

Caste management, not secular alliance, key to victory: experts

In a coalition era, winning elections seems to be about picking up right allies who can shore up dwindling numbers and push you past the electoral goalpost. And caste management, political parties and analysts believe, has now become the key to electoral triumph.

'The Congress has to get its caste arithmetic right,' Congress leader and Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy told IANS, referring to his party's attrition in the Karnataka assembly polls. 'Caste is not a micro but a macro issue in elections.'

Reddy's friends in the Left believe that a 'split in the secular vote bank' hurt the Congress in the state, leading to the dramatic victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

'The results are a warning about a split in the secular vote bank,' said Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) politburo member Sitaram Yechury.

Not all political analysts are ready to fall in line with this argument.

Debunking the theory, analyst G.V.L. Narasimha Rao said the talk about a 'split in secular vote' was 'atrocious.' 'The key to winning elections is good governance, followed by right alliances and caste management.'

He argued that the ideology-indifferent voter was not taken in by the 'secular/communal' tag attached to political parties.

'Karnataka voters would not vote for the Congress or the Janata Dal-Secular because they saw them as secular parties. These are tags political parties lend to themselves because of convenience,' said Rao.

Despite its 'secular' tag, the Janata Dal-S shared power with the BJP, he pointed out, but went alone in the latest assembly polls in Karnataka.

Does the Indian public vote for an ideological plank?

'The Indian public has never voted for ideology except when the BJP won on Ramjanambhoomi,' Dipankar Gupta, sociologist in the Jawaharlal Nehru University here, told IANS. 'Caste is more significant,' said Rao.

As far as ideology is concerned, it is a matter of convenience, he pointed out - of putting together a combination that can fetch numbers.

Barring the Left parties and the Congress and the BJP, which are nationally pitted against each other, others - regional parties - can veer from one bloc to the other.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), once a core member of the centre-Left United Front which ruled India in 1996-98, later sided with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Sharad Yadav, once top leaders of the Janata Dal, which later

split into Janata Dal (United), switched sides and teamed up with the NDA. The Janata Dal-Secular, headed by H.D Deve Gowda, prime minister of the United Front government, teetered between the Congress and the BJP in Karnataka.

Political analyst Yogendra Yadav pointed out that one of the few parties on the move in Indian politics is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

This is one party that, from the outset, made clear its strategy was not driven by ideology. The BSP, its founder Kanshi Ram said, would not mind holding hands with any political formation that could give it an edge in terms of national visibility.

So what makes the voters tick?

Rao insisted that governance ranked first on the priority list of voters, followed by considerations of caste.

'Anti-incumbency', Dipankar Gupta underlined, has always been critical to dislodging governments. Governance includes every factor that impacts the voter in every area: education, health, roads, delivery mechanisms.

According to analysts, the electorate in Bangalore, for instance, hit hard by shaky coalitions, which led to delays in implementing infrastructure projects, voted for stability.

'Even in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar people voted for a change because they wanted good governance,' said Rao.

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