

## Gauging the Electoral Mood in Haryana

**Shreyas S P**

The largest democracy in the world is just three months away from electing the 17th Lok Sabha (LS) in the General Elections of 2019. Sensing from the nation's mood, the 2019 elections would be region-specific, unlike the personality-centric one of 2014. The 2014 LS elections saw a presidential style of elections for the first time after the 1980 elections, when the Indira Gandhi-led Congress(I) returned to power defeating the faction-ridden Janata Party. In the coming general elections, it is most likely that the country will revert to the coalition era of 1990s and 2000s. The local issues, the local state leaders and the LS candidates of respective constituencies will take precedence over the national narrative. Caste-politics is likely to shape the narrative at regional levels.

### Looking into Haryana

One such state where the caste and local issues will dominate the electoral scene is Haryana, a predominantly agricultural state comprising a rural population of 65 percent. The state elects 90 MLAs to its assembly and sends 10 MPs to LS. The BJP swept Haryana in the LS elections of April–May 2014 and the assembly elections of October 2014. The party increased its LS tally from nil to seven seats and its assembly tally from four to 47 seats. This was achieved through the consolidation of non-Jat votes, the social engineering of which helped BJP capture the state for the first time in history.

### Caste Matters

Jats are the most dominant community in Haryana with a population of 25–30 percent. They hold huge influence over state politics, with most of the state's chief ministers coming from this community. Both the Congress and the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) have strong Jat leaders in their camp. Dalits are the second dominant community constituting 21 percent of the population. The other influential communities are Brahmins (8 percent), Punjabis (8 percent), Ahirs (4 percent) and Meo Muslims (4 percent).

### How are Political Parties Faring in Haryana?

The upcoming LS and assembly elections are unlikely to be a cakewalk for the saffron party as anti-incumbency is brewing against the state government. The party is facing strong resistance from the Jat community. The non-Jats of Haryana, who voted unanimously for the BJP, are not completely satisfied with the government either. The major fault lines of the state government were the Jat reservation riots of 2016, which brought the entire state to a standstill and resulted in 30 deaths, the Baba Rampal episode and the Dera violence of 2017. Rural distress and demand for the completion of the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) project are the ongoing issues in the state.

The BJP lost three Hindi-heartland states in the recent assembly elections, as its voter base corroded significantly in rural areas. The BJP may face a similar backlash in the rural parts of Haryana. Jat resistance, rural distress and brewing anti-incumbency are not good news for the BJP, which is hoping to win another term at the Centre. However, the state government is planning to address rural distress by announcing Kisan Pension Yojana (KPY) in the budget session. The scheme aims to provide a monthly pension, ranging from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 5000, to registered farmers. Though the government tried to woo Jats by passing the reservation legislation in the assembly, it was struck down by the judiciary.

On the other side, the opposition parties, namely the Congress and the INLD, are confident of defeating the BJP in Haryana. Haryana was a stronghold of the Congress party till 2014. But the party faced its worst defeat in the last elections, from which it seems to be recovering. However, infighting in the party is still a major concern and there is no clarity on who would be the party's face in the upcoming elections. There is a leadership tussle between Bhupinder Singh Hooda, former CM and an influential Jat leader, and Ashok Tanwar, HPC President and a prominent Dalit leader. It has been observed that Hooda's leadership would help the Congress garner Jat votes.

The INLD is a strong regional party dominated by Jats. It has taken a critical stand against the BJP with respect to the Jat reservation issue and the SYL canal project. The INLD's worst moment arrived with the recent split due to a family feud between Abhay Singh Chauthala and his nephew Dushyant Chauthala. Abhay Chauthala has been leading the party after his father Om Prakash Chauthala and his brother Ajay Singh Chauthala were jailed in 2013. Dushyant Chauthala left the party to form the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP), which will target INLD's voter base. It is not clear what impact the JJP can have on state politics, particularly on the INLD. The INLD-BSP alliance that is banking on Jat-Dalit votes will also be tested. The two communities together comprise 50 percent of the population. The INLD and the BSP won a vote share of nearly 24 percent and 4.5 percent respectively in the 2014 LS and assembly elections. The alliance is sure to give a tough fight for the two national parties in the state.

### **The 2019 Battle**

The contest in the 2019 elections will mainly be triangular between the BJP, the Congress and the INLD-BSP alliance. However, there are some significant players like the AAP, the LSP and the JJP. The AAP has an advantage in the constituencies that border Delhi. The Loktanter Suraksha Party (LSP) founded by rebel BJP MP Rajkumar Saini will dent BJP's non-Jat votes in some constituencies. The JJP's impact is to be watched closely.

