allocation had been a severe jolt to the BSP's election strategy. The party has tried to overcome this setback through intensive mobilisation campaign among various castes and sub-castes, wooing their leaders by offering more seats. There were 97 Muslim candidates (12 more from its 2012 list), 87 Dalits, 106 OBCs and 113 upper castes (Brahmins 66, Kshatriyas 36 and others 11) in the party's final list.

In the case of the BJP, Amit Shah played a crucial role in rallying various castes and sub-castes in favour of the party. Apparently, the NDA/BJP strategy was to mobilise non-Yadav OBCs and upper castes on a common platform, while ensuring marginal support from Dalits through a package of welfare and developmental programmes. From June 2016, Amit Shah paid extensive visits to central, eastern and western UP, and convened special conventions of Dalits, *Ati-Dalit* and *Ati-Pichada* (extreme Dalit and extreme backward) sections and upper castes, where the main slogan was to 'break the sequence of SP–BSP, BSP–SP

governments' in the state for its larger interest. Narendra Modi addressed mammoth rallies in eastern and western UP, where major announcements such as the Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana were made for the all round development of the region. The party formed a 40-member state team with representatives/leaders from major communities/castes for intensive campaign. Besides, the party engaged Cabinet Ministers and regional leaders having decisive influence among various castes/communities for electioneering. For example, the services of Anupriya Patel, Minister and daughter of famous Kurmi leader Sonolal Patel, was used to placate non-Yadav OBCs, especially Kurmis.

The main strategy of the SP, now a house in turmoil, was to consolidate the support of Yadavs and Muslims and make further inroads into the uncommitted section of voters by projecting the developmental works of the SP government. '*Kaam Bolta Hai*' (Let Our Work Speak), the slogan of CM Akhilesh Yadav, is meant to woo such voters. But, the party is equally conscious of maintaining the caste equation. The Akhilesh Yadav government had recommended the inclusion of 17 Other Most Backward Castes (OMBCs) as Scheduled Castes (SC) ostensibly to win their support in the elections. Similarly, the government's rehabilitation and welfare programmes for the riot victims of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli have created goodwill and fetched the support of Muslims for the party. By elevating the prominent Kurmi leader, Beni Prasad Verma to the Rajya Sabha, the party plans to better its electoral prospects in western UP, where Kurmis and Kuris are a significant force to reckon with.

With the major castes and communities aligning with the BJP, SP and BSP, the Congress has set its eyes on the upper castes, Dalits and Muslims in the electoral battle. By projecting Sheila Dixit as CM, the party has tried to bank on the support of upper-caste voters, especially Brahmins. The party's poll strategist Prasanth Kishor had pointed out that along with Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Vadera should be brought to the election scene to rekindle the hope and aspirations of the bulk of disenchanted Congress workers in the state.

The Dalits, Muslims and some sections of OBCs have been the traditional supporters of the Congress until 1977, when the party was unseated from power for the first time by the Janata Party (JP). With the disintegration of the JP and the subsequent formation of the SP (SP) and the BSP, the loyalties of these demographic groups changed from time to time, making the election scene in UP complex. Among the OBCs, majority of the Yadavs form the solid vote bank of the SP, major chunk of the Jatvas are with the BSP and the Kurmis are with the BJP, AD and SP. Most of the Dalit voters support the BSP, but, of late, they have been associating with the BJP and its allies like the LJP.

The Muslims exercise their franchise in favour of the SP, BSP or Congress, depending upon the candidates and the nature of contest in the constituencies. In fact, in the 1990s and 2000s, when the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid controversy was creating strong ripples in

UP polity, the SP was enjoying the overwhelming support of the Muslims by virtue of Mulayam Singh Yadav's uncompromising stand against Hindu fascist forces. However, the situation drastically changed and Muslim support to the SP nose-dived during 2009, when the SP decided to tie-up with Kalyan Singh of the BJP, who was the CM at the time of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Just like the SP, the Congress too eroded its support among Muslims. The immediate beneficiary was the BSP that offered an alternative to counter the BJP. But, Muslims considerably alienated themselves from the BSP, when it started dilly-dallying with NDA/BJP to safeguard its political interests.