It is important to analyse the prospects of the political parties according to constituencies, as the 2019 elections are likely to be influenced by regional factors and local leadership. It has to be noted that the BJP seems to be at a comfortable position in urban pockets. The recent mayoral and municipal corporal elections are a clear indication of BJP's strength in urban areas. However, the BJP is losing its vote share significantly in rural constituencies. There are seven parliamentary constituencies in Haryana with more than 60 percent rural population.

### **A Peek into each Constituency**

The Ambala parliamentary constituency is likely to see a bipolar fight between the BJP and the INLD-BSP alliance. The significant urban population, the presence of an impressive number of Punjabis and Brahmins, and a well performing MP are the positives for the BJP, while the dominant Dalit population gives an edge to the INLD-BSP alliance. The Congress held this seat prior to 2014 but it does not seem to be at an advantage this time.

Kurukshetra, the erstwhile battlefield of Kauravas and Pandavas, may see a tough contest between the Congress, the INLD-BSP alliance, the BJP and the LSP. The sitting MP Rajkumar Saini, a strong non-Jat leader, rebelled against the Jat appeasement politics of the BJP and formed the LSP. The LSP will eat into BJP's non-Jat votes in both Ambala and Kurukshetra. Kurukshetra has an influential presence of Dalits, Jats, Punjabis and Brahmins. Naveen Jindal of the Congress also enjoys a good influence in the region. Hence, a four-cornered fight is likely here.

In Sirsa, the fight is binary between the INLD–BSP alliance and the Congress. The BJP is a weak player in the region, where Dalits, Punjabis and Jats hold sway. The merger of the HJCBL into the Congress party has strengthened it. Ashok Tanwar of the Congress party formerly held this constituency, which is currently ruled by the INLD. The INLD–BSP alliance holds significant advantage over the Congress party in 2019.

**Table 1: Constituency-wise Demographics and Election Data of Haryana**

LS Constituencies	Demographics (2011 Census)		Approximate Population (%) of Influential Communities	Winner of the LS Constituency			Probable Tough Contestants in 2019
	Urban (%)	Rural (%)		2014	2009	2004	
Ambala	46.58	53.42	Dalits: 41.36, Punjabis: 13.29, Brahmins: 8.15	BJP	INC	INC	INLD–BSP vs BJP
Kurukshetra	25	75	Dalits: 20.68, Jats: 16.41, Punjabis: 16.01, Brahmins: 8.27	BJP (LSP) <sup>1</sup>	INC	INC	INC vs INLD–BSP vs BJP vs LSP
Sirsa	22.15	77.85	Dalits: 43.35, Punjabis: 20.95, Jats: 20.29	INLD	INC	INC	INLD–BSP vs INC
Hisar	25.63	74.37	Jats: 32.94, Dalits: 21.41	INLD (JJP) <sup>2</sup>	HJCBL	INC	INLD–BSP vs JJP vs HJC vs INC
Karnal	37.61	62.39	Dalits: 14.84, Punjabis: 14.84, Jats: 11.10	BJP	INC	INC	BJP vs INLD–BSP vs INC
Sonipat	30.81	69.19	Jats: 35.28, Brahmins: 10.6	BJP	INC	BJP	INC vs BJP vs INLD–BSP
Rohtak	30.21	69.79	Jats: 39.87	INC	INC	INC	INC vs INLD–BSP
Bhiwani-Mahendragarh	19.04	80.96	Jats: 25.44, Ahirs: 19.67, Brahmins: 9.76	BJP	INC	INC	BJP vs INC vs INLD–BSP
Gurgaon	43.32	56.68	Meo Muslims: 20.32, Ahirs: 20.32	BJP	INC	(Did not exist)	BJP vs INLD–BSP vs INC vs AAP
Faridabad	53.73	46.27	Jats: 12.41, Gujjars: 10.57, Brahmins: 6.7, Punjabis: 6.3	BJP	INC	INC	INC vs BJP
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>Jats: 25.30, Dalits: 21, Brahmins: 8, Punjabis: 8, Ahirs: 5, Meos: 4, Others: 23</b>	<b>BJP: 7, INC: 1, INLD: 2</b>	<b>INC: 9, HJCBL: 1</b>	<b>INC: 8, BJP: 1</b>	<b>BJP vs INC vs INLD–BSP</b>

The Jat-dominated Hisar LS constituency is likely to see the most interesting contest as the rebel INLD MP Dushyant Chauthala, founder of the JJP, holds this seat. The likelihood of a triangular fight between the INLD, the JJP and the Congress is evident. The merger of the HJCBL into the Congress

<sup>1</sup>The new party formed by the BJP MP, who quit the party he represented in the 2014 LS elections.

<sup>2</sup>The new party formed by the INLD MP, who quit the party he represented in the 2014 LS elections.

and the return of Kuldeep Bishnoi and Bhajan Lal into the party have strengthened the Congress party further.

The BJP seems to have an advantage over the Congress and the INLD–BSP alliance in Karnal. The BJP won this seat with a 50-percent vote share and repeated the performance in the assembly elections. The INLD–BSP alliance may give a tough fight to the BJP, as Dalits and Jats dominate the constituency. However, the BJP has a good hold on Punjabi votes here. The recent mayoral and municipal elections in Karnal were won by the BJP with a comfortable majority.

The Sonipat constituency may see a tripartite battle between the BJP, the Congress and the INLD–BSP alliance. Though the BJP performed well in the 2014 LS elections, the Congress outperformed the party in the 2014 assembly elections. The Congress won five MLA seats, while the BJP won only a single seat. The huge presence of Jats in this constituency gives hope for the INLD–BSP alliance. Brahmins also hold a sway in this constituency.

The Rohtak constituency is intact with the Congress. The party sustained the Modi wave in the 2014 LS and assembly elections. Deepender Singh Hooda, son of Bhupinder Singh Hooda, holds the constituency. Jats constitute a whopping 40 percent of the population and are the most influential community in this constituency. The INLD–BSP alliance is equally strong as Rohtak was the epicentre of Jat reservation protests.

Bhiwani-Mahendragarh is likely to see a triangular contest between the BJP, the Congress and the INLD–BSP alliance. Jats, Ahirs and Brahmins dominate the constituency. Ahirs and Brahmins had largely voted for the BJP in the 2014 elections. But this time, the Ahir votes are likely to be divided between the BJP and the Congress. The demand for an Ahir regiment in the Indian Army is a current election issue among the Ahirs. The slogan *‘Vote vahi paayega jo Ahir regiment ko laayega’* is popular among Ahir organisations. Both the BJP and the Congress are trying to woo the Ahirs. While BJP MP Inder Singh Rao has appealed to the Defence Minister to consider the request, the Congress is conducting a signature campaign, which is receiving good response. The INLD–BSP alliance has an advantage of Jat votes, while the BJP has an advantage over Brahmin votes.

Gurgaon is another Ahir-dominated region. Meo Muslims are equally dominant here. The current MP Inder Singh Rao is serving as a Union Minister. Both Ahirs and Meo Muslims have issues with the BJP. In the recent Rajasthan elections, Meo Muslims largely voted for the Congress in Alwar district of Mewat region, adjacent to Haryana. Cow-related vigilantism is also a major concern for the community. The AAP might play some role in this constituency, due to its proximity to Delhi.

The BJP won Faridabad with a 57-percent vote share. But in the 2014 assembly elections, the BJP and the Congress won three assembly seats each and the INLD won two assembly seats. The BJP’s vote share has also declined considerably. Jats, Gujjars, Brahmins and Punjabis are the dominant communities here. Jats are divided between the INLD and the Congress. Brahmins and Punjabis are with the BJP, while Gujjars might vote for the Congress. However, the fight is likely to be between the BJP and the Congress.

### **Young Voters are Key**

The X-factor in the 2019 elections would be young voters. Approximately, 18.5 percent of Haryana’s population is in the 19 to 25 age group. The young population are least bothered about caste and communal politics and their voting behaviour is based on issues relevant to them. The most important issue among youth is unemployment. Haryana has nearly 25 percent of unemployed population in the state. While Congress President Rahul Gandhi is using various platforms to

highlight the failure of the Central Government in job creation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to reach out to the youth through digital platforms. The electoral benefit of 10 percent reservation for economically weaker sections is to be watched out for.

### **Takeaways**

Though Indian election outcomes are highly unpredictable, it is possible to sense the nation's mood. What matters are the election strategy and the social engineering tactics adopted by various political parties. Considering the current political scenario, Haryana is headed towards a triangular battle, which may result in a split verdict in the upcoming LS and assembly elections.

In the event of a split verdict, the role of regional parties like the INLD, the JJP and the LSP may become significant. If the outcome of the general elections leads to a hung Parliament, these parties may play a crucial role. The INLD, which was part of the NDA in the late 1990s and 2000s, has never aligned with the Congress party. Currently, the INLD is at loggerheads with the BJP government. The BSP, which is an ally of the INLD, is supporting UPA governments in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The possibility of the INLD supporting Mayawati as Prime Minister with Congress as a constituent at the Centre cannot be ruled out. However, if the BJP falls few seats short of majority, the INLD–BSP alliance may not hesitate to support the NDA.

The JJP and the LSP might swing towards any side based on the electoral outcome. The decision of regional parties to support any national alliance will be based on the advantages that they can gain in the assembly elections of October. The parties would be careful in their moves, as all the regional parties are fighting to be the part of next state government.

*Shreyas SP is a research intern with the CPPR Centre for Comparative Studies. He can be reached at [shreyas.paramesh@gmail.com](mailto:shreyas.paramesh@gmail.com)*