The election scenario in UP is riddled with uncertainties. Though the SP, BSP and Congress have declared their CM contenders, the BJP is yet to finalise its CM candidate. In the case of the ruling SP, the crucial question is how far the family feud that led to the split in the party will affect its overall popularity and mass support, when Akhilesh Yadav is trying to emerge as a youth icon in national politics with his new slogans of development-oriented politics. Two factions of the SP contesting the elections on their own will definitely give an electoral advantage to the NDA/BJP. However, a united and cohesive front led by Akhilesh and Rahul Gandhi gives them an advantage, much to the discomfiture of the BJP and BSP. The Akhilesh faction received a shot in its arm, when the Election Commission allotted the 'cycle symbol' (of undivided SP) to the group. With this popular symbol, the support of majority of the party functionaries and the developmental agenda, the Akhilesh faction is likely to inherit the legacy of the undivided SP. Despite the abysmal electoral performance of the SP and Congress in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, their total share of votes was 33 per cent, whereas in the 2012 Assembly polls, their share was 42 per cent, almost equal to the percentage of votes polled by the NDA/BJP during its spectacular performance in the last Loka Sabha polls. In a triangular or four-cornered contest, any party or alliance that musters 33–35 per cent votes will capture power in Lucknow. In 2007, with 30.7 per cent votes, the BSP came to power, whereas, in 2012, the SP was voted to power with 224 seats, securing 29.15 per cent votes. Such statistics or analysis may become redundant, if the 'Modi wave' sweeps the poll, as in 2014. The thousand-dollar question is whether a 'demonetisation wave' will strike UP to the electoral advantage or disadvantage of the BJP.

Punjab

The state is witnessing a four-cornered contest, where the key players are the Congress, AAP, SAD–BJP alliance and BSP. In the 2012 Assembly elections, the SAD–BJP combine created history by defeating the Congress for the second consecutive term. The SAD–BJP alliance won 68 seats (SAD – 56 and BJP – 12) with a total vote share of 42 per cent, the Congress won 46 seats with a share of 40 per cent of total votes and independents secured three seats with seven per cent of total votes. The BSP, which contested all the seats could

not open its account, but secured 4.30 per cent of votes. Despite a decline in the number of seats in Majha and Doaba regions, the SAD–BJP alliance could get clear majority, due to its electoral gains in the Malwa region, where the Congress suffered major reverses, as compared to the 2007 elections.

The entry of the AAP during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has transformed the election scenario in Punjab. The AAP surprised its rivals by capturing four out of the 13 Lok Sabha seats with an impressive vote share of over 30 per cent. The SAD won four seats (20.3 per cent), the Congress won three seats (33 per cent) and the BJP secured two seats (8.7 per cent). If we translate these results into the Assembly segments, the SAD–BJP combine had an upper hand in 45 seats, followed by the Congress in 37 seats, the AAP in 33 and independents in two seats, indicating the possibility of a hung Assembly this election. But, the ground situation appears to be entirely different.

The SAD is coping with strong anti-incumbency factor, being in power for 10 years. The first signs of anti-incumbency were clear in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, when the ‘Modi wave’ that swept most parts of the country did not create much impact in the state. Not only did the vote share of the SAD–BJP alliance come down to 29 per cent from 47 per cent in the 2012 Assembly polls, but also BJP strongman Arun Jaitley faced an embarrassing defeat in Amritsar. Many SAD ministers and senior leaders are involved in scams for their alleged links with powerful drug, liquor, sand, transport and real estate mafia. Drug and liquor addiction, especially among the youth of Punjab, is a grave social issue. Illicit liquor trade is rampant. Notorious gangs and criminal syndicates operate in every nook and corner of the state. The case of prison breach of 37 convicts between January 2015 and March 2016 has put a question mark on the ability of the State machinery on checking gang activities and maintaining law and order. The controversial film ‘*Udta Punjab*’ is a realistic portrayal of the decay, degeneration and criminalisation of a society that claims a rich legacy of heroism and patriotism.

The apparent failure of the State Government in containing social maladies has created considerable public resentment, which has been exploited by the opposition parties to their electoral advantage. Cracks have developed within the SAD–BJP combine and its politico-religious power centres like the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). The SAD suffered a severe jolt, when two of its sitting legislators, Mahesh Inder Singh and Rajwinder Kaur Bhagike, joined the Congress in December 2016. Navjot Singh Sidhu, cricketer-turned-politician, a member of the BJP since 2004, left the party and formed a new body, Aawaaz-e-Punjab, with the declared aim of safeguarding the interests of the state. Indications are that, he, along with his supporters, may join the Congress camp. Kuldeep Kaur Tohra, the daughter of former SGPC president late Guracharan Singh Tohra, and her husband and Harmail Singh Tohra have left the SAD and joined the AAP.

The AAP has emerged as a major challenger to the SAD–BJP combine and the Congress. If the AAP sustains the momentum of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, it would have a fair chance at coming to power in the state in the 2017 elections. But, serious internal differences have developed in the party on issues such as the selection of candidates, including the prospective CM, induction of Tohras and removal of Sucha Singh Chhotepur as state convenor. Parliamentarians Dr Dharamvira Gandhi and Harjinder Singh Khalsa are at loggerheads with the party leadership and are planning to forming a Punjab-oriented forum. The internal squabbles and controversial stand of senior leaders like Aravind Kejriwal on the Sutlej–Yamuna Link and Khalistani movement have hampered the prospects of leaders like Navjot Singh Sidhu and Manpreet Singh Badal (chief of People’s Party of Punjab) joining the AAP.

However, political analysts do not entirely write off the AAP. While the anti-incumbency factor and a host of social and political issues haunt the SAD–BJP combine, the Congress carries the stigma of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The AAP candidates have highlighted the slogan ‘Justice to anti-Sikh riot victims’ to influence the psyche of large majority of Sikhs, who still harbour the bitter experiences of 1984. Many senior Congress leaders and candidates are facing allegations of corruption and malpractices. Thus, developing a ‘mass-psyche’ in favour of an alternative to the Congress or the SAD–BJP alliance cannot be ruled out. The AAP, over the last two years, has meticulously tried to build up the organisation in the state, floating various front organisations for youth, farmers, women, Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), professionals and students. Just as in Delhi, it has worked out innovative and ingenious methods to reach different cross-sections of voters. Further, Kejriwal has extensively toured the state on a number of occasions and addressed party conventions. He has openly sought out the Dalit vote bank, visiting late BSP leader Kanshi Ram’s sister in Ropar and touring the Hoshiarpur–Jalandhar Dalit bastion. A marginal polarisation of the Dalits in favour of the party may alter the election scenario in the state. The Dalits that constitute 31.94 per cent of the population, the highest percentage amongst all the states, have hitherto exercised their franchise cutting above caste considerations or influences.

The Dalit factor is also the trump card of the BSP. The party’s main strategy is to win over the support of the Dalits and sections of the OBCs (constituting over 20 per cent of the population). Branding both the SAD–BJP combine and the AAP as ‘anti-Dalit’, the party’s main slogan and core theme is ‘*Punjab Bachao, BSP Laao*’ (Save Punjab, Elect BSP). It’s ‘*Ghar Ghar Chalo*’ campaign, a door-to-door drive covering around 29 million people across 550000 households, has created some impact in Dalit-dominated areas.

The BSP’s strategy of Dalit mobilisation appears to be a major threat to the Congress. The party leadership has cleared that its agenda is to wipe out the BSP from Punjab in the 2017 elections. The AAP factor has aggravated the problems faced by the Congress. However, the Congress leadership is hoping to overcome these factors by projecting the party as the only

alternative to the SAD–BJP combine. Will the Congress party be able to milk the anti-incumbency wave or will the SAD–BJP alliance create history by capturing power for the third successive term, exploiting the split in opposition votes between the AAP and the BSP?

Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand is going to polls following the political crisis that led to the ouster of the incumbent CM Harish Rawat of the Congress, due to the revolt by MLAs of his own party, the imposition of President's rule and the subsequent reinstatement of the Rawat at the instance of the judiciary. Hence, political instability and allied issues figured prominently in the electioneering of the leading parties in the fray. The NDA/BJP focused on the omissions and commissions of the Rawat government, which precipitated the crisis in the Congress, leading to the defection of the MLAs. The Congress highlighted issues such as BJP's alleged use of unfair means to topple a democratically elected government.

Corruption is another major poll issue, with Rawat being accused of having close and mutually beneficial links with liquor, mining, sand and timber mafia. The State Government and administration have been accused of bungling funds meant for relief and rehabilitation of the victims of the devastating flash floods of 2013. Rawat is also entangled in a CBI enquiry. The NDA/BJP has tried to rake up these issues to corner the Congress in the elections.

In the 2012 Assembly polls, the Congress and BJP had a neck-to-neck race to the 70-member Assembly. The Congress won 32 seats (33.79 per cent of vote share), BJP secured 31 seats (33.1 per cent of vote share), BSP won three (12.2 per cent of vote share) and UKD (3.18 per cent of vote share) and Independent (12.34 per cent of vote share) secured a seat each. But, an entirely different picture emerged during the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, when the BJP swept the polls by winning all five seats with a vote share of over 55 per cent. The total vote share of the Congress remained static compared to the 2012 Assembly polls. If this trend is repeated, the NDA/BJP is likely to get a clear lead in 63 constituencies and the Congress will lead in only seven constituencies.

The NDA/BJP is hoping it will be able to channel instability, anti-incumbency and scams/scandals to its advantage. But, its biggest challenge is to keep its flock together. The party has many senior leaders, including four former CMs, B C Khanduri, Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank, Vijay Bahuguna and Bhagat Singh Koshiari. Bahuguna, who left the Congress along with a dozen Congress legislators, is not contesting the polls. With more than 10 CM aspirants, the BJP is facing the problem of plenty. The Congress too faces many hurdles. The party is haunted by tales of defection, the latest being that of the octogenarian Congress leader and former CM of UP and Uttarakhand, N D Tiwari, who has also held coveted positions in the Centre. Personal and political differences have cropped up within the party.

Even, Harish Rawat no longer enjoys the wholehearted support of all sections within the party. In such a scenario, the fate of the Congress in the 2017 polls is almost sealed.

Manipur

The state that is prone to insurgency and militancy went to polls amidst internal conflict incited by certain indigenous groups. Law and order is one of the major issues in Manipur, where the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been in force for many years. The Congress was victorious in the 2012 Assembly and 2014 Lok Sabha polls. In the 60-member assembly, the Congress won 42 seats (42 per cent of vote share), TMC won seven seats (17 per cent of vote share), MSCP secured five seats (11.5 per cent of vote share), NPF won four seats (eight per cent of vote share) and LJP won a single seat (seven per cent of vote share). The Congress sustained its lead in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls by capturing both the seats with the same percentage of vote share as in the 2012 polls. However, the BJP and NPF had a total vote share of over 32 per cent in the Lok Sabha polls. If the Lok Sabha results are translated into the Assembly segment, the Congress will have a clear lead in 38 constituencies, while the BJP will lead in three, the NPF and CPI in nine each and the TMC in one.

The NDA/BJP strategy was to turn the political climate in the state to its advantage. The BJP's sterling victory in Assam and political developments in Arunachal Pradesh catapulting it to power has emboldened the party. While trying to strengthen its relations with the NPF, its main effort was to woo sections of the Meiteis, who are traditionally Congress supporters, by exploiting their Vaishnavite lineage and sentiments. To that end, the party adopted a positive and sympathetic approach towards the demands of the Meiteis for inner line permit to keep the outsiders away. On the issue of the economic blockade by Nagas, opposing the creation of new districts on the grounds of demographic imbalance, the BJP adopted a conscious approach so as not to antagonise them. The most powerful weapon in the armoury of BJP was anti-incumbency, which was used to corner the present Congress CM Ibobi Singh, who has been in power for 15 years. Biran Singh, the right hand man of Ibobi Singh, who joined the BJP, was used to whip up anti-incumbency sentiments among voters.

Led by Ibobi Singh, the Congress strategy was to consolidate its support among the Meiteis by creating an impression that the Centre and BJP extended support to Nagas on issues such as economic blockade. But, the main hurdle for the mobilisation of the Meiteis was the entry of Manipur People's Party (MPP) into the election fray by fielding around 40 candidates. In the past, the MPP with its pockets of influence among the Meiteis had twice come into power in the state. The CM's decision to carve out eight new districts was projected as the Congress's commitment to ensure speedy development by ending ethnic strife and conflicts. Politically, the Congress has improved its base after the merger of the

MLAs of TMC and other splinter groups into the party. However, battling anti-incumbency would be a formidable challenge. The entry of Irom Sharmila, popularly known as the Iron Lady of Manipur, into the election field, after her historic 16-year-long hunger strike, demanding the withdrawal of AFSPA, also creates problems for the Congress. Sharmila, who is pitted against CM Ibobi Singh, is likely to cause more harm to the Congress than the BJP. Underground outfits like the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) that have clandestine network among sections of voters can indirectly influence the election outcome.

Goa

The state leaves a fluid political scenario with the emergence of new parties and alliances, posing problems for the ruling BJP as well as the Congress. Subhash Velingkar, former state chief of RSS, formed the Goa Suraksha Manch during the last part of 2016. The new party, highlighting the core theme of the preservation of Goa's ethnicity, culture and language, could bring the BJP's ally MGP to its camp, besides Shiv Sena and other like-minded groups. The anti-BJP alliance, contesting majority of the seats, is expected to eat into the ruling party's vote share. Moreover, compared to Manohar Parrikar, former CM and current Union Defence Minister, the incumbent CM Laxmikant Parsekar was unable to inspire confidence among BJP workers. Parsekar is also battling charges of corruption.

The Congress too has its share of problems, with its last CM Digambar Kamat named as the prime conspirator in a corruption case. Despite a plethora of controversies and issues, the party failed to play the role of an effective Opposition in the last five years. Moreover, there is a feeling among party workers that the Central leaders in charge of the state lack awareness on the background of Goan politics and hence failed to work out a sound electoral strategy. The party could not so far prop up a popular face as the CM.

The strategy of the AAP is to emerge as a gamechanger in Goa by highlighting the role of parties like the BJP and Congress in betraying the interests of the people of Goa. Aravind Kejriwal has gone to the extent of saying that it will be an AAP versus the rest contest. The AAP has focused on issues like the mining scandal, in which the political class is deeply involved. The report of a judicial commission set up in 2012 to probe into the illegal mining activity has indicated the involvement of many senior political leaders. The unprecedented illegal mining, according to the report, has caused a loss of Rs 34,935 crore to the state exchequer. Elvis Gomes, former Inspector General of Prisons, who took voluntary retirement to join the AAP, is its CM candidate.

In the 2012 Assembly polls, the BJP scrapped through by capturing 21 seats with a vote share of 35 per cent in the 40-member assembly. With the support of its ally, MGP that won three seats (with a vote share of seven per cent), the BJP could form a stable government in

the state. The Congress that polled 31 per cent of votes won nine seats, seven down from its show in the 2007 Assembly polls. The independents captured five seats (17 per cent of vote share) and GVP two seats (four per cent of vote share). However, in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the 'Modi Wave' struck Goa as well. The NDA/BJP won both the Lok Sabha seats with 53.40 per cent of votes, where as the Congress polled 36.60 per cent votes, which on translating into Assembly segment showed a clear lead for the BJP in 63 seats and the Congress in seven seats.

Now, with the maiden entry of the AAP into the Goan election scene, electoral equations are set to change. The party with its support base in the coastal belt and among minorities and middle class intelligentsia may pose a challenge to both the BJP and Congress. Added to this is the emergence of the anti-BJP alliance led by Goa Suraksha Manch. Its emotive slogans highlighting the self-pride of Goans may influence sections of voters. Thus, the outcome of the elections depends on how much the voters of the state will respond to such sloganeering and the new parties and alliances.

